Morris. Heaven's Command.

CHAPTER ONE

# A Charming Invention

IN October 1837 the Honourable Emily Eden, a witty and accomplished Englishwoman in her forty-first year, was accompanying her brother Lord Auckland, Governor-General of India, on an official progress up-country from Calcutta. Lord Auckland was homesick, but his sister was irrepressibly entertained by everything she saw, and she recorded all her impressions in vivacious letters home. She was anything but innocent or provincial. She was born in Old Palace Yard, within sight of Parliament at Westminster, and had lived always near the centre of English power. Her father had been Postmaster-General and President of the Board of Trade, her eldest sister Eleanor had been the only true love of the younger Pitt, and she herself was an intimate friend of Lord Melbourne the Prime Minister. She was accordingly amused rather than awed by the scale and grandeur of His Excellency's company.

They travelled sometimes by steamer up the rivers which were the principal highways of India, sometimes on camel-back, in palanquins or in elephant howdahs, and they did it with theatrical display. The gubernatorial caravan numbered some 12,000 souls, with hundreds of animals and wagons, and when they stopped for the night a city of tents sprang up, bustling and teeming about Lord Auckland's quarters, with its own bazaars and workshops and stables, its farriers and its wheelwrights, its redcoat sentries, its aides and commissaries, its delegations of local magistrates or doctors or commanding officers, its gaudy emissaries from maharajahs of the country, its rituals of presentation or official entertainment, its camp fires, its hurrying orderlies, its myriad ragged camp followers, its bugle calls at dusk, its smells of spice and woodsmoke and leather and sweat, all under the Union Jack on its great flagstaff beneath the

terrific Indian sky. Sometimes it took three days for the cortège to cross a river; the pet dogs of the Europeans wore red coats on the march; when the King of Oudh kindly sent his own cook along to accompany the progress, and Lord Auckland was served a succession of highly spiced pilafs and curries, St Cloup the Governor-General's own chef, who had once been cook to the Prince of Orange, was predictably affronted.

This was the manner of the British in India, where the East India Company had been active for nearly 200 years, first as a trading organization, then as an instrument of supremacy. It was a half-oriental manner, inherited from the Moghuls, intended to overawe the indigenes and perhaps give the Company's officials a proper sense of their own authority. Miss Eden, who had been in India for two years, and was accustomed to different styles of consequence, found it faintly comic. Her letters show no awareness of majesty. The Governor-General is, after all, only her diffident brother George, pining for a decent inn. His grand officials, advisers and aides are only upper middle class Englishmen, accompanied by gossipy wives, squirmy children and ludicrously cossetted pets. Miss Eden is not moved by the power, or the responsibility, or even the historical continuity represented by their progress. She does not see that vast brown Indian landscape, those half-naked multitudes around them, as a charge upon the English conscience, or a field for high adventure. She sees it all rather as a pageant, and thanks her sister Mary warmly for sending the latest issues of *Pickwick*—which, though it has already appeared in a pirate edition in Calcutta, is fresh and very funny to the Governor-General's entourage. She sees it, in fact, with the eyes of the eighteenth century. She was born in the old century, and her attitudes are Augustan—elegant, fastidious, entertained, urbane. Her England is the England of the younger Pitt; her style is the style of Sheridan, Addison, and the cool amusing ladies of the age of reason.

But on October 30, 1837, she learnt beside the Ganges that the age was ended. The company, which was sailing up-river by barge and steamer, put ashore for the night in pleasant hilly country some 200 miles north of Calcutta. They looked at some convenient ruins in the evening—'very picturesque', Emily thought—gave the





spaniel Chance a run, did a little sketching, and received letters from England. These had come by the steamer *Madagascar*, which had left London on her maiden voyage just three months before.[1] Emily read them with delight. She noted her sister's change of address ('I did not know that there was such a place'); and she noted also the accession to the throne of England of Princess Alexandrina Victoria of Kent, 'Drina' to her childhood intimates, 18 years old and rather plump.

So she discovered, beside the holy river, one of history's allegorical events. The world would never be the same again, and in particular Great Britain, whose lethargic plenipotentiary in those parts was her brother George, would acquire a new character. Before Victoria died a very different kind of empire would acknowledge her sovereignty—a brazen, plumed, arrogant and self-righteous empire, ruling its immense possessions not merely by display of force, but with an obsessive conviction of destiny and duty. Out of Victoria's Britain would come a new breed of imperialists, unrecognizable in George Auckland and his leisurely assistants, and so constant would be the flow of British capital abroad, the movement of British migrants, the activities of British merchants, the campaigning of British armies, that by the time Queen Victoria died she would be the mistress of a quarter of the world's inhabitants and nearly a quarter of its land surface.

Miss Eden had no vision of these powers to come. On the contrary, she thought the idea of the little Queen rather touching. It brought a lump to her throat. 'I think', she wrote back to her sister that evening, after telling her about the ruins and the sketching, Chance's run and the quick passage of the *Madagascar*—'I think the young Queen a charming invention'.

## 2

England in 1837 was a country only half-aware of its luck. It was enduring a period of social turbulence, which the more nervous of the landed classes assumed to be the start of a revolution. The first

[1] Perhaps over-straining herself, for only four years later, returning to Calcutta after service in the China Seas, she blew up and sank.

Reform Bill, the Chartist agitation, the Luddites, Peterloo—all were symptoms of change and uncertainty, in a country which was enduring the menopause between an agricultural and an industrial society. The example of the French Revolution was still forceful, and Disraeli's 'two nations' were more than fictional—at least one in ten of the British people were paupers, naked women pulled wagons through mine shafts, poor little children of eight and nine were working twelve-hour days in the dark factories of the north. The traditional English hierarchy seemed threatened at last—doomed, the gloomier patricians thought, since one man in seven now had the vote.[1] The Established Church of England was undermined by non-conformism, agnosticism or worse. The nation's way of life was disrupted by the movement of labour to the towns, and the stylish English cities of the eighteenth century were invested now by tenements and factories: 'at the corner of Wood Street' Wordsworth's Poor Susan habitually paused, to see as in mirage an image of a vanishing England—

> *. . . a single small cottage, a nest like a dove's,*
> *The one only dwelling on earth that she loves.*

The nation was in flux. What the English did not generally realize was that this very flexibility, this clearing of the decks, provided a moment of opportunity unmatched in the history of modern Europe. England had the world at her feet. The very cause of her unrest was her own pre-eminence. Though she still grew 90 per cent of her own food, she was the first industrial nation; and blessed as she was with apparently limitless supplies of coal and iron, during the past fifty years she had so mastered the mechanical arts that she had outstripped all her competitors. The British stood at the threshold of a colossal boom, for they possessed a virtual monopoly of the techniques of steam, which was presently to prove itself the basic energy of the age. In the 1830s their industry was essentially a textile industry, but provided with this marvellous new power they

[1] Though the Duke of Wellington as usual got it right, when he assured a jittery fellow-landowner that 'we shall not have a commotion, we shall not have blood, but we shall be plundered by forms of law'.





were soon to manufacture every kind of capital goods—to become, in fact as in phrase, the workshop of the world.

At the same time they had emerged victorious and aglow from the unexampled struggle of the Napoleonic wars, to stand alone among the Powers of Europe. It was ultimately their wealth, their leadership, their power which had defeated Napoleon—they had provided, as Canning had said, the 'animating soul' of the struggle. They had largely dictated the terms of the peace, tempering the revenge of the Germans and Austrians and magnanimously restoring France to the comity of nations. Nelson and Wellington were international heroes—the one nobly dead in his catafalque in St Paul's, the other very much alive as the most tremendous of party politicians. The British fleet was recognized as the ultimate arbiter of the world's affairs. The British Army basked in the reputation it had won at Waterloo. London, with a population of two million, was not only the world's largest city, but also its principal financial exchange, the Rialto of the age.

To liberals everywhere England had replaced Napoleonic France as the hope of mankind. Beethoven in his late years assiduously followed the debates at Westminster, and wrote a respectful set of variations upon Arne's *Rule, Britannia*: Wagner seized upon that stirring melody too, thought its first eight notes expressed the whole character of the British people, and in the year of the Queen's accession wrote an overture based upon it. The romantic legend of Lord Byron shone over Europe still, and the contemporary English taste for tournaments, tales of knightly contest and Arthurian myth was seen as a true reflection of the national chivalry. So perfect were the institutions of England, thought the Abbé de Prat in France, that it must be her destiny to give the world a new aspect; 'To The Glory of the British Nation' cried the obelisk erected by the islanders of Cephalonia in the Adriatic;[1] when the East Indiamen put in for provisions at Johanna in the Comoro Islands, north of Madagascar, the local boatmen used to cry 'Johanna man Englishman, all one brother come, Englishman very good man, drinkee de punch, fire de gun, beatee the French, very good fun!' And though the English gentry might feel insecure in their country houses, unblemished still

[1] Until the occupying Italians meanly chipped the inscription off in 1941.

within the walls of their estates, still to the outside world the island presented a very assurance of stability: a constitutional monarchy of defiant habits and humours, unmoved it seemed by the vagaries of international fortune, safe behind the moat of its Channel, blessed with a stolid, unsoaring, insular certainty of temperament, and passionate chiefly, if we are to go by Turgenev's Anglomaniac Ivan Petrovich, about port wine and underdone roast beef.

# 3

Alone among the Powers, Britain possessed freedom of action, but her statesmen did not covet the mastery of the world. It was only fifty years since they had lost an empire, in America, and they did not wish to acquire another. Their aim now was a balanced peace, enabling the British people to seek their fortunes wherever they chose without undertaking vast new responsibilities of defence or administration; they accordingly gave back most of the territories their arms had captured during the wars, retaining only a string of bases, Heligoland to Mauritius, which they thought essential to their security at sea.

England had been an overseas Power for nearly 900 years—never since the Norman conquest had the Crown been without possessions across the water. But the idea of empire was suspect in the Britain of the 1830s. It went with foreign despotisms and aggressors, and had long lost the stately pacific meaning that Spenser and Milton had given the word, when they wrote of the Britannick Empire long before. Westminster was called the Imperial Parliament only because it had, since 1800, incorporated the parliament of Ireland, while the State Crown was Imperial only in ancient defiance of the Holy Roman Empire. The eighteenth century British Empire, before the loss of the American colonies, had been a self-contained economic system, protected by tariffs, producing its own raw materials, providing its own markets, shipping its own products in its own vessels. The Corn Laws kept foreign competition to a minimum: the Navigation Acts ensured a British monopoly of trade throughout the empire. Now the economic arguments for such a system seemed to be discredited. The progressive theory now was Free Trade, which





would allow the goods of all nations to flow without tariffs and restrictions all over the globe, and seemed to make the possession of colonies obsolete. With Great Britain mistress both of the means of production and the means of distribution, was not the whole world her market-place? Why bother with the expense and worry of colonies? Free Trade was not yet accepted British policy, but already powerful lobbies were pressing for the repeal of the Corn Laws and the Navigation Acts, and deriding the idea of empire. Colonies, said Richard Cobden, 'serve but as gorgeous and ponderous appendages to swell our ostensible grandeur without improving our balance of trade', and if *laissez-faire* was the watchword of the nation's new economic instincts, a suggested slogan for colonial policy was *laissez-aller*.

Memories of the American Revolution, too, helped to sour the notion of empire. A great deal had happened to the world since then, but there were still many Britons alive who had fought against the rebels of the thirteen colonies, or their sons in the war of 1812. The American Revolution had seemed to show that the more successful an overseas settlement, the more certain it was to break away from the Mother Country, and probably set up in rivalry against her. Besides, it had convinced many people that colonialism necessarily led in the end to repression—if not of one's own fellow-countrymen, only striving to be free, then of foreigners in whose affairs the British had no right to meddle. Power corrupted. The British remembered still the trial of Warren Hastings in 1785: though it had ended in acquittal it had served its purpose—to warn the nation against the danger of ambitious satraps, made rich by the spoils of empire and seditious by the temptations of distant authority.

All in all the British were not thinking in imperial terms. They were rich. They were victorious. They were admired. They were not yet short of markets for their industries. They were strategically invulnerable, and they were preoccupied with domestic issues. When the queen was crowned, shortly before her nineteenth birthday, we may be sure she thought little of any possessions beyond the seas. She was the island queen, anointed with the pageantry and ritual evolved by the island people during a thousand years of history—hailed by her island peers, consecrated by her island bishops, cheered

through the streets of London by a population which was almost undilutedly English. 'I really cannot say *how* proud I feel to be the Queen of *such* a Nation', she wrote in her journal, and she was unquestionably thinking of the nation of the English, 14 million strong in their 50,000 green square miles. Even the Welsh, the Scots and the Irish were unfamiliar to her then, when the world called her kingdom simply 'England', and only seers could foretell how colossally her responsibilities were to multiply, how wildly the image of her nation would grow, and how different would be the meaning of her royalty before her reign was done. ('Poor little Queen', Carlyle wrote, 'She is at an age at which a girl can hardly be trusted to choose a bonnet for herself; yet a task is laid upon her from which an archangel might shrink.')

## 4

Far away Lord Auckland laboured: for even now there did exist a British Empire of sorts, an inchoate collection of territories acquired in bits and pieces over the generations, administered partly by the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, partly by great chartered companies. It was an unsystematic affair, an empire in abeyance, possessing no unity of purpose or sense of whole, and it was characteristic that the only complete register of its affairs was compiled by an enthusiastic amateur, Robert Montgomery Martin, who had travelled in the British possessions and returned to England a dedicated advocate of the colonial system. Martin estimated, soon after the Queen's accession, that the area of the overseas empire was some 2 million square miles, with a population of rather more than 100 million. Some of its possessions were relics of the old eighteenth century empire, some were new settlements of Britons overseas, some were the spoils of recent victory, touched with splendour—as it said above the guardroom door in St George's Square, Valletta, on the newly acquired island of Malta:

*Magnae et invictae Britanniae*
*Melitensium amor et Europae vox*
*Has insulas confirmat A.D. 1814*[1]

[1] *To Great and Unconquered Britain the Love of the Maltese and the Voice of Europe Confirms these Islands.* The inscription is still there, a little battered now.





The grandest of the imperial possessions were in India: there sovereignty had been acquired in stages by the East India Company until by 1837 most of the sub-continent was under British suzerainty, and 50,000 Britons, led by George Auckland, lorded it over more than 90 million Indians. Then there were the West Indian islands, with British Honduras and British Guiana on the American mainland—the sugar colonies, which had for a century and more made a disproportionate contribution to the prosperity of England, but were now rotting in decline. There were the colonies in Canada—Newfoundland, the oldest of them all, Nova Scotia settled largely by loyalists from the United States, French settlements in conquered Quebec, English and Scots in Ontario, and the scattered outposts of the Hudson's Bay Company in the unimaginable wastelands of the west. There were four settlements in Australia, two of them originally penal colonies, and there was Ireland close to home, ruled by the English for seven centuries, and still so primitive that in 1837 the 9,000 people of Tullahobagly, County Donegal, possessed between them ten beds and 93 chairs.

The Cape of Good Hope was British, and so was Singapore, founded by Stamford Raffles twenty years before. There were trading settlements at Penang and Arakan, and Ceylon had been acquired at the Peace of 1815. In Europe the flag flew over Gibraltar, Heligoland, the Ionian Islands in the Adriatic, and Malta—Nelson's 'outerwork to India'. Elsewhere a miscellaneous scatter of islands, strongpoints and trading stations infinitesimally enhanced the grandeur of Mr Martin's statistics—the Falklands and the Seychelles, Mauritius and Gambia, the trading forts of the Gold Coast, Norfolk Island in the South Pacific, St Helena where Napoleon died, Guiana and Fernando Po and Bermuda, defined by one visionary strategist of the day as 'central to the mouths of the Amazon, the Mississippi, the Oronooko, the St Lawrence, and to the innumerable tributary rivers which send their waters through these mighty vomitaries to the ocean'. In all, it was estimated, some 1,200,000 Britons were living overseas, including 56,000 soldiers in the imperial garrisons.

The imperial experience had inevitably left its mark upon the British. The East India nabobs, for example, formed a distinctive sub-society of their own among the British monied classes: often

immensely rich, yellowed by their years in Madras or Calcutta, eccentric of habit and authoritarian of style, they filled their houses with ornate mementoes of the east, and lived in a manner assertively different from the ways of their neighbours—more flamboyant, more aloof, and generally less responsible, for though many of them acquired substantial estates upon their retirement from the east, their roots were seldom deep in the countryside. The Caribbean planters, too, many of whom had come home when the abolition of slavery spoiled things in the sugar islands, formed a cohesive group, and the West India Interest provided one of parliament's most persistent lobbies. Many a respected family, from the Barretts of Wimpole Street to the Lascelles of Harewood, owed its dignity to West Indian enterprise; mansions like Stowe and Fonthill were built with sugar money; in the spa societies of Bath, Cheltenham or Tunbridge Wells the planters were instantly recognizable, taking the waters with bronzed cronies from Barbados or Jamaica, and eventually filling a sizeable proportion of wall-space in abbey or parish church.

In London, though the offices of empire hardly showed, the monuments of imperial trade were evident enough. Beyond the Tower the East India and West India docks were thronged with masts and riggings; in the warehouses of the Hudson's Bay Company the beaver pelts and fox skins were piled in their lucrative thousands; in the heart of the City, at the corner of Lime and Leadenhall Streets, stood the headquarters of the East India Company, surmounted by a gigantic Britannia, containing a magnificent library and an Oriental Repository of Indian treasures.[1] In Liverpool, Bristol and Glasgow entire communities had been enriched specifically by the imperial enterprise. These were the home ports of the triangular trade which had, for generations, swopped English manufactured goods for African slaves for American raw materials, making a profit on each transaction. Here the slavers had found their crews, shanghaiing drunkards in the waterside inns of Hotwells or Merseyside, or blackmailing criminals into service. The slaving captains and merchants were still great men there, and the profits of slavery had

[1] Notably Tipu's Tiger, the working model of an Indian tiger eating an Englishman which is still to be shuddered at in the Victoria and Albert Museum.





passed into the civic arteries long before, and nourished other lucrative ventures in their turn.

Here and there throughout the kingdom, too, lesser memorials bore witness to the fact of empire: captured guns from India or Quebec, commemorative plaques to the casualties of tropic wars, personal trophies like the great gates which, high and generally invisible on the mist-shrouded moors of Knock Fyrish in Easter Ross, Sir Hector Munro of Foulis had erected to commemorate the part he played, and the fortune he consolidated, at the capture of Negapatam in 1781. Gatepost pineapples, Hindu cannons in the Tower of London, gilded domes upon a country house, an exotic grave in a country churchyard, an unpronounceable battle honour upon a regimental standard: such small encrustations upon the island fabric were symptoms of the imperial instinct that lay fallow there, momentarily subdued—'the sentiment of Empire', the young Gladstone called it, 'which may be called innate in every Briton'.

And already there were a few citizens who, looking ahead into the Victorian era, thought that the national destiny lay in a more deliberate overseas expansion. There were evangelists who believed in empire as the instrument of Christian duty, and social theorists who believed in emigration as the instrument of enlightened progress, and merchants unconvinced of the advantages of Free Trade, and activists of the West India Interest and the India lobby, and soldiers bored after a decade of peace, and adventurers coveting fresh opportunities of self-advantage. There were fighting patriots, and speculators of exotic preference, and there were even ornamental visionaries, half a century before their time, who conceived a new British Empire framed in symbolism, and endowed with a grand and mystic meaning.

One of these was Robert Martin, who standing back from his immense collection of imperial facts, and contemplating his engravings of colonial seals and charters, concluded that the British Empire of 1837, ramshackle and disregarded though it seemed, would prove to be one of the great accomplishments of history, 'on whose extension and improvement, so far as human judgement can predict, depends the happiness of the world'.[1] Another was J. M.

[1] Martin, who died in 1863, produced his first imperial studies without

Gandy, an able but erratic architect of grandiloquent style. Gandy was already a High Victorian, at the very opening of the Victorian age, and even before the Queen's accession he exhibited at the Royal Academy a design for an Imperial Palace, to be the home and headquarters of the Sovereigns of the British Empire. It was to be a building of overpowering elaboration, domed, pedimented, turreted, colonnaded, upheld by numberless caryatids, ornamented with urns and friezes and mosaic pavements and sunken gardens and ceremonial staircases, and allegorically completed by the marble columns, toppled ignominiously in the forecourt, of earlier and more transient sovereignties.

Fifty years later the Queen might have loved it, for it was only a prophetic expression of national emotions to come: but in 1837 it struck a false note, the Imperial Palace was still-born, and Gandy himself, whose most remarkable monument after all was to be Doric House on Sion Hill in Bath, died unhonoured and unremembered, some say insane.[1]

## 5

No, in 1837 England seemed to need no empire, and the British people as a whole were not much interested in their colonies. How could one be expected to show an interest in a country like Canada, demanded Lord Melbourne the Prime Minister, where a salmon would not rise to a fly? The Secretary of State for War looked after colonial matters in his less busy moments, and in a back room at the Colonial office in Westminster one might find in effect the embodiment of Britain's imperial authority, shrivelled into the duties of some obscure official—'we know not the name', as the social reformer Charles Buller put it, 'the history or the functions of the individual, into the narrow limits of whose person we find the Mother

official help, but turned professional later and became the first Treasurer of the Colony of Hong Kong—a possession he declared to be doomed to failure from the start.

[1] In 1843: he was an associate of Sir John Soane, but seems to have been, says the Dictionary of National Biography, 'of too odd and impracticable a nature to ensure prosperity'.





Country shrunk. . . .' It was as though the kingdom had put the imperial idea deliberately out of mind. As the victorious British proceeded with their experiments of political reform, as the thrilling new railways crept across the island—'the velocity is delightful', reported Charles Greville the diarist, dubiously taking the Liverpool train that year—as the statesmen of England concerned themselves with the settlement of Europe, and the dumpy young Queen timorously submitted to the burdens of her office—'very few have more real good will and more real desire to do what is fit and right than I have'—as Dickens got on with *Oliver Twist* and Landseer started *Dignity and Impudence* and Darwin worked up his notes on the voyage of the *Beagle*—as Cobden stormed on about the Corn Laws, and Charles Barry perfected his designs for the new Houses of Parliament, and the coal-grimed girls dragged their wagons through the stifling mine-shafts, and Gladstone settled down to his treatise on Church and State—as this most fascinating of island states entered upon the thirty-sixth reign of its ancient monarchy, the possession of an overseas empire seemed irrelevant to its wealth, dignity and interest. 'For the fact is, Jardine', wrote a China merchant in London to his colleague in Canton, 'the people appear to be so comfortable in this magnificent country, so entirely satisfied in all their desires, that so long as domestic affairs, including markets, go right, they cannot really be brought to think of us outlanders. . . .'

Miss Eden appeared to put it in perspective. Presently Lord Auckland went into the Punjab to meet the great King of the Sikhs, Ranjit Singh, whose help he required in a war he was about to start. Ranjit, the Lion of the Punjab, was one of the most powerful men in India, and a great ruler of men—half-blind, exceedingly astute, drunk often upon a mixture of opium, raw spirit, meat juice and powdered pearls, perpetually inquisitive, habitually deceptive, the commander of a large and efficient army, the master of a colourful harem of nubile women and graceful painted boys, and the dictator of human affairs between the Indus and the Afghan passes.

Lord Auckland visited this formidable prince in state, giving him seven horses, an elephant and two howitzers as tokens of his esteem, and Ranjit responded with gorgeous pageantries of his own. The issues they discussed were very grave, the decisions they took

momentous. Emily, though, watched their transactions with detached amusement, as though they were all no more than Gothick fantasies, or charades. The King of the Sikhs, she thought, looked like a one-eyed mouse with whiskers; and when he entertained the Governor-General at a banquet, illuminated by 42,000 lamps, attended by his fakir Uziz-ed-Din, with his fire-water in a gold carafe, and two bands to play, and the royal children crawling about the floor, and a party of screaming dancing-girls, and an idiot prince, and a long row of turbaned sirdars, and the tyrant slowly sinking into intoxication, and the future of hundreds of thousands of people, the fate of immense territories, all immediately at stake—'still', reported Miss Eden to her sister, 'we all said "what a charming party", just as we should have said formerly at Lady C's or Lady J's'.[1]

[1] Emily Eden died unmarried in 1869, comfortably home in Richmond, a successful novelist, a fashionable hostess, and the author of an entrancing book of Indian letters, *Up The Country*, from which I have drawn these pictures. Her brother George, alas, will appear again in our narrative.



CHAPTER TWO

# High and Holy Work

YET almost at once a seminal imperial event occurred: the final manumission of slaves throughout the British possessions. Slavery as such had been abolished in 1834, but for another four years slaves were bound by a system of apprenticeship to their masters, and it was not until August 1, 1838, that the last serfs of empire, nearly all black Africans, were officially emancipated. There were 768,000 of them, not counting those in the hands of native potentates whose bondage lingered longer. This was a fresh start indeed. The old British Empire had been inextricably linked with slavery. Colonies had been built upon the practice, industries depended upon it, and it was only thirty years since British military recruiters, when faced with a shortage of manpower, paid cash for their colonial volunteers. So organic did slavery seem to the shape of the old empire that the eighteenth-century cartographers divided West Africa quite naturally by commodities—the Gold Coast for minerals, the Ivory Coast for elephant tusks, the Slave Coast for human beings. Many British families had numbered their securities in human stock, for to perfectly decent Britons, only a generation before, slavery had seemed part of the divine order. 'To abolish a *status*', thought Boswell, 'which in all ages GOD has sanctioned, and man has continued, would not only be *robbery* to an innumerable class of our fellow-subjects; but it would be extreme cruelty to the African Savages, a portion of whom it . . . introduced into a much happier state of life.' The end of slavery was thus doubly ritual: obsequies for the old empire, consecration for the new.

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Let us visit, on that day, the little town of Falmouth in northern

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Let us visit, on that day, the little town of Falmouth in northern

Jamaica. It was a pleasant clapboard sort of place, wide straight streets and a lighthouse on the shore, set at the foot of the Cockpit Country on the Atlantic coast of the island. Several great sugar estates dominated the country round about, and Falmouth was the outlet for their merchandise, and the chief shopping and gathering place for their slaves. It was a lively town, made elegant by the colonial British, made exuberant by the expatriate blacks. Clouds softly drifted through the mountain-tops behind: in front the Atlantic breakers frothed and churned. It is true that Jamaica, severely hit by the prospect of emancipation, was in the economic doldrums, but still it was a lovely island, full of gay animation, and mellowed by two centuries of the colonial presence.

The aesthetics, though, were misleading. Jamaica was one of the most important slave colonies—there were 320,000 blacks to some 35,000 whites—and slavery there had been an institution of ruthless power. The shady plantation houses on their hillsides, the picturesque affection of the old retainers, the native merriment, the air of indolent ease, all gave a false impression of magnolia charm and paternalism. In reality the life of the island was based uncompromisingly upon the ownership and exploitation of human beings. Architecturally any of the Falmouth sugar estates graphically illustrated this truth. Take, for instance, Orange Valley, a well-known plantation a few miles north of town. It was built of solid limestone, and displayed an almost ecclesiastical air of conviction. On the hill above stood its Great House, balconied and wide-eaved, lapped by lawns and caressed by creepers. Nearby was the house of the overseer, an English yeoman house, pretty in an unassuming way, as though always conscious of its place at the mansion gates. And all around the central factory area, where the sugar was refined and packed, were the slave-installations—the slots or stables or repair bays in which those human mechanisms were installed, housed and serviced. The refinery had a churchy look, its limestone finely dressed and mortared; the slave hospital was an elegant little structure in the classical mode; the slave quarters were rows and rows of shanties, like rickety garden pavilions, with their vegetable plots behind (slaves were expected to grow their own nourishment) and their gaudy patched washing fluttering upon their clothes-lines. It





was a highly functional arrangement: like a ship disposed about its engine-room, the estate was assembled efficiently about its motive-power, the muscle of captive humans.[1]

Orange Valley was clearly built to last, and it looked on the face of it benevolent enough—that gracious house on the hill, that bowered cottage for the overseer, the hospital in whose wards, it seemed, crinolined ladies must surely be soothing with scented hands the brows of grateful fevered blacks. But slavery in the British West Indies was not always like that. A series of exposés had lately revealed that British slave-masters could be as cruel as any Arab traders or Bokhara khan. The English public had read with horrified fascination of ears cut off in punishment, eyes gouged, teeth drawn, hands amputated. Slaves were hung by their arms from trees, nailed by their ears to posts, clamped in steel collars or iron boots. Throughout the British possessions the slave had been utterly at the mercy of his employer—or worse still his employer's wife, who was often more vicious in the refinement of her spite.

Of course there were good owners too, conditions greatly varied in the nineteen British slave colonies, and no doubt evangelical reporters sometimes exaggerated the horrors. But the consensus of evidence was appalling, and it was not surprising that when the final emancipation came at last, on that August day in 1838, the negroes of Falmouth celebrated it with almost hysterical fervour. The pastor of the Baptist Church, the Reverend William Knibb, summoned his congregation for a midnight service of thanksgiving, and the negroes assembled joyously. Mr Knibb was one of the most active non-conformist clergymen on the island, a native of Northamptonshire and a passionate abolitionist, and he carried his faith theatrically, as the blacks preferred. It was very hot that night. The wide lattice windows of the chapel were open, clumsy insects buzzed in the lamp-lights, the congregation was a blaze of primary colours and glistening black, and as the midnight deadline drew near Mr Knibb

[1] Orange Valley is a cattle ranch now, through whose compounds stylish negro cowboys ride. Most of its slave-buildings are in ruins; rats, lizards and a barn owl live in the derelict Great House; but overgrown behind the garden the mausoleum of its founding family, the Jarretts, has monumentally survived the centuries, and is fluttered over by yellow butterflies.

ascended his pulpit with portentous step. 'The hour approaches!' he cried, pointing a quivering finger at the clock upon the wall. 'The time is drawing near! The monster is dying!'—and as the minutes ticked by, and the pastor stood there tense and fiery, and the harmonium played, so the congregation worked itself into a frenzy of excitement and delight, until midnight struck, Knibb cried triumphantly, 'The monster is dead!' and all those negroes leapt to their feet and broke into cheers, songs, shouts, tears and embraces. The slaves were free! They took the symbols of their bondage, chain, whip and iron collar, and buried them for ever in the schoolroom yard, singing a dirge as they did so:

*Now slavery we lay thy vile form in the dust,*
*And buried for ever let it there remain!*
*And rotted and covered with infamy's dust*
*Be every man-whip and fetter and chain.*[1]

## 3

Though slavery had been so old an imperial practice, paradoxically its ending did not weaken the idea of empire, but rather gave it new life: for among those who argued that Britain had an imperial mission to fulfil were the prime agents of abolition, the English evangelicals. They were a power in the land. They had infiltrated the Established Church, they had representatives in the highest quarters of government, their most celebrated spokesman, William Wilberforce, was a saint among low churchmen, if a prig among high. The evangelical force—'vital Christianity'—was concerned with every kind of cruelty and injustice. Prison reform, factory conditions, corporal and capital punishment, child labour, cruelty to animals, the treatment of lunatics—all these matters engaged the conscience

[1] Mr Knibb's church was destroyed by a hurricane in 1944, but its present successor, named in his memory, contains a marble panel depicting this scene. In the churchyard is a monument to Knibb 'erected by the Emancipated Slaves, to whose enfranchisement and elevation his indefatigable exertions so largely contributed', and when I went to service there one Sunday morning in 1969 I found his parishioners as merry, kind and passionate as ever.





of the English reformers in the first decades of the nineteenth century. In the imperial context, though, they were concerned most with the welfare of the coloured peoples, and their several institutions became powerful forces of imperial commitment: the Clapham Sect, a humanitarian cult whose members had included a Governor-General of Bengal, a Governor of Sierra Leone, several members of Parliament and a permanent head of the Colonial Office; the African Association, which concerned itself with the exploration of Africa for humanitarian ends, and which was to develop into the Royal Geographical Society; the Aborigines Protection Society, founded in the year of Queen Victoria's accession; or best-known of all, Exeter Hall, not really an institution at all, but a religious meeting hall in the Strand whose name had become synonymous with the entire humanitarian movement.

It was the pressure of this vague but potent guild that gave to the Victorian Empire, in its earliest years, functions of guardianship. Exeter Hall believed that the power of Great Britain should be used to guard the welfare of the backward peoples, to protect them from exploitation, and guide them into the Christian way. The Colonial Office became a stronghold of imperial trusteeship—James Stephen, 'Mr Mother Country', its permanent under-secretary in 1838, was a stalwart of Exeter Hall, while Lord Glenelg, the Colonial Secretary, was hardly less evangelical. Even Lord Melbourne, that worldly old Whig, could hardly disregard so strong a political current, for the evangelicals were skilled propagandists, masters of the pamphlet and the protest march, the petition and the fund-raising needle-party. The House of Commons itself reflected the trend in a motion which, while it did not actually advocate the extension of empire for pious purposes, did call upon all colonial governors and officers to promote the spread of civilization among the Natives everywhere, and 'lead them to the peaceful and voluntary reception of the Christian religion'.

So for many Victorian Englishmen the instinct of empire was first to be rationalized as a call to Christian duty. Lord John Russell, a future Prime Minister, defined the imperial purpose towards the negro people as being 'to encourage religious instruction, let them partake of the blessings of Christianity, preserve order and internal

peace, induce the African race to feel that wherever the British flag flies they have a friend and protector, check all oppression, and watch over the impartial administration of the law'. Even the directors of the Hudson's Bay Company, a sufficiently materialist concern, laid it down in standing orders that divine service must be read each Sunday in its remotest Canadian fur posts, for the civilization and instruction of the Red Indians. The statesmen of England had behaved with exemplary modesty and restraint in settling the affairs of the world in 1815, but by 1838 one detects a certain smugness among the islanders, and this superior tone of voice came not, as it would later come, from an arrogant Right, but from a highly moralistic Left. The middle classes, newly enfranchised, were emerging into power: and it was the middle classes who would eventually prove, later in Victoria's reign, the most passionate imperialists of all.

The greatest triumph of the evangelicals was the abolition of slavery. Economically its results had been devastating. Planters were ruined from Antigua to Mauritius.[1] Middlemen of Ashanti, slave captains of Merseyside, overseers of Nassau, found themselves without an occupation. Paupers proliferated in all the slave colonies, squatters defied the land laws, a Select Committee defined the condition of the average Jamaican freedman as *otium cum dignitate*—'idle dignity'—which he fulfilled by working for a few hours two days a week, and going home with a bottle of Bass. Most of the sugar colonies never really recovered. Thousands of Indians had to be shipped to the West Indies to work the estates there, and in Jamaica the authorities were obliged to import German labourers too—dirty and drunk, thought the planters, who were hard to please.[2] In London the West India Association warned that there might be no other course for the Caribbean colonies but to 'appeal to the Crown for a release from their unprofitable allegiance, in order that they may attach themselves to some other country willing to extend to them the protection of a parent State'. In all the British Government had

[1] One Jamaica estate that netted £11,000 annually in the 1820s was sold in the 1840s for £1,650, and by the 1850s was said to be worth about £800.

[2] Their descendants survive, around Seaford Town in Westmoreland County, and look today, thanks to a century and a half of in-breeding, whiter than anyone else in Jamaica.





to pay out £20 million in compensation (£8,823 8s 9d of it to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, whose *ex officio* members included the Archbishop of York, and whose properties included two plantations in Barbados).

But morally emancipation put the British on a special plane, and set an example for the world. It also gave a fresh impulse to the empire. If so much could be achieved by agitation at home, what might not be done if the moral authority of England were distributed across the earth—to tackle the evils of slavery, ignorance and paganism at source, to teach the simpler peoples the benefits of Steam, Free Trade and Revealed Religion, and to establish not a world empire in the bad Napoleonic sense, but a Moral Empire of loftier intent? So was evolved the chemistry of evangelical imperialism; and since hatred of slavery was its original ingredient, it became the first imperial purpose of Victoria's reign to extend to all parts of the world the convictions of Exeter Hall and Mr Mother Country on what the Americans in their prevaricating bigotry preferred to call the Peculiar Institution.[1]

## 4

The British could not enforce the abolition of slavery everywhere in the world, but their command of the sea did qualify them to interfere with the movement of slaves from source to customer. In the suppression of piracy the Empire had already assumed a police function. Now its power was harnessed to the evangelical purpose, and for the first thirty years of Victoria's reign the Royal Navy's chief task was the interception of slavers. Legally the anti-slave patrols were international, the American, French and Portuguese navies contributing squadrons: in practice they were almost entirely British, in execution as in concept.

The main slave routes ran out of equatorial Africa east and west. Whether the Africans were destined for emirs of Yemen or planters of Brazil, the conditions of their journeys were equally terrible. Captured in war or slave-raid, by Arabs or fellow-Africans, they

[1] As against the Pernicious Article, which is what the British themselves called the most profitable commodity of their eastern commerce, opium.

stumbled often for hundreds of miles through scrub and forest, chained and yoked with wooden collars, whipped and bullied mercilessly to keep them on their feet. If they were travelling east, they were shipped to Zanzibar, paraded for purchase in the great slave market there, and sold to buyers from Arabia or the further east. If they were going west, they found themselves in stockades or barracoons in the foetid estuaries of the Slave and Ivory coasts, where they were beaten for discipline's sake and put into stock. Here they were in the hands of European renegades and half-castes, who sold them in turn to the slaving captains always cruising off-shore: and so before long they were shipped away on their last journey, by the notorious Middle Passage to Brazil, or (illegally but all too often) to the southern United States. East or west, thousands of slaves died *en route*: on the Atlantic voyage, even as late as the 1840s, probably about a quarter of those embarked.

At first the Royal Navy tried to end the traffic by interception at sea, and a ramshackle squadron of frigates, sloops and gunbrigs, all the Admiralty could spare, pottered up and down the West African coast, or later in and out of Zanzibar, in pursuit of slavers. This was a job the Navy loathed, despite the bounty paid—£5 a head for each liberated slave, or £2 10s if he died before reaching port. The slave-ships were generally faster and better sailers than the elderly warships of the patrols, and the Navy's captains were hamstrung by legalism. The West African station, in particular, could be a captain's nightmare. Though there were European trading posts up and down the coast, several of them British, West Africa had no formal frontiers, or even clearly defined sovereignties, and there was scarcely a creek for 2,000 miles that did not sometimes harbour slave-ships. 'Here we are,' wrote one officer of the slave patrol, 'in the most miserable station in the world, attempting the impossible.' The sight of a slave-ship was the signal for the frigate captain to ransack his locker for the necessary regulations, for his action depended upon the slaver's nationality. With some foreign States, Britain had reached full agreement on searches: if a ship had slaves on board, or carried equipment obviously designed for slaving purposes, like shackles, balls and chains, or whips, then she could be seized willy-nilly. With other countries, notably the United States, Britain had not been





able to conclude an 'equipment clause'—if slaves were not on board in the flesh, the frigate captain could do nothing. Other States again had no agreement with Britain at all, so that to board a ship might be interpreted in a court of law as an act of war, or piracy.

All this made interception an embarrassing process. Often it was exceedingly difficult to overhaul a suspected slaver in the first place, so that the boarding party was received with caustic condescension. Often the slaver's true nationality was impossible to determine. Most often of all, the unfortunate patrol commander found himself legally impotent, however many pairs of manacles or instruments of torture he found on board, and was laughed overboard by disrespectful Portuguese, or abused by Spaniards. Americans especially could be insufferable. The United States had made slave traffic illegal in 1808, and occasionally contributed a sloop or two to the slave patrols: but slavery itself was still legal in the southern States, the American Ambassador in London was a Virginian, and the Americans had never conceded the Royal Navy's right of search, so that every interception was a diplomatic gamble. American slavers had the best ships, too—especially Baltimore clippers and New York sloops, which were among the fastest vessels afloat, and could easily outmanoeuvre the clumsy broad-beamed brigs of the patrols. One successful American slaver was the schooner *Wanderer*, built as a pleasure-yacht and owned by a Georgia slaving syndicate: she flew the pennant of the New York Yacht Club, and her master once entertained the officers of a Royal Navy frigate to a merry dinner on board, before packing 750 slaves below deck and sailing for home. Another was the barque *Martha Ann*. Given chase in the Atlantic once, this exasperating vessel at first showed no colours, only hoisting the Stars and Stripes after a number of warning shots. Why had she not hoisted colours before? the British officers demanded of her captain, when at last they caught up with the barque, but the American was not abashed. 'I guess,' he languidly replied, 'we were eating our supper.'

## 5

However hard the Navy tried, the slave trade continued. As the King of Bonny had told the captain of the last English slaver, when

they bid a sentimental farewell to each other years before, 'we tink trade no stop, for all we ju-ju men tell we so, for dem say you country no can niber pass God A'mighty'. Every kind of ruse continued to baffle the patrols—false colours, hidden decks, forged papers, mid-ocean transfers. Presently the Navy took to flushing the trade out on shore, and an archetypal imperial action was the destruction, in 1840, of a particularly notorious slave station at the mouth of the Gallinas river, in Sierra Leone. Then as now the estuaries of West Africa were among the nastiest places on earth. Flat, swampy, hot, sprawling, brackish, fly-infested, mosquito-ridden, fringed with gloomy mangroves and monotonous palms, they lay beneath the heartless sun in secretive desolation. Of them all, one of the most detestable was the estuary of the Gallinas.[1] It was hotter and swampier than anywhere, its mangroves gloomier and its swamps more awful, and among its creeks and lagoons, protected by the river bar and the Atlantic surf, a Spanish trader named Pedro Blanco had established a slave mart. Its barracoons, of reed and palm thatch, were scattered among the swamps, invisible from the sea but easily accessible by creeks from the interior. Its warehouses were full of goods for barter, cloths, rum and Cuban tobacco. Blanco himself, who was immensely rich and flamboyantly immoral, lived on an island deep in the swamp, attended by a black seraglio, and on lesser islets all around sentries with telescopes on high lookouts kept watch over the Atlantic.

This was a hideously successful enterprise. Blanco had established an alliance with the chiefs of the surrounding countryside, notably King Siaka of Gallinas, and the coastal tribes acted as his agents, paid in advance for the slaves they could catch inland. A regular trade was established with Cuba, in Portuguese, Brazilian and American slave-ships, and the barracoons were nearly always full of slaves awaiting shipment, sometimes 5,000 at a time. Two or three ships arrived each month at the estuary. Blanco imported his shackles from England, and recruited a staff of Spaniards: King Siaka dined off silver plate.

The Royal Navy knew this place well from a distance, and had

[1] Now renamed the Kerefe, and a popular weekend resort for Freetown sportsmen.





blockaded the estuary for months at a time. But it was independent territory, and until October, 1840, the British could find no excuse to go ashore. Then a black British subject, Mrs Fry Norman of Sierra Leone, was kidnapped by King Siaka's son Manna as security for a debt. 'I have to inform you', Mrs Norman wrote to the debtor, a Mrs Grey of Freetown, 'that Mr Manna has catched me on your account, and is determined to detain me until you come yourself. Between now and night all depends on good or evil heart of Mr Manna. Therefore you will lose no time in coming to my assistance on your account.' But instead of Mrs Grey it was Commander Joseph Denman, R.N., with the armed schooner *Wanderer* and the brigs *Rolla* and *Saracen* who, in an early exertion of the Victorian imperial principle *civis britannicus sum*, arrived wrathful and determined at the bar of the Gallinas.

Denman was the son of a distinguished abolitionist, Lord Chief Justice Denman, and had himself felt passionately about the evils of the slave trade since, as a young lieutenant, he had sailed a captured slaver across the Atlantic with 500 half-dead Africans on board. 'I was forty-six days on that voyage, and altogether four months on board of her, where I witnessed the most dreadful sufferings that human beings could endure.' Denman was aching to settle scores not only with Siaka, but with the Spanish traders too, and he used the plight of poor Mrs Norman as pretext for a double action.

He had no mandate for an attack upon the barracoons—Britain was not at war with the Gallinas chiefs—but he acted Nelsonically, on his own. With three boatloads of blue-jackets he rode the surf, crossed the bar and seized the biggest of the estuary islands. Almost at once, without a shot, the whole iniquitous enterprise collapsed. Hustling as many slaves as they could into canoes, the Spaniards fled up the creeks into the bush. Mrs Norman was triumphantly released. More than a thousand slaves were freed of their chains. All the barracoons and warehouses were burnt. Siaka and the chiefs signed an abject treaty of renunciation, promising to abandon the slave trade altogether, whatever the ju-ju men said, and expel all the slave traders from their territories. The Gallinas trade was extinguished, and the British consul in Havana reported a stream of anxious slave-traders, requesting his advice about future prospects.

Some years later one of Blanco's associates at the Gallinas station, whom the Navy had rescued from his own infuriated captives and shipped away to safety, ungratefully sued Denman for trespass and the seizure of property—a familiar hazard of the slave patrols: but the judges of the Court of Exchequer, who knew the Commander's father well, directed the jury to clear him.

# 6

This bold little action was a foretaste of imperial manners to come, but its effect was transitory. Though it led to treaties with most of the slave-trading chiefs along the West African coast, they were seldom honoured for long. The legal complexities remained insoluble, and the movement towards Free Trade at home actually encouraged the slave traffic, for it greatly bolstered the economies of slave States like Cuba and Brazil. Though the Royal Navy liberated in all some 150,000 souls, the Atlantic slave traffic did not end until the victory of the North in the American Civil War, twenty years later. As for the Red Sea trade, it continued fitfully much longer still, with illicit shipments of boys to the pederast princelings of Arabia, or allocations of retainers to the Sultan of Muscat. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century the slave patrol remained one of the Navy's principal chores, a duty as implicit to the fact of British maritime power as guardship duty in Gibraltar, or cruiser service on the West India station.[1]

No less demanding a concern of the imperial evangelists, though, was what to do with the slaves when they were liberated, for of course they could not be returned to barbarism. Fortunately the empire already possessed a haven. In the eighteenth century there had been some 14,000 slaves in Britain itself, scattered in gentlemen's houses throughout the kingdom.[2] When domestic slavery was made

[1] Ships of the Royal Navy continued to carry slavery manuals until 1970.

[2] Of whom I cannot forbear to mention 'Jack Black' of Ystumllyn, near my own home in Caernarfonshire. He was the only black man in North Wales, and the local girls adored him: as his biographer austerely observed in 1888, *gwyn y gwel y fran ei chyw*—'the crow sees its young as white'. Jack's gravestone bears the inaccurate but touching epitaph, in Welsh:





illegal in 1772 many of these people, together with ex-slaves from Nova Scotia, became the nucleus of an experiment in humanitarian imperialism—the creation of a new British colony, specifically for liberated negroes, on the coast of West Africa. It was to contribute to the ending of the slave trade everywhere, its sponsors said, by 'civilization, Christianity and the cultivation of the soil'.

The chosen shore had been named by the Spaniards Sierra Leone, for the crouching lion-shape of the hill above its bay, and the capital of the new settlement was called inevitably Freetown, but most of the hamlets upon the peninsula were given names of ineffable Britishness, to stand as texts of enlightenment. There was Wilberforce, there was Buxton, there was Charlotte and there was Regent. Gloucester was down the road from Leicester, and the road from Waterloo to Wellington ran through Hastings, Grafton and Allen Town—all this at a time when the vast mass of Africa had never seen a white man at all, and there was not a single European consul between Freetown on the one shore and Zanzibar on the other. From the very start Sierra Leone, though its population was almost entirely negro, represented an implanted culture: a black British culture, evangelically Christian, conventionally diligent.

The colony made several false starts, for the ex-slaves proved inept colonists at first, and its early years were disturbed. As the wit Sydney Smith observed, there were always two Governors of Sierra Leone, the one who had just arrived, and the one who was just leaving. Among the new settlers there were understandable prejudices against white patronage of any kind: some citizens, after all, believed that the uniforms of the redcoat garrison were dyed with the blood of slaughtered negroes, and that British officers' brains were developed by a potion of boiled African heads. As the years passed, and the neighbouring African peoples infiltrated the colony, and liberated slaves arrived too from the West Indies, and from captured slave-ships, some unsuspected doctrines were grafted upon the Christian orthodoxies, and distinctly heretical pieties were

*India was the land of my birth,*
*But I was christened in Wales;*
*This spot, marked by a grey slab,*
*Is my cold, dark resting place.*

pursued in the less respectable quarters of Freetown. Witchcraft was practised when the clergymen were not looking. Secret societies flourished. Streets named for statesmen, governors or eminent men of God found racier local nicknames. Yet Sierra Leone remained above all a Christian settlement upon the African shore, a ward of evangelical imperialism: spires and chapel roofs ornamented the Freetown skyline, and if Saturday nights were rumbustious in the backstreets, Sunday mornings were rich with hymns and self-improvement.

Architecturally the little town was remarkable, for here alone the Georgian style was applied to tropical Africa. Freetown was built to a grid system, partly as an image of European order, partly perhaps to make it easier to police. Some of its streets were surprisingly elegant. They were lined with deep-eaved villas three or four stories high, built of a heavily mortared yellowish sandstone, with white balconies and well-proportioned windows—comfortable, solid-looking houses, pleasantly sited on the slopes of Howe or Trelawny Streets, and made piquant by a certain naïvety of design—a gentle crudeness, which gave them a child-like charm, like rows of dolls' houses in the sunshine. Handsome stone steps led down to the harbour of Freetown, an Anglican cathedral stood predominantly above, and the little capital kept as its fulcrum the handsome oak tree, now the hub of a cross-roads, at whose feet in 1787 the founding fathers of the colony had declared their intentions with a short and low church service.

Freetown society was rich and strange. The founders had been concerned to create an educated African bourgeoisie, to be the governing class of the place, and to perpetuate its Christian origins: the evangelicals were seldom radicals in any modern sense, and generally held strong Whiggish views about property and the continuity of class. Almost at once they founded a place of higher education, Fourah Bay College, which inhabited an imposing building on the hill, and which presently produced an entire social layer of educated Africans—clergyman, lawyers, school-teachers, civil servants. These were the first of the Sierra Leone Creoles, a people destined to play an important part in the development of the British Empire. 'Creole' was a word of many meanings. In the French colonies of America it meant a locally-born European. In Spanish South





American it meant a half-caste predominantly white. In West Africa it meant at first a liberated slave or his descendants, as distinct from a local African: but there it presently came to mean more too, and signified a person who subscribed to the particular Anglo-African culture propagated by Fourah Bay.

The Creoles became an imperial caste. They developed their own Afro-English language, Krio—far more than a pidgin language, but a tongue with its own literature, which sounded indeed like a hazily slurred recording of cultured southern English, but was graced with its own nuances and idioms, and eventually became so divorced from the parent language that scholars translated Shakespearian plays into it.[1] They wore European clothes, conveniently differentiating them from the local tribespeople, whom they tended to despise, and who were either draped in blinding swoops of textile, or almost totally nude. They filled their houses with the orthodox bric-à-brac of the English middle classes, upright pianos and lithographs and portraits of the Queen and framed embroidered samplers. They aimed above all at respectability. We see them, in starched white collars and stifling crinolines, presiding stiffly over public functions, or trailing beneath sunshades to morning service. We see their heavy black features sweating over dog-collars (the first black Anglican bishop was a Creole) or stuffed into red serge jackets (the first black British Army doctor was another) or crowned with judge's wigs, or hung about with stethoscopes, or bespectacled over philosophical treatises. They ran the colony more or less themselves, with intermittent advice from white governors and transient civil servants, and by and large they did it well. One of the earliest coherent plans for self-government in British African colonies was produced by Major Africanus Horton, who had enjoyed a successful

[1] For example:

*Paddy dem, country, una all way day*
*Nar Rome. Make una all kack una yase.*
*Are cam berr Caesar, are nor cam praise am.*
*Dem kin member bad way person kin do*
*long tem after de person kin don die.*
*But plenty tem de good way person do*
*kin berr wit im bone dem. . . .*

career in the British Army before settling down to a literary and commercial retirement in Horton Hall, Freetown.[1]

Presently, too, the Creoles began to demonstrate talents more specifically their own—throw-backs, so to speak, to the distant times before their redemption. They turned out to be marvellous money-makers. Capitalism sprouted and thrived in Sierra Leone. The paternalist white clerics of Fourah Bay found some of their most promising pupils, steeped in the maxims of Dean Stanley or the examples of William Wilberforce, abruptly blossoming into immensely rich entrepreneurs, landowners or speculators. Dynasties of rich Creoles were founded, and those modest houses of Trelawny Street were often abandoned for more ostentatious mansions and country estates. At the same time the Creoles, while still honouring the principles of the evangelical faith, threw off its gloomier forms. They became a particularly gay and hospitable people. Half-forgotten ancestral rhythms enlivened the cadences of metrical psalms, and the sons of sober bureaucrats discovered in themselves inherited aptitudes for dance and buffoonery.

Sierra Leone still had its ups and downs. Periodic scandals excited the little colony, and heavy-bearded commissions of inquiry occasionally disembarked at Freetown quay to put things straight again. Here as elsewhere, even the most compliant Africans sometimes disappointed their mentors and liberators—as was said by one judicial commission, 'the known Christian moral lesson should be continually impressed on their minds that we must earn our bread with the sweat of our brow'. But the settlement survived, and Freetown itself became the principal base of the Royal Navy on the West African coast—a town where generations of transient Britons, on their way to grimmer places farther south, would be surprised by the gaiety of their welcome, and first discover that there might be some element of fun, after all, in the prospect of a posting to the White Man's grave.[2]

[1] And who was not above giving some sensible advice to white residents in Sierra Leone: 'A strict moral principle is beneficial in the tropics. Agreeable society should always be courted, as it relieves the mind a great deal. The society of real ladies will be found preferable to any other'.

[2] The fun persists, the Afro-English culture having become distinctly more Afro in independent Sierra Leone, but Fourah Bay thrives still, the Creoles are still pre-eminent, and there are still sixty-five Christian churches for the 128,000 inhabitants of Freetown. Sierra Leone was the original inspiration for the neighbouring republic of Liberia, settled by freed American slaves, and for the French ex-slave settlement of Libreville, on the Gabon river to the south.





# 7

So the first monuments of Queen Victoria's empire were monuments of liberty. The fight against slavery at its source would continue throughout the Victorian era, being a prime motive as we shall see of the great mid-century explorations, and it proved a fertile seed of imperial emotion. It was seen as a stake in providence—as Lord John Russell told the House of Commons in 1850, 'it appears to me that if we give up this high and holy work . . . we have no right to expect a continuance of those blessings, which, by God's favour, we have so long enjoyed'. The adventures that were to come, as imperialism itself developed into a kind of faith, and dominion became a national ambition for its own sake, were grounded upon this good old base, erected so long before by the earnest philanthropists of Clapham and Exeter Hall: and when evangelicalism had long lost its dynamism, when a harsher generation was in command, impelled by cruder ends, still the memory of these aspirations tempered the brashness of the British Empire, and sometimes touched the imperial conscience.

the old order. And there was in fact, as the renowned Homeric scholar doubtless knew, a deeper symbolism to his arrival at Paxos. Nineteen centuries before, during the reign of Tiberius, a ship from Egypt had been sailing past this very island, bound for Italy, when Thamus its master heard a voice from the shore. 'Thamus! Thamus!' it cried. '*Pan magus tethneeke*!'—'Great Pan is dead!' Whereupon, we are told, 'there were such piteous outcries and dreadful shrieking as hath not been the like . . . at that time all Oracles surceased, and enchanted Spirits that were wont to delude the people henceforth held their peace'.

Christian commentators assumed that this had been the moment of the Crucifixion, when the false gods of the ancients died: others pined still, perhaps, even in 1858, for those enchanted Spirits, bathed in fire and dressed in bright colours.

Morris. Heaven's command.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# The Imperial Style

IN 1861 work began on the construction of a new headquarters for the British Empire. In one of the grandest sites in Europe, between Whitehall and St James' Park in the heart of Westminster, Lord Palmerston's Whig Government authorized the construction of a great new building to house the India Office, the Foreign Office and the Colonial Office. It was a true palace in the Italian Renaissance manner, magisterially sited, richly ornamented, columned, balustraded, with an open courtyard decorated with majolica friezes, innumerable statues and symbolic medallions, and a chimney piece inherited directly from the old East India House in Leadenhall Street, itself now demolished. It was a building recognizably descended from the sea-empires of Venice and Genoa, and through them from the classical imperialisms of old: but at its north-west corner, overlooking St James's Park, architectural purists were dismayed to find a curious square-topped tower, oddly out of style, placed asymmetrically at the corner of the structure, and strangely linked to it by another distinctly un-classical feature, a rounded corner.

This was a touch of the picturesque, and as such it was more proper to its subject than its critics knew. The designer of the new building was Sir George Gilbert Scott, one of the most celebrated architects of the Victorian era, and a principal exponent of the Gothic Revival. The High Gothic style, of which the greatest example in London was the new Palace of Westminster, completed in 1860, was to prove in the end the most truly imperial of British architectural idioms: touched up often with exotic embellishments, domes, pagoda tops or Hindu motifs, it was presently to commemorate the British presence everywhere from Hong Kong to Ottawa,

and was adapted to every kind of structure, cathedral to engine-shed.

It was in this quintessentially Victorian style, long since outgrown its mediaeval origins in technique and elaboration, that Scott himself wished to build the entire imperial headquarters. He envisaged upon that splendid site a fantasy of pinnacles, mansard roofs, gargoyles, tall red-brick chimneys and lavish quirks of ornament. Deposited there next door to Downing Street, towering over the domed Horse Guards, the Banqueting Hall and Adam's exquisite Admiralty Screen, it would have transformed the character of Westminster, imposing the Gothic as the predominant official style, and thus by association establishing London as an imperial capital above all else.

To a Tory Government it might have been welcome: Gothic was well established as the Tory style of architecture, just as imperialism would later be a Tory speciality of politics. Lord Palmerston, however, brusquely rejected the plan. His ideas of empire were essentially classical ideas—*civis romanus sum* was the analogy he had majestically offered, when the imprisonment of the Portuguese-naturalized Gibraltaran sea-captain Don Pacifico had nearly led to war with Greece a few years before. Scott offered a Byzantine modification of his scheme, which Palmerston predictably characterized as 'a regular mongrel affair', but reluctantly acquiesced in the end, and immersing himself in a new set of source-books and examples, provided the classical *palazzo* Lord Palmerston demanded.

He allowed himself, though, that one Gothic compensation on the corner; and far more than the sumptuous central courtyard of the building, or its laborious scholarship of spandrel or pilaster, the unexpected tower above the lake was to represent to posterity the spirit of mid-Victorian Empire.[1]

## 2

For the Empire was taking a Gothic turn. Its style, in life as in art,

[1] Though Scott was not allowed to crown it, as he wished, with four gigantic female figures, one of them Britannia; other parts of his Gothic design, however, he was able to adopt for his later masterpiece, St Pancras Hotel.





was becoming more elaborate, more assertive, more utterly itself—as Blake had written, the classical forms were mathematical, but Gothic forms had *Life*. Let us view, in illustration, two architectural compositions of the Raj in India, one an inheritance of earlier years, one a mid-Victorian creation, and see how differently they reflect the imperial aspirations of their day.

One's first view of the city of Calcutta, as one sailed up the Hooghly through the shoals and mudbanks of the Ganges Delta, was essentially *gracious*. This was deliberate. No more than a slatternly collection of hovels until the British settled there, Calcutta remained even now largely an eighteenth-century city, and faithfully represented the spirit of an older empire. To the right there stood Fort William, a powerful heap of ramparts and barracks, with the spire of its garrison church protruding above the walls, to proclaim the Christian presence, and the green space of the Maidan all around to provide a clear field of fire. On the left there extended in happy contrast the leafy expanse of the Botanical Gardens, greenhouses gleaming through the banyans, to remind the traveller that this Empire was concerned not only with power, but with science and beauty too. There were wharves all along the southern bank, lined with three-masters and hung about by country craft, and immediately in front, as the river bent northwards, there stood the mass of the central city, grouped in stylish esplanade at right angles to the stream.

It was a white city, plastered white, peeling in many places and patched with damp, but still to the eyes of a newcomer ethereal against the Indian sky. Around its buildings, as the century progressed, the untidy straggle of an Indian city grew, but earlier Victorian visitors to Calcutta nearly all commented upon its white elegance. They called it the City of Palaces, partly because its buildings were so grand, but partly because, in the pilastered classicism of its predominant style, it suggested a dream-like evocation of Rome or Greece. This was intentional too. As they emerged from the free-for-all eighteenth century, the British in India had been concerned to represent themselves as enlightened despots, and they saw their eastern settlements, as the American colonists had seen Ithaca or Syracuse, as nuclei of classical ideals and virtues. By and

large the architecture stuck to classical rules—Doric for masculine, warlike buildings, Corinthian for pleasure—and if the detailing of these edifices was imperfect, only irritating purists fresh from home complained about their proportions.

There was the great palace built by Lord Wellesley, brother to the Duke of Wellington, with its great sweep of porte-cochère, its vast colonnade, the white tropic birds poised upon the urns that crowned its balustrade, and the sentries all scarlet and white beside its gates. There was the Town Hall, double-columned in Tuscan Doric, and the Greek Doric Mint, with its portico a half-size copy of the Temple of Minerva at Athens, and the church of St John's with its façade a facsimile of St Martin-in-the-Field's in London;[1] and all down Mission Row, and along the Chowringhee edge of the Maidan, and far away down Garden Reach towards the sea, the immense stucco mansions of the merchants and traders stood opulently in the sun—not in squares or terraces, as they would be in London, but each in its own wide compound, like a Roman villa.

This was a retrospective scene, as though the British were recalling a golden age of antiquity, and trying in a gentlemanly way to recreate it in their oriental empire. That the stucco was often peeling and the masonry flimsy, that the great drawing-rooms of those mansions were frequently half-furnished and echoing, did not detract from the illusion: there was an element of theatre to the City of Palaces, insubstantial like a stage set, which many travellers thought proper to so resplendent a showplace. Besides, implicit to the neo-classic outlook was an element of romantic melancholy, and if more sophisticated visitors could not always admire these buildings as examples of the best constructional techniques, at least one could cherish them as ruins of the future.

But later in the century a very different aesthetic governed the architects of the Raj, who were by then mostly officers of the Royal Engineers, and responded professionally to the imperial sentiments fashionable in their day. Now the British were concerned to express

[1] Whose pattern, published by James Gibbs in his *Book of Architecture*, was reproduced not only in India, but in South Africa, Canada and Australia too: perhaps the last example was the Dutch Reformed Church at Cradock in South Africa, completed in 1867 nearly 150 years after the original conception.





not the classic purity of their standards, but their detached omnipotence. The mid-Victorian buildings of empire were nothing if not assured. In the vast vaulted roofs of railway stations they displayed the technical command of empire; in the derivative spires of cathedrals, or the daunting mahogany halls of Government Houses, they tried to demonstrate its inner calm: and nothing illustrated the Empire's sense of divine hierarchy more revealingly than the hill-station, a uniquely British contribution to the cultures of the east.

Hill-stations were never thought of by the Moghul rulers of India, who preferred retreats of more languid purpose. They were a device of the mid-Victorian British, pining for the briskness of the north. Until the imperial armies penetrated the Himalayan foothills, in the 1820s and 1830s, the hills were almost unknown to Europeans. Up there the British could start from scratch, and in the high enclaves of the hill-stations, narrowly set upon their terraced ridges, the Britishness of Empire could find its most intense expression—for at Simla, Darjeeling or Mussoorie the gentlefolk of the Raj, celestially withdrawn from the Indian millions on the plains below, lived for a few months in the year entirely for themselves. Such Indians as were present were there as feudatories, servants or dependents, and the emotions of the British, all too often inhibited in the stifling heat of the lowlands, vividly flowered in the mountain brilliance above.

Darjeeling, say, must have seemed a vision of release when the jaded memsahib or exhausted Collector took the last bend out of the deodars and saw it standing there above. Behind it the stupendous Himalaya rose; away to the south the foothills tumbled in terrace and fold towards the plains; yet theatrical though the setting was, instantly the eye was drawn to the modest centre of the stage. Your hill-station was scarcely more than a village, and was ludicrously dwarfed by the scale of the country, but it had the startling impact of an intruder. It was defiantly, gloriously out of place—a figure of despotic privilege.

Where there should be an eaved white temple with prayer flags up there, a Gothic steeple rose instead, with a weathercock on top, and the white blobs of tombstones in the yard behind. Where one

might expect the palace of Mir or Maharajah, a hotel in the Eastbourne manner stood, wicker chairs upon its terrace, awnings above its windows. There were military-looking buildings here and there, and genteel half-timbered villas disposed above rustic steps, and along the top of the ridge there ran a wide paved esplanade, with a bandstand, a fountain in a public garden, and benches, as on a promenade at home, surveying the Himalayan prospect.

In decreasing consequence down the ridge to the south, the rest of the town obsequiously fell: lesser hotels, pensions and Eurasian sorts of villa, a clutter of bazaars, an open-air market, a square at the bottom where the rickshaws waited. Socially it was a vertical construction—posh and British on the summit, mixed half-way down, utterly indigenous in the lowest layers. Visually it was a neatly hatched compression of planes. The horizontals were the buildings in their tiers; the verticals were the tall thin trees which stood everywhere like cypresses in Italy, and were matched by the tower of St Andrew's at the top; the diagonals were the slopes of the hills themselves, which framed the town, and by intersecting behind it accentuated the meshed and intricate texture of the scene. The hill-stations were mostly built by military engineers, and if their individual buildings were generally undistinguished and sometimes repellent, their civic patterns were rather handsome. Bath, itself the echo of an earlier empire, was familiar to many an imperial soldier, and in Darjeeling's simple but elegant plan we perhaps see innocent derivations of Lansdowne and Great Pulteney.

Yet it was not the shape of the town that was exciting, and certainly not its architecture, but the suggestion it gave of concentrated force. For all its respectable trappings it looked a fierce, perhaps a vicious kind of place. It was all in movement. Even from a distance one could see the urgent jostle of its bazaars, the bright crowds hastening arm in arm along the Mall, or clattering hilariously about on mountain ponies. The air was full of sparkle; hoots, shouts, axes, hammers, bugles or even bagpipes sounded; sometimes the sun flashed brilliantly off a window, or a flag fluttered red white and blue through a chink in the buildings.

It was an insignificant, in some ways a preposterous little settlement, but it was more truly a symptom of absolute power than the





City of Palaces had ever been. It was the belvedere of a ruling race, obedient to no precedent, subject to no qualm, from whose terraces as from some divine gazebo the British could look down from the cool heights to the expanses of their unimaginable empire below.[1]

## 3

All over the Empire this trend towards the aloof and the grandiloquent was apparent. Government Houses, for example, became very grand indeed, however minuscule their colonies: for as a perceptive official memorandum put it, 'the keeping up of an outward appearance of power will in many instances save the necessity of resort into the actual exercise of it'. The one at Hamilton in Bermuda had a Medici air: it was supposed indeed to have been originally designed for erection outside Florence, and stood among great groves of cedar-trees, crab-grass lawns and banana orchards as if a prince were indeed its occupant, instead of (more often than not) a superannuated and not very successful general. The one at Nassau in the Bahamas, on the other hand, aspired more towards Chatsworth or Woburn in manner, and actually had deer in its park, while the one at Hobart in Tasmania, set with turrets and flagstaffs against the mass of Mount Wellington, looked suggestively like Balmoral.[2]

Even the white settler colonies progressed with astonishing speed from the homely to the pretentious. Some lovely buildings had been erected out there in the earlier years of the century. There were the delectable country houses of Tasmania, built to a square simple Georgian of finely-dressed stone: rectory sort of buildings, Gainsborough buildings, with their big sash windows, their whitewashed dairies, the lovely oaks and elms transplanted with them from the English countryside, their verandahs incongruously roofed with corrugated iron, their tall chimneys aromatic with eucalyptus smoke. Or there were the stone farmhouses built by British settlers in the

[1] Darjeeling remains much as it was, and the hill-towns of India, half-heartedly copied elsewhere, were to prove, I think, the only truly original socio-architectural conception of the British Empire—unless you count the bungalow.

[2] And had a ghost which, perpetually wandering its corridors, moaned down the years an enigmatic message: '*It's a quarter past eleven*'.

flank of the Little Karroo, along the coast from Cape Town—buildings so strong, so organic, so deep-shaded by trees and cosy with dry-stone walling, so exquisitely set in their hill-sides, that they might have been lifted stone by stone from Radnor or Brecknock, together with their pigs, sheep and leather buckets.[1] And the handsomest small market towns of East Anglia could offer no happier architectural ensemble than the public square at St George's in Bermuda, which was seventeenth century in origin, but had been discreetly embellished and preserved throughout the heyday of the sugar colonies: an authentic hole-in-corner English square, opening at one side to the harbour, and cluttered all about with wood-framed shuttered houses, open staircases and tall white chimneys—two comfortable old pubs, and the town pillory, and poking quaintly above the houses the tower of St Peter's, 300 years old already, in whose shady churchyard the negroes sprawled and gossiped among the tombs sealed with whitewash, and from whose belfry on Sundays mellowed English bells summoned the expatriates to worship.

But this modesty of scale and demeanour had not survived. The early settlers knew their place in the comparative order of things, but your mid-century Australian or Canadian was limitless of pretension. The cities of the new British nations were urgently grandiose: ugly often, like Toronto, heavy sometimes like Melbourne and Auckland, but never diffident and seldom mean. Even the cramped terrace houses of Sydney, sprawling in their white thousands over the hills of Paddington or Balmain, possessed a certain air of ease, with their wrought-iron balconies and their voluptuous magnolias, while in fast-rising suburbs from Victoria to Ontario the new rich of the British Empire, flourishing on wool or diamonds, railway boom or ostrich feather fashions, built themselves mansions in the full amplitude of the Gothic orthodoxy.

Such new buildings offered no ideological lessons. They were no longer a projection of ideals, like the great white houses along

[1] When I was looking at these buildings in 1970 I stopped for tea at the Kruis Valley Tea Rooms. I was given home-made brown bread, butter and strawberry jam, and ventured to strum through some of the music I found on the piano—*Smilin' Through*, and Henry Hall's Selection of Love Songs. The Empire dies hard in nooks and crannies.





Garden Reach at Calcutta, nor was there to them any suggestion of fantasy or transience. They expressed, like Darjeeling, more pride than purpose. We are here, they seemed to say, on top of the world: as though the dream of empire, scarcely yet formulated, had already in a sense been fulfilled. The Anglo-Indian bungalow had begun life modestly and racily as a Europeanized Bengali cottage—a stationary tent, as one Englishman suggested in 1801: but by the middle of the century it had become, with its wide verandahs, its gauze screens, its elaborate cooling devices and the servants thronged and squabbling through its out-buildings, more like a rich man's retreat.

## 4

For if some of the gaiety was leaving the Empire now, so was much of the easy amateurism. In art especially a new professionalism was apparent. The British Empire had never been short of artists: every possession, every campaign, had been meticulously recorded in a hundred sketch-books. There had always been professionals in the field, men like the Daniells or Zoffany who followed the flag specifically in search of subjects or commissions: but more notably, there had been an inexhaustible number of amateurs. Many were soldiers, especially engineers, who had learnt the elements of sketching as part of their military training, and whose pictures were touched up for them, or corrected, by professionals at home. Many were officers' wives, among whose lady-like accomplishments water-colour painting was almost obligatory.

So the earlier years of Victoria's empire were richly recorded. Often the pictures were fearfully inaccurate, sometimes as a result of the professional touching-up, sometimes because of lack of skill, sometimes because the artist over-responded to his stimuli, and saw the giant carved figures of the Elephanta Caves, say, or the rapids of the Winnipeg River, even bigger or more tumultuous than they really were. These distortions were, however, guileless. They were part of the prevailing dilettante charm, like the harmless exaggeration of a raconteur, or a memory that grows brighter with the years. By the 1850s a different kind of distortion was appearing. Now for the first time we see imperialist art. In the popular history books

hack professionals portrayed the scenes of the Mutiny in a spirit of vicious caricature, while the generals or pro-consuls whose pictures appeared in the magazines began to look more than mortal. An unearthly aura seems to surround the imperial heroes in these commissioned portraits, and they stand in god-like poses on their hillocks, or battlements, or Parliamentary terraces, holding foam-flecked chargers, maps or Order Papers: their faces are invariably grim, they are often romantically cloaked or furred, and they seem to be looking out across veld or S.W.1. towards imperial hazards yet to be defied.

Even in the flesh, one sometimes feels, the imperial activists now moved pictorially. We read of an incident, for instance, during the siege of Lucknow, when the Nepali prince Jung Bahadur visited General Colin Campbell in his tent outside the city. A guard of kilted Highlanders greeted him, pipers stalked up and down, the guns of battle rumbled and shook the ground as the two men talked, and in the middle of the durbar, impeccably timed, a tall and handsome British officer, glamorous in fighting gear, entered the tent to report the capture of one of the main enemy strongholds—'very little loss on our side, about 500 of the enemy killed!' Or consider the British entry into Peking during the China War of 1856, when Lord Elgin arrived to express the Queen's displeasure at the obstructive behaviour of the Chinese. Three miles up the highway to the House of Ceremonies the British majestically marched—General Sir Robert Napier in the van, Lord Elgin in a sumptuous sedan chair with another horseback general at his side, then 400 marching soldiers, and 100 sailors, and two bands—through the symbolic gates of the hall, through the ornamental gardens, up the cobbled way—and when, near the Grand Entrance, Prince Kung, attended by 500 mandarins, closed his hands before his face in submissive greeting, 'Lord Elgin', we are told, 'returned him a proud contemptuous look, and merely bowed slightly, which must have made the blood run cold in the poor Prince's veins'.

# 5

*One man with a dream, at pleasure,*
*Shall go forth and conquer a crown;*





*And three with a new song's measure*
*Can trample a kingdom down. . . .*

Yet the dream did not, by and large, much inspire the writers of England. They could not ignore the imperial crescendo, of course, and many had imperial connections of their own. Captain Marryat captured the Akyab Peninsula in the first Burmese War. Fanny Burney's brother was first Resident of Arakan. Thomas Love Peacock worked at East India House. Thackeray was born in India. One of Dickens' sons was in the Canadian police, another was buried in Calcutta. Sometimes they portrayed imperial characters incidentally, as Thackeray immortalized the nabobs in the person of Colonel Newcome, and Dickens lampooned the evangelical imperialists in Mrs Jellyby. Carlyle, Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, all wrote around the imperial theme at one time or another, and by the nature of his office Tennyson, Poet Laureate through the High Victorian years, intermittently celebrated the Queen's imperial dignity—

*. . . Statesmen at her council met*
*Who knew the seasons when to take*
*Occasion by the hand, and make*
*The bounds of freedom wider yet.*

*By shaping some august decree*
*Which kept her throne unshaken still,*
*Broad-based upon her people's will,*
*And compassed by the inviolate sea.*[1]

The best novels about imperial life were written by practitioners on the spot (most of the worst, too, especially those that made up the vast and painful corpus of Anglo-Indian romance). Meadows Taylor, for instance, was an Anglo-Indian whose book *Confessions of a Thug* was a memorable fictional reportage of the Sleeman campaign: while Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life*, which first exposed

[1] Though Tennyson was not so obvious a choice for Laureate as one might suppose—'there are three or four authors of nearly equal merit', wrote Lord John Russell to the Queen in 1850, 'such as Henry Taylor, Sheridan Knowles, Professor Wilson, and Mr Tennyson, who are qualified for the office'.

the horrors of the Tasmanian convict settlements, approached the stature of epic.[1]

But the giants of the day did not respond to the fact of British ascendancy in the world, the establishment of new Britains overseas, or the hardening imperial arrogance of the nation. No great literature came out of the Mutiny, one of the most extraordinary events in human history; nobody wrote the sagas of the imperial families, generation succeeding generation on the distant frontiers; to English men of letters the imperial story was only ancillary to greater themes at home, and even the wistful imperial tragedies of time, distance or disillusion, did not seem the stuff of art.

## 6

Only the lapidary monuments of the Raj sometimes suggested this fragile sense of waste. Occasionally a tomb itself revealed it, like the little Ionic temple which, high above Grand Harbour at Malta, honoured the memory of Sir Alexander Ball, the first Governor—built of Malta's soft golden stone, shaded by palms and hibiscuses, and looking so cool, so white, so small and poignant in that setting that it might have been a monument to homesickness itself. More often it was the inscription upon the tombs that could move the susceptible traveller. Comic sometimes, pathetic very often, sometimes pompous, sometimes innocent, they were like a communal text of the great adventure, chiselled on granite, sandstone or marble across half the world.

They could be caustic, like this tribute to a Governor of Bermuda:

*To enumerate the many rare Virtues which shone united in the Governor of that little Spot were to tell how many great Talents and excellent Endowments are wanting in some, whom the Capriciousness of Fortune Exposes in a more elevated and Conspicuous station.*

They could be melancholy, like this plaint from West Africa:

*By foreign hands thy dying lips were closed,*
*By foreign hands thy decent limbs composed,*

[1] And seems to me distinctly akin, in style and intent as in material, to the revelatory novels of post-Stalinist Russia.





*By foreign hands thy humble grace adorned,*
*By strangers honoured and by strangers mourned.*

Often, especially after about 1850, they expressed with a stunning blandness the evangelical fatalism of the day, like that favourite epitaph for babies dying in the miseries of a tropic confinement or infancy—*The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away, Blessed be the name of the Lord.* This is the motto that Battery Sergeant Major J. Evans, Royal Artillery, chose for the grave of his little daughter, Minnie, aged 4½, buried at Malta in 1874: I'M GONE TO JESUS. WILL YOU COME!! And when they erected a memorial church upon the site of the entrenchment at Cawnpore, to honour the Britons so hideously slaughtered at the Ghat or in the Bibighar, they placed upon its wall a definitive text of imperial Christianity: *The sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared with all the glory which shall be revealed to us.*

Sometimes epitaphs successfully translated the bravado of the imperial way—*Abruptly Terminated by Assassins*, as it said succinctly of somebody's life on a brass in Lahore Cathedral. At Multan, for instance, the epitaph of two young administrators whose assassination in 1848 led to the final annexation of the Punjab began with the romantic declaration:

*On this, the farthest frontier of the British Indian Empire,*
*which their deaths extended,*
*lie the remains of*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *PETER VANS AGNEW* | | *WILLIAM ANDERSON* |
| *of the* | *and* | *Lieut. 1st Bombay* |
| *Bengal Civil Service* | | *Fusilier Regt.* |

And hardly less vibrant was the tributary verse to General Sir Charles Fraser, V.C., in the Royal Garrison Church at Aldershot:

*Wounded, helpless, sick, dismounted,*
*Charlie Fraser, well I knew*
*Come the worst I might have counted*
*Faithfully on you.*[1]

[1] The regimental spirit is perhaps less advisedly evoked in a neighbouring memorial, whose subject is said to have died 'from the effects of a wound

The nearest to literary grandeur among the imperial epitaphs, perhaps, was achieved by Macaulay, who wrote the tribute to Lord William Bentinck inscribed upon his statue on the Maidan at Calcutta:

*Who, placed at the head of a great Empire, never laid aside the simplicity and moderation of a private citizen. . . . Who infused into oriental despotism the spirit of British freedom. . . . Who never forgot that the end of Government is the welfare of the governed. . . . Who abolished cruel rites. . . . Who effaced humiliating distinctions. . . . Whose constant study it was to elevate the moral and intellectual character of the nation committed to his charge. . . .*

And undoubtedly it was Walter Savage Landor, in the most famous imperial epitaph of all, who came nearest to capturing the frail sense of disillusion that haunted the British Empire even in its prime. Rose Aylmer was an almost legendary young Anglo-Welsh beauty with whom Landor had fallen in love at sight one day in the Swansea Circulating Library. She had been staying with an aunt in India, had died of dysentery, and had been buried in the Park Street Cemetery in Calcutta, itself an imperial city of the dead, laid out in avenues of domes, obelisks and classical temples like an architectural display. Upon her tomb was inscribed the elegy which almost alone, among all the hundreds of thousands of imperial epitaphs, catches the heartbreaking loss of life and love which was so often the price of dominion:

*Ah, what avails the sceptred race!*
*Ah, what the form divine!*
*What every virtue, every grace!*
*Rose Aylmer, all were thine.*

*Rose Aylmer, whom these wakeful eyes*
*May weep, but never see,*
*A night of memories and sighs*
*I consecrate to thee.*

received in action with the regiment at El Teb, the re-opening of which was caused by over-exertion at the regimental athletic sports'.





She was 20 when she died so squalidly in Bengal—from eating too much fruit, we are told—and the poet survived her for sixty-four years.

# 7

Let us end with the humblest of literary forms, the graffito. Every empire left its scratches. The Spanish conquistadores carved their names in exquisite calligraphy on desert rocks in New Mexico. The Romans cut theirs sacrilegiously upon the Colossi of Memnos. The British left the same such homely souvenirs across the world, wherever a ship put in, a company halted on the march, or an idle sentry doodled with his bayonet point in the night. At Muscat in the Persian Gulf, where the British claimed misty powers of suzerainty, a tall bluff above the harbour was daubed all over with the names of British warships, piquantly flaunted up there beside the fortress that represented the lost empire of the Portuguese. On the walls of the water catchment tank at English Harbour, in Antigua, Nelson himself had scratched the name of his ship, HMS *Borealis*, and the remains of his own name could still be seen, it was said, among the myriad Robinsons, Thomases and Williamses carved there in the limestone. On the ruins of Persepolis in Persia, that grand fragment of an older empire, generations of British imperialists had shamelessly carved their signatures: wandering diplomats and intelligence agents, soldiers scouting the approaches to India, unexplained adventurers, scholars taking the long road home. And in the Red Fort at Delhi, where the British Army now maintained a garrison of its own, many a redcoat had by now scratched his initials, his regiment and the homesick date upon Bahadur's soft sandstone. Slightly sweaty we may imagine such a young man there, in his thick serge and white-crusted webbing, his rifle propped against the wall, his helmet pushed to the back of his head, his tongue protruding slightly in concentration beneath his moustache: the bul-buls sing in the garden trees, a distant clamour sounds from the bazaar, a desultory murmur of Indian voices rises from some shadowy arch beneath his watchtower—until he hears the orderly sergeant approaching, with a stertorous clatter up the winding stone staircase,

and hastily returning his bayonet to his scabbard, tilting his topee correctly above his eyes, he stands ready with his back to the parapet, in case those new-scratched letters in the old stone, with half a heart and a sweetheart's crooked initials, should show up in the moonlight and betray him.[1]

[1] All these graffiti may still be seen by the indefatigable aficionado of Empire, and most of the epitaphs too, though I have taken some anachronistic liberties in their selection, are still legible—even Bentinck's, for his statue is one of those that remain on the Maidan at Calcutta. Perhaps I may be allowed to add one more for its own sake—that of Lieutenant Christopher Hyland of the 62nd Regt., who died in Bermuda in 1837 and is buried beneath the sly backhander, devised perhaps by his mess-mates:

*Alas, he is not lost,*
*But is gone before.*



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# Illustrious for the Nile

ON September 16, 1864, the spa of Bath in Somerset awoke in a state of half-illicit anticipation. Long past its prime as a fashionable resort, its prevailing tone was set now by retired military men and colonial administrators, and the walls of its ancient abbey were crowded with memorials to the imperial departed—as was said of them,

*These walls, so full of monument and bust,*
*Show how Bath's waters serve to lay the dust.*

Bath's glorious Georgian squares and crescents, which made it one of the handsomest cities in Europe, were mostly peeled and shabby: the old place had subsided into provincial respectability, and had acquired a name for seedy dullness that was to persist for another century.

But September 1864 was a gala month there. The British Association for the Advancement of Science, founded thirty years before to foster public interest in the sciences, was holding its annual conference in the city. Savants and enthusiasts had arrived from all over the kingdom, and at a moment when applied science had reached an apogee of esteem, all educated eyes were turned to the proceedings in Somerset. The London newspapers carried long daily accounts; the *Bath Chronicle* had imported forty typesetters from the capital to produce a daily newspaper reporting nothing else. The celebrated squares, parades and terraces of the city were alive with the comings and goings of the great, and the *Chronicle's* social reporters[1] could scarcely keep up with the soirées, the concerts, the balls and the private dinner parties—over whose tables, between whose quadrilles,

[1] Who continued until 1939 to record the arrival of hotel guests in Bath.

Morris. Pax Britannica

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

# Stones of Empire

*I must be gone to the crowd untold*
*Of men by the cause which they served unknown,*
*Who moulder in myriad graves of old;*
*Never a story and never a stone*
*Tells of the martyrs who die like me,*
*Just for the pride of the old countree.*

Alfred Lyall

# 17

IT was by their buildings that earlier Empires were most arrestingly remembered. Storks upon a Roman viaduct, proud towers in an Andean plaza, the squat menace of the Pyramids, seen small but alarming from the Mokattam hills—any of these could instantly suggest to an unlettered visitor the age and power of a lost dominion. The British in their imperial heyday had evolved no style so absolute as the Roman or the Egyptian, if only because they were members of a wider civilization, sharing a culture with the rest of the Western world.[1] Buildings would not be their chief memorials: but across their Empire, nevertheless, they had left architectural imprints that were recognizably their own, to remind posterity with a gable or a clock-tower that the Raj had passed that way.

In their earlier years of Empire they had scattered through their possessions buildings in the Queen Anne and Georgian styles, reflecting the ordered security of society at home, and now commonly called Colonial. Much of the best was in the lost colonies of the United States, where the Americans had given the style subtleties of their own, and in the old parts of the Empire there were many good examples too, stabled and impeccable in Nova Scotia, or wilted by heat and humidity in the estates and merchant settlements of the tropics. They gave a sense of continuity to the British presence, linking the plantations of the old Empire with the Chartered Companies and railway workshops of the new: but far truer to the spirit of the imperial climax, and much more widely admired by the British, was the heterogeneous collection of idioms loosely called the High Victorian. The characteristic form of the imperial prime was romantically picturesque, loosely derived from Gothic or Byzantine models, and ornamented all over with eclectic variety. It

[1] Though Sir Osbert Sitwell once suggested that a British Empire style might 'lie dormant' in the Brighton Pavilion.

was not how one imagines an imperial style. It was not exactly imperious. But in the elaboration of its hybrid forms, the towering exuberance of its fancy, its readiness to accept a touch of the exotic here and there, its colossal scale and its frequent impression of enthusiasm wildly out of hand—in all these things the style truly reflected this high noon of imperialism. In Canada the British adopted mansard roofs and château turrets, in India they built railway sheds of Saracenic motif, and in British Columbia, looking westward across the Pacific, they built a Parliament with pagodas. But beneath all these alien veneers the authentic British showed, in the red brick and the mullion windows, the wrought iron and the commemorative medallions, or just in a true-blue inscription, recording the cost of it all, commemorating an occasion, or honouring, like the text on the Simla telegraph office, prefectorial values:

MOLEM AEDIFICII MULTI CONSTRUXERUNT:—
RATIONEM EXEGIT I. BEGG[1]

## 2

Supreme in every imperial city stood the house of God, on a hill if there was one about, and generally Gothic. Sometimes it was a princely pile. On a hundred improbable imperial sites, encouched in buffalo grass or dripped about by frangipani, there stood a genuine Anglican cathedral, with a Bishop's Palace somewhere near and a flutter of surplices in the Sunday trade winds. Even more than the mansions of colonial governors, these stately buildings expressed a sort of hook-nosed and scholarly assurance, and gave the traveller from England an uncanny sense of *déjà vu*. There was one very like Hereford in the Punjabi town of Ambala, on the road from Delhi to Kalka.[2] There was one rather like Lincoln down the road from the Renaissance-style Post Office, the Classical Town Hall, the Byzantine market and the Tudor Government House in Sydney. The cathedral at Calcutta used to look like Salisbury, until the 1897

[1] 'Many men erected the stonework of this building: I. Begg directed the work.'

[2] It was bombed by Pakistani aircraft during the fighting with India in 1965.





earthquake knocked its spire off.[1] The cathedral at St John's, Newfoundland, started by George Gilbert Scott in 1844, was burnt out in a fire in 1892, and now stood portentously, a vast humped shell, high above the clapboard streets of the port.[2] The cathedral at Lahore was by Scott, too, and was all layered in the brown dust of the Punjab, with a baked brown close, a few brown stringy trees, and a catechism echoing across the Mall from the brown cathedral school across the way. The cathedral at Fredericton, New Brunswick, was modelled originally on the parish church at Snettisham in Norfolk, and completed according to the advice of the Ecclesiological Society of Cambridge. The cathedral at St Helena was described by one Governor of the island, R. A. Sterndale, as being 'utterly devoid of architectural beauty outside or in'.

If there was not a cathedral, there was certainly a parish church. There it stood in splendid incongruity on heathen strand or far-flung waterfront, and not only Anglicans were moved to find it there, for like those Mounties at the head of the White Pass, it spoke of order and authority, meals at the proper time, clean sheets and punctual trains. Any of a thousand would serve us for examples, but let us choose the church of St John which stood in a fine wide churchyard above the waterfront at Hong Kong. St John's was in the very best part of town. Government House was its neighbour one way, Flagstaff House the other, and within convenient walking distance were the barracks, the parade ground, the cricket ground and the public gardens. Behind rose the steep streets of the Peak, the most fashionable residential area. In front was the waterfront, looking across the marvellous harbour to Kowloon. Easily, benignly, the tower of St John's presided over those varied scenes. The waterfront buildings in those days were vaguely Italianate in style, in a kind common to all European settlements in China, and the quaysides themselves were picturesquely Chinese, all coolie hats and sampans. The slab of the Peak behind was tawny and brown, except where the taipans had planted their lush gardens, and the general colour of the scene was a bleached grey, as though all the paints had slightly faded. The stance of St John's, however, was unaffected by

[1] When they rebuilt it, without the spire, it looked like Canterbury.

[2] It is rebuilt now, but still unfinished.

it all. It stood there precisely as it might have stood in Cheltenham or Tunbridge Wells, assimilated into the scene by sheer force of character. Like the minaret of a mosque, it represented more (or less) than a faith: it was the emblem of a society, expressing temporal as well as spiritual values, and clearly built upon the assumption that if God was a church-goer at all, he was obviously C. of E.

## 3

Next to the home of God, the home of the Empire-builder. The domestic architecture of the Victorian Empire was everything that it was at home in England, with tropical overtones. There was no class or style of contemporary British housing that you could not find, lifted bodily, somewhere in the overseas possessions. Even the mean terrace houses of industrial England were reproduced in the cities of Australia, where a British proletariat existed to occupy them; the Australians also favoured a peculiarly froward kind of bungalow, with grey-washed walls and lead-coloured iron roofs, which they disguised with an acacia or a couple of Norfolk pines to look like a week-end cottage. The English suburban villa, as we have seen, was broadcast throughout the Indian hills, and the first thing any conventional colonial magnate did, when he had made his pile in Parramatta or Kimberley, was to build himself a really lurid Gothic mansion, just as urned, terraced and carriage-swept as any his contemporaries were erecting in the environs of Manchester. Even the odd folly appeared in the Empire, honouring the traditions of English eccentricity: the Astana, the palace of the White Rajahs of Sarawak, had a Gothic tower and high-pitched roofs of wooden shingles, and was supported on white-washed brick arcades.

Often these replicas of home were absurdly ill suited to their setting—if not in looks, at least in comfort. Even in England those florid piles were scarcely functional, and when one added to their original disadvantages all the hazards of tropical life, from termites beneath the hall floor to troops of servants' babies in the stable-yard, they must sometimes have made the memsahib's heart sink. But there were exceptions, even in the heyday of High Victorian. The English settlers in South Africa were building some very





agreeable homesteads, trim with trees and fences like Kentucky stud-farms, and far more comfortable than the shambled farms of their neighbours the Boers. The tea-planters' houses of Ceylon, with their immensely tall narrow corridors and their outdoor kitchens, were often surrounded by admirable lawns of coarse mountain grass, upon which the planters' ladies enviably sat, buzzed about by harmless insects and salaamed by passing serfs.

The archetypical Anglo-Indian bungalow was an uninspired compromise. In the beginning it was simply a box, for living in, with a veranda all around it to keep it cool. When British families began to go to India a second storey was placed upon the box, and on top of it again a sleeping platform was often built, with a ladder to reach it from the roof on the very hottest nights of the hot weather. Cool creepers were encouraged to grow over and around the veranda, and sometimes it was covered with an aromatic screen, moistened with running water by coolies outside, and smelling sweetly fresh and herbal. Behind was the compound, in which the servant community lived, and all around was sprinkled garden, acting as insulation against the hot dust of street or desert. Upon this basic form every sort of change was rung, and in its grander versions the bungalow had anything up to twenty rooms—a dining-room and a drawing-room downstairs, bedrooms and a family sitting-room above.

Such a house stood for imperial sense. For imperial sensibility we will pay brief calls upon two very different possessions. At Zomba, in Nyasaland, the British Consul accredited to 'the Kings and Chiefs of Central Africa' had built a Residency that was a model of its kind, beautifully set upon the slopes of a forested mountain (the home of Rider Haggard's People of the Mist) and surrounded by delicious half-wild gardens. It had conical towers at each end, to fortify it against savages, and verandas upstairs and down, and was proudly claimed to be the finest building in East Africa north of the Zambesi: with its steep roof and big low rooms, the mountains behind and the wide lush valley in front, it looked genuinely indigenous to Africa, a sensitive synthesis of sun and shade, ruling and ruled.

The houses on the Savannah at Port of Spain, capital of Trinidad, offered sensibility of a more distracted kind. There architectural

clairvoyants could peer behind the composure of Victorianism into its wild reality. The Savannah was a wide green park, perhaps a mile across, preserved more or less in its natural state. There was a bandstand and the usual race-course, and on the grass groups of negro and Indian boys, scattered across the green, played interminable games of cricket, occasionally bursting into impromptu carnival. Trees ran down to the edge of the grass, and the whole was encircled by an electric tramline. Around this wide expanse a staggering gallimaufry of mansions surveyed the scene. Some were domed, some were stained-glassed, some had turrets, some had gables. There was half-timbering, and pictorial tiling, fenestration ranging from the medieval to the Georgian, spikes and pagodas, weathercocks everywhere, casement windows as of faery lore, bobbles and battlements, mullions and ornamental ironwork, silhouettes of Rhenish castle or Loire château—all in esplanade on the edge of the Savannah, in mad embodiment of the imperial variety.[1]

## 4

Public buildings of the most august elaboration honoured the Queen, the Arts and Sciences or the principle of imperial Government. Town Halls were scarcely less imposing than Parliament buildings, and clock towers were ubiquitous—the one in the middle of Colombo had a lighthouse on top, and the one at Aden was much the most prominent structure in the colony, standing high on a bare hill overlooking Steamer Point. Many of these enormous buildings were designed by soldiers, others by celebrated English architects of the day, but so vastly overwhelming was the spirit they represented that it was very difficult to tell the Captain of Engineers from the new Palladio. It was the spirit of Art for Empire's sake. We read that when a wealthy south Indian philanthropist decided to found a boarding-school in Madras 'his attention was directed not only towards improving the results at the University Examinations but also the construction of an artistic pile of buildings

[1] The Port of Spain houses are still in their full glory, with more cricketers than ever shouting '*Owzat?*' or 'Very pretty, sir', in the best imperial fashion on the Savannah. The Zomba house is now a hostel for Government employees, and its grounds form a public garden.





with a tower in the middle'. The tower-in-the-middle impulse informs many of the great buildings of the Pax Britannica. Their purpose does not seem to matter, and is seldom clear. They may be railway stations, libraries, ladies' colleges, covered markets. All are heavily clothed in symbolic ornament, and come to blur indistinguishably in the mind, a general mass of pomp strewn across the world in the Queen's name.

Probably the most daunting group of official buildings in the Empire was in Bombay. It stood like a massive palisade in parallel with the sea, separated from the beaches only by an expanse of brownish turf, a railway line, and a riding-track called Rotten Row. Here in three great blocks the Establishment of the Bombay Presidency was concentrated, celestially removed from the chaos which, out of sight beyond Esplanade Road and the Victoria Terminus, ran indescribably away to the north. Side by side stood the Secretariat, the University, the Library, the Clock Tower, the Law Courts, the Public Works Department, the Post Office and the Telegraph Office—a group of public buildings worthy of a great capital, and unmatched for scale in any English city outside London. It was a heady parade. Some was Venetian Gothic, some French Decorated, some Early English, and the Post Office, so the guidebook says, was simply 'medieval (architect, Trubshawe)'. Enormous palm-mat awnings shaded the windows, and high on their vast balconies dignitaries of the Raj could sometimes be seen strolling in white suits, discussing sewage costs with underlings or interviewing contractors. Nothing could be more unbendingly official than these buildings. They looked as though never, in all their years of dignity, did a lady drop a scented handkerchief upon their stairs, or a small boy prop his hoop against the porter's lodge. The Secretariat alone, designed by Captain H. St Clair Wilkins, Royal Engineers, had taken seven years to build, and a notice inside recorded with approval that whereas the estimated cost was Rs 1,280,731, the actual cost was only Rs 1,260,844.[1]

In Simla, steel-bolted offices below the Mall; in Wellington, New Zealand, the largest wooden buildings in the world, designed

[1] The buildings remain, daunting as ever, but land reclamation has removed them some distance from the sea, and tempered their majestic effect.

not to hurt if an earthquake demolished them, and containing all the Ministerial offices and all the Archives of State; in Bulawayo, Rhodesia, a white-walled and thatched-roof Government House built on the site of Lobengula's kraal; and in Ottawa a Parliament building which illustrated, better than any other, the romance of the imperial ideal at its best, the dream of cloud-capped towers and halls of brotherly debate which shimmered in many an Empire-builder's mind. The Parliament of the Canadian Confederacy was seen from the start as an epitome. Canada was the idealist's end of Empire—a people united in reconciliation, a colony emancipated, a wilderness civilized, the principles of parliamentary democracy transferred in triumphant vindication from an ancient capital to a new. When they built their Parliament the Canadians were consciously building a symbol, and they chose a properly sacramental site. The west bank of the river at Ottawa is flat, and runs away sullenly into the wilderness and the frozen north. The east bank is high and wooded, rising in grand bluffs above the water, and offering wide desolate prospects in every direction. Up there, in a site unmistakably of the New World, the English architects Thomas Fuller and Frederick Stent erected the most sumptuously imperial of buildings. It was best seen from Major's Hill, a little way downstream, for there its symbolisms showed clearest. To the left were the stepped locks of the Rideau Canal, descending steeply to the river in a virtuoso demonstration of man's mastery over nature. To the right the river ran away infinitely cold and uninviting, sometimes clogged with huge rafts, and chuffed over by steamboats. High in the middle, lapped by respectful trees and statuary, the turrets, towers and variegated roofs of Parliament rose in mysterious supremacy—a tall clock-tower their apex, outlier wings with mansard roofs and gabled windows, the library of Parliament buttressed and octagonal like an English chapter-house—with roofs of green and purple, and stonework splashed everywhere with reds, yellows and whites. Proud Canadians took their sons up Major's Hill, to point out the lessons of this majestic spectacle: and watercolourists threw an extra glow around it all, as they might embellish an allegory.[1]

[1] The principal architect of this great group was Fuller (1822–98), who was born in Bath. The central block was recognizably related to the University Museum at Oxford, which Fuller knew, and which had been completed in 1855.





# 5

One day in 1836 Colonel William Light, Surveyor-General of South Australia, stood on a bluff above Holdfast Bay and chose the site of Adelaide. He was the bastard son of a Royal Navy captain and a Malay half-caste woman, and had gone to Australia at the invitation of Gibbon Wakefield, who had high-flown plans for one of his colonies there. Light's job was to survey the country and apportion land to settlers, and almost the first thing he did was to pick a spot for the capital. The city was started absolutely from scratch, on military principles, in a place deliberately and scientifically selected out of the endless bush. First Colonel Light decreed a circular road, surrounding the entire site. He lined it all around with parkland, as an insulation against the bush, and in its centre he deposited a double city: to the north a residential area, around Wellington Square, to the south a business area, around Victoria Square. Between the two lay another park, with the Torrens River running through it, containing Government House, cricket grounds, a parade ground and an artificial lake. Adelaide was an elegant little city from the start, and though in the course of time Light's plan was partly overlaid by haphazard development, still it remained a standing reproach to the cheek-by-jowl disoriented cities of the Mother Country.[1]

It was a paradox of Empire that the British, the most pragmatic of peoples, should have best expressed themselves architecturally in planned townscapes—in groups rather than individual buildings, skylines rather than façades. This was partly because sites were generally virgin, and partly because soldiers so often laid out settlements, and partly because in their overseas possessions the British allowed themselves to be more formal and methodical than they often were at home. There were no sentimental yearnings for the

[1] Poor Light, though he is now gratefully remembered in Australia, came to a sad end. He resigned his job after a series of differences with his superiors, and died in 1839, aged 54, penniless and tubercular, in a cottage of mud and reed near his city site, nursed by his English mistress Maria.

crooked way, the rolling way. Right angles were *de rigueur* in the imperial towns, streets were often numerically named: many cities, like Adelaide, were built to a grid. Streets were often immensely wide, to allow ox-trains to turn in them, and the setting of spire against dome, tree against clock tower, was often arranged with methodical finesse. Foreigners were frequently struck by what seemed to them an uncharacteristic logic of design: von Hübner, surveying the straight broad streets of Australia, concluded that the young Englishmen of the colonies 'lean to the American'. Certainly the cities which the British had summoned into existence across the world were notable for a spaciousness, an airiness, that suggested boundless promise—as though the colonial planners foresaw from the very start their couple of shacks and a lean-to shop transformed into a metropolis.

Melbourne, for example, had been founded only sixty years before, when a Mr John Batman signed a land agreement with the aboriginal chiefs of the area—the three brothers Jagajaga, together with Cooloolock, Bungarie, Yanyan, Moowhip and Mommarmalar. No Colonel Light stepped in, to enlighten its origins with green belts and zoning, but it had already become a city of consequence, gilded with the profits of sheep-range and gold-rush. It was built to a grid, regardless of the shape of the ground. Each main street was flanked by a lesser access road, so that Lonsdale Street had its Little Lonsdale Street in parallel, Bourke Street its Little Bourke Street, Flinders Street its Flinders Lane. The business houses had their front doors on a big street, their back doors on a small, and suavely among them proceeded the supreme Australian thoroughfare, Collins Street, already claiming itself to be the finest street in the southern hemisphere (to every other Melbourne Street, Miss Clara Aspinall had written in the 1850s, 'there is an American, go-ahead spirit, very objectionable to the well-regulated minds of our sex'). There were no squares or crescents: the centre of the city was rigidly geometrical, partly because it made land sales easier, and it was in the suburbs that the individualism of Australia found expression. These were very British. Carlton was frankly modelled on Bloomsbury, and when they established their first seaside suburb the Australians naturally called it Brighton. Street after street the





villas extended, each in its garden, across the Yarra River and down to the sea; rich and showy houses, often delightfully touched up with decorative cast-iron, with ballrooms and nurseries, fern houses and coach houses, stucco decorations everywhere and stained glass on the landing. From these elegant and commodious retreats, as the panegyrists used to say, furnished in the costliest taste of four-poster and mahogany, such magnates as had escaped the bank crash of 1893 drove into town along broad tree-shaded boulevards, out of *rus* into *urbs*, to their flamboyant offices on Chancery Place, to lamb chops at the Melbourne Club, or simply to perform the social ritual known as 'doing the Block'—strolling up and down the north side of Collins Street, fetching up at last at Gunsler's Vienna Café, where *everybody* went.

English visitors might scoff at such a city ('isn't it a little far from Town?'), and Melbourne citizens of cosmopolitan pretensions habitually disparaged it, too. But these great cities of the white colonies—Melbourne, Sydney, Toronto, Durban—were already much finer places than the industrial cities of the English provinces. They were handsome towns: not subtly handsome, but boldly so. In the detail they often slavishly copied English patterns, but in the whole they had a freshness all their own, as though their builders had torn Birmingham or Manchester breezily apart, and begun all over again.

*Give me old Melbourne and give me my girl,*
*And I will be simply all right,*
*Does anyone know of a better old place,*
*Than Bourke Street on Saturday night?*

## 6

The British, who generally neglected their waterfronts at home, or blocked them all off with high-walled docks, used them rather better abroad. They created no Golden Horns, it is true, and wasted a few such marvellous sites as Wellington or Vancouver, but one did not easily forget the harbour-front at Hong Kong, the formal splendour of Empress Place in Singapore, or St John's in Newfoundland, with its tumble of wooden houses secreted behind the Narrows.

Sometimes the imperialists even set out to give gaiety to their waterfronts. Almost the first thing they created at Aden was a forlorn and blistered Esplanade, facing Front Bay. Sydney Harbour was flanked with little villas, perched Riviera-like high and low along its banks, and the seafront at Durban, where the Zulu rickshaw boys waited outside the hotels with bells on their ankles and feathers in their rickshaw wheels, was already one of the brightest of Victorian water-places. As for the esplanade at Colombo in Ceylon, that isle of imperial delights, it was almost Breton in its seaside elegance, and only seemed to be awaiting Proust's young ladies, to flounce along the boardwalk with their bikes and parasols. At one end stood the swanky Galle Face hotel, with its gay sunblinds and majestic hall porters; at the other the British Army barracks were built in sunny enfilade, like expensive hotels themselves; facing the sea was the oval-shaped Colombo Club, white, shuttered and Members Only; between them all stretched a huge seaside lawn, beautifully maintained by the Municipality, with white rails like a race-course all around it, and Dufy ships sailing brightly by beyond the seawall.

And at Madras, beyond the Coromandel surf, the British erected the best of all their city skylines, a romantic extravaganza comparable to that Whitehall view from the little bridge in St James's Park. In London the oriental elaboration seemed gloriously alien: in Madras, the oldest British city of the Raj, exotic flourishes seemed only proper. The skyline was like a cross between the Kremlin, a story-book Damascus and St Pancras railway station. Its buildings were, in fact, quite widely separated, and various in their styles, and seen close to resolved themselves into huge warrens of courthouses and Government offices, all arched and vaulted, with sunshine and rain pouring alternately down open staircases, and immense piles of documents glimpsed beneath portraits of old Governors and judges through barred unglazed windows. When seen from a distance, though, through the haze of the Carnatic noonday as your ship approached the anchorage, something ethereal happened to those structures: their walls were lost in the bustle of the city, and only their bulbous roofs and towers seemed to float above Madras, insubstantial against the blur, portly for Victoria and domed for the East.





# 7

'The Maharajah gave the order and Yakub Sahib made the garden.' In every city the sahibs softened their architecture with gardens, and of all expressions of the imperial taste, the gardens were the most satisfactory. The English predilection for the paradise garden, nature unobtrusively coaxed into order, was richly encouraged in the tropics, where the imperial gardeners found plants readier than anything at home to intertwine and luxuriate in the profusion they preferred. This was a ruling race with green fingers. The great gardens of the British Empire were mostly botanical gardens created for scientific purposes, but they were never mere open-air laboratories, while around their own houses, and in their public parks, the British lovingly grafted imperial cuttings to the root of English landscape art.

The best of the imperial gardens had an air of exuberance, as though their creators have been given *carte blanche*. The two famous botanical gardens of Ceylon, for instance, felt like English gardens magically released from the restraints of English taste and climate. Peradeniya, outside Kandy, was done to a Blenheim scale: the river Mahawali-ganga almost surrounded it, giving it a theatrical unity, and everything about it was lavish—royal palms, vast clumps of bamboo, greenhouses and wicker arbours veiled in creeper, an eerie grotto of an orchid house, flower gardens dramatically laid out, colour by colour in big bright slabs. Its high-altitude subsidiary, Hakgalla, was its antithesis. It stood secluded in the mountains beyond Nuriya Eliya, a favourite object of Grand Hotel excursions, and it was like an English garden in a dream, blurred and suggestive. Peradeniya was best seen on the evening of a sunny day, when the shadow gave depth to its grand manner, and threw the silhouettes of its palms nobly across the green. Hakgalla excelled in a Scotch mist in early morning, when its maze of little paths, thickets and hollows opened unexpectedly one after another through the haze. It was only just short of a wild garden, its foliage exquisitely checked on the brink of anarchy, and it was dominated by ferns—damp and lacy ground ferns, tangled rock ferns, and the beautiful tree ferns

peculiar to Ceylon, whose leaves formed a high caparison, and dripped their rain-drops all around the edge.

The British had never stopped creating botanical gardens—those on the island of Dominica, in the West Indies, though already a superlative collection of tropical plants, had been founded only in 1891. The gardens at Sydney, which meandered delectably along the shores of the harbour, predated the city itself, for on the same site had been planted the flowers and vegetables brought out with the First Fleet of convicts in 1788: but the senior imperial gardens of all lay on the banks of the Hooghly at Calcutta, removed from the city's clutter on the other side of the river. Behind them passed the Grand Trunk Road, on the first stage of its march across India, and over their walls the masts and upperworks of ships could be seen, silently moving up and down the river. Into this retreat the British had brought tropical specimens from every part of the world—mahogany and Cuban palms, mangoes, plantains, giant South American creepers, tamarinds and casuarinas: and Bishop Heber wrote of the Calcutta botanical gardens that they would 'perfectly answer to Milton's idea of Paradise, if they were on a hill instead of a dead flat'.

The British had a genius for parks, and in the end perhaps it would be for these noble urban expanses, preserved with such a sense of scale and human values, that their Empire would longest be thanked. There was something very superior to the imperial parks. They seemed to announce a grand disregard of petty side-issues, like land values, or property rights, and at the same time a mastery of nature apparently so complete that their designers could afford to relax their discipline, and let things run a little wild within the stockade of the surrounding city. King's Park at Perth, indeed, was simply a slab of native bush, fenced about above the harbour and preserved for ever as the aborigines had known it: while Phoenix Park in Dublin, though it contained a zoo, a race-course and several official residences, was so vast—1,750 acres—that it was virtually open country, its paths highways and its mansions country houses. The Maidan at Calcutta was just the opposite: in the centre of a tumultuous oriental metropolis (for by the 1890s the City of Palaces was scarcely recognizable) a huge ordered pleasure-garden, scrupulously British, with tennis courts, golflinks, bicycle tracks, cricket pitches, riding roads, innumerable statues of generals and administrators, and down at the river's edge an ornamental pagoda, a substantial piece of loot from Burma.





The Maidan was originally no more than a clear field of fire for Fort William, but sometimes the creation of such a park showed astonishing self-denial. Nobody doubted that Vancouver, incorporated as a city in 1886, would one day be among the chief ports of the Americas. It was founded as the western terminus of the C.P.R., and was already booming. Yet in a particularly covetable part of the city area, beside the narrows which formed the harbour entrance, the city fathers established a park. It was to become, so many travellers thought, the most beautiful park in the whole world, half savage, half domestic, with water on three sides of it and the soft Pacific winds ruffling its trees—a damp west coast park, where the moisture steamed out of the tree-bark when the sun came out, and sometimes even the morning birds were to be seen preening their feathers in a haze of vapour. The great port grew all around it, but never encroached, and sentinel for ever at its gate stood the Queen's Governor-General of the day, Lord Stanley, with the inscription upon his plinth: 'To the use and enjoyment of people of all colours, creeds and customs for all time, I name thee Stanley Park.'[1]

## 8

The garden instinct of the English did not always survive migration.

[1] The successors of Empire have been sensible of all these garden glories. On the great green at Peradeniya, during the Second World War, Lord Mountbatten set up the headquarters of his South-East Asia Command, but the garden remains glorious, and now forms an appendage to the University of Ceylon along the road. The Sydney garden makes a backdrop for the city's bold new Opera House, the Dominica gardens were described by Mr Patrick Leigh-Fermour, in 1950, as 'the most perfect botanical gardens I have ever seen'. Phoenix Park has passed unscathed through permutations of Empire and independence, and its zoo remains pre-eminent for the breeding of lions. The Maidan at Calcutta, though stripped of its plinthed Viceroys and trampled by the feet of a million angry demonstrators, remains at least an open space. When I speak of the travellers who consider Stanley Park the most beautiful of all, emphatically among them I number myself.

The private houses of the simpler Australians and Canadians notably lacked greeneries—not just because of the climate, for public gardens thrived, but perhaps because life was too near the soil already, without bothering about herbaceous borders. The Briton fresh from Britain, though, as soon as he moved into a new bungalow, or set down the family baggage on a new small-holding, almost always got hold of some seeds or cuttings to make himself a garden. The gardens of Government Houses were often the only consolations for restless Governor's ladies, and tea among the orchids on the buffalo-grass lawn was an imperial institution—the wildest dreams of Kew were the facts of Katmandu. Sir George Grey, the man the aborigines so loved, created a remarkable garden on the island of Kawau, in the Hauraki Gulf, north of Auckland. He built a house of concrete there, stocked it with a good library, and surrounded it with exotic foliage. He brought oaks from California, Norfolk Island pines, Chinese willows, pines from Tenerife, fibrous plants from Chile and Peru, silver trees from South Africa, camphor trees from Malaya—and all through the shrubberies, to be glimpsed by the studious statesman from his library windows, ostriches and white-ringed Chinese pheasants stalked, and kangaroos queerly lolloped.

Most expatriate Britons, counting the months to home leave, had garden aspirations of a different kind. Love of their own country was very strong among this people; nostalgia and homesickness were among their weaknesses. It was roses these transient imperialists pined for, stocks and honeysuckle, lavender hedges and spring daffodils. Up their little gardens sprang, hopeful around each bungalow, and there were rose-petals in bowls in the sitting-room, and nodding wallflowers beside the compound gate. With luck, when the Empire-builder moved elsewhere, or went home for good at last, his successor loved the garden in his turn, so that it proliferated down the generations, and was immortalized in scrapbooks. If not it very soon languished. The weeds of the country started up triumphantly, tangled trees overcame the flower-beds, and presently all that was left in souvenir was a bramble of English roses gone wild in the undergrowth, their scent forgotten and their colours faded.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

# Tribal Lays and Images

*England, none that is born thy son, and lives*
*by grace of thy glory, free,*
*Lives and yearns not at heart and burns with*
*hope to serve as he worships thee;*
*None may sing thee: the sea-wind's wing beats*
*down our songs as it hails the sea.*

Algernon Swinburne