Morris. Pax Britannica.
The Climax of an Empire.

THE BRITISH EMPIRE, 1897

IN EUROPE: Great Britain and Ireland: Channel Islands: Gibraltar: Isle of Man: Malta

IN AFRICA: Ashanti: Basutoland: Bechuanaland: British East Africa: Cape Province: Gambia: Gold Coast: Natal: Nigeria: Nyasaland: Rhodesia: Sierra Leone: Somaliland: Uganda: Zanzibar

IN AMERICA: Bahamas: Barbados: British Guiana: British Honduras: British Virgin Islands: Canada: Falkland Islands: Jamaica: Leeward Islands: Newfoundland: Tobago: Trinidad: Turks and Caicos Islands: Windward Islands

IN ASIA: Aden: Brunei: Ceylon: Hong Kong: India: Labuan: Malay Federated States: North Borneo: Papua: Sarawak: Singapore

IN AUSTRALASIA: New South Wales: New Zealand: Queensland: South Australia: Tasmania: Victoria: Western Australia

IN THE ATLANTIC OCEAN: Ascension: Bermuda: St Helena: Tristan da Cunha

IN THE INDIAN OCEAN: Mauritius: Seychelles: seven other groups and islands

IN THE PACIFIC OCEAN: Ellice, Gilbert, Southern Solomon, Union groups: Fiji: Pitcairn: twenty-four other groups, islands and reefs

Transvaal was debatably subject to British suzerainty: Egypt was under British military occupation: Cyprus was British-administered, but nominally under Turkish sovereignty

Area: about 11m square miles

Population: about 372m

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CHAPTER ONE

The Heirs of Rome

But hush—the Nations come from overseas,
Attend, with trumpets blown and flags unfurled,
To swell thy Jubilee of Jubilees,
Heart of the World!

Cosmo Monkhouse
Punch, June 26, 1897

I

BEFORE she set out on her Diamond Jubilee procession, on the morning of June 22, 1897, Queen Victoria of England went to the telegraph room at Buckingham Palace, wearing a dress of black moiré with panels of pigeon grey, embroidered all over with silver roses, shamrocks and thistles. It was a few minutes after eleven o'clock. She pressed an electric button; an impulse was transmitted to the Central Telegraph Office in St Martin's le Grand; in a matter of seconds her Jubilee message was on its way to every corner of her Empire.

It was the largest Empire in the history of the world, comprising nearly a quarter of the land mass of the earth, and a quarter of its population. Victoria herself was a Queen-Empress of such aged majesty that some of her simpler subjects considered her divine, and slaughtered propitiatory goats before her image. The sixtieth anniversary of her accession to the throne was being celebrated as a festival of imperial strength, splendour and unity—a mammoth exhibition of power, in a capital that loved things to be colossal. Yet the Queen's message was simple—'*Thank my beloved people. May God bless them*'—and the technicians at St Martin's le Grand later reported that the royal dot on the Morse paper at their end was followed by a couple of unexpected clicks: indicating, they thought, 'a certain amount of nervousness on the part of the aged Sovereign at that supreme moment in her illustrious career'.

2

The crowds outside waited in proud excitement. They were citizens of a kingdom which, particularly in its own estimation, was of unique consequence in the world. The nineteenth century had been pre-eminently Britain's century, and the British saw themselves still

as top dogs. Ever since the triumphant conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars they had seemed to be arbiters of the world's affairs, righting a balance here, dismissing a potentate there, ringing the earth with railways and submarine cables, lending money everywhere, peopling the empty places with men of the British stock, grandly revenging wrongs, converting pagans, discovering unknown lakes, setting up dynasties, emancipating slaves, winning wars, putting down mutinies, keeping Turks in their place and building bigger and faster battleships.

By June 1897 all this vigour and self-esteem, all this famous history, had been fused into an explosive emotional force. The nation had been carried away by the enthusiasm known as the New Imperialism, an expansionist, sensational concept of Empire which exactly fitted the spirit of the nineties. It was an era of dazzle and innovation—a time of heightened responses, a quickened time, with a taste for things bizarre and overstimulating, and a sense of history on the turn. This was *fin de siècle* at last, and the very French phrase carried undertones of excitement, suggestions of racing pulse and melodrama. Out of this inflamed setting the New Imperialism started. The Empire had been growing steadily throughout the century, generally without much public excitement, but since the 1870s it had expanded so violently that the statistics and reference books could scarcely keep up, and were full of addenda and hasty footnotes. Recalled now from the grand junction of the Jubilee, the separate lines of the Victorian story seemed to have been leading the British inexorably towards the suzerainty of the world—the methodical distribution of their systems, their values, their power and their stock across the continents. Their Empire, hitherto seen as a fairly haphazard accretion of possessions, now appeared to be settling into some gigantic pattern: and like gamblers on a lucky streak, they felt that their power was self-engendering, that they were riding a wave of destiny, sweeping them on to fulfilment. The New Imperialism was the one certain political winner of the day. With its help the Conservatives and their Liberal Unionist allies had won the 1895 General Election so completely that they seemed destined to stay in office for decades to come. Supremacy, dominion, authority, size, were the watchwords of the time. Social progress

rarely cropped up in the literature of the Jubilee, and even the arts had mostly succumbed to the national taste for elaborate grandeur, expressing themselves in mass choirs and enormous set-pieces. All was summed up in that splurge of red across the map, and was now deliberately commemorated in the pageantries of the Diamond Jubilee—the first pan-Britannic festival, *The Times* called it.

3

Many and varied energies had swept the British to this meridian. Impulses shoddy and honourable, pagan and pious, had turned them into imperialists—a word which had itself shifted its value from the dubiously pejorative to the almost unarguably proper.

First there was simply the wealth, vigour and inventiveness of Victorian Britain, a dynamic State in an age of excitement: capital looking for markets, vitality looking for opportunity, success looking for new fields. Then a succession of disparate prophets, from Jeremy Bentham and Tennyson to Disraeli and Cardinal Newman, had excited the instincts of the people for space, power and sacramental dazzle. Darwin, a half-understood household sage, seemed to have demonstrated that some races, like some animals, were more efficiently evolved than others, and had a right to leadership and possession. The Evangelical movement had drawn attention to the plight of the ignorant heathen of the tropics, only awaiting redemption—'educating the natives of Borrioboola-Gha', as Mrs Jellyby expressed it, 'on the left bank of the Niger'. Among the gentry Dr Arnold and his reformers of the public schools had implanted concepts of privileged service that led logically to the idea of a new Rome; among the masses popular education had opened a generation's eyes to the thrill of the world outside, contrasting so compellingly with the drabness of the new industrial cities at home. The new penny Press, led by the brilliantly boastful *Daily Mail*—'the embodiment and mouthpiece of the imperial idea'—assiduously fanned the aggressive patriotism of the people. The more blustering sort of Briton reacted violently to the Yellow Book decadence of the intellectuals, whose notions seemed the very

antithesis of Nelson, the Pound Sterling and the Charge of the Light Brigade.

Politically the Liberals were in eclipse, and Gladstone's voice, the voice of the English conscience, was silent.[1] The perennial discontent of the Irish, a squalid constant of English politics, had hardened rather than weakened the British will to rule, and that summer Kitchener was gloriously revenging the death of Gordon, twelve years before, with his imperial armies in the Sudan.[2] To the innocent public everything seemed to be going right. The monarchy was more popular than ever. The prestige of the Royal Navy had reached an almost mystical plane. The spectacle of other peoples coalescing in powerful federations—in Germany, in Italy, in America—made the British wonder if they might not also combine their scattered communities, all over the world, into an unapproachable super-state. Jingo imperialism was intoxicating fodder for the newly enfranchised working classes, and the Conservative-Unionist Government was dominated by imperialists of complementary styles: Lord Salisbury the Prime Minister, stroking the surface of affairs with his patrician and scholarly hand; Joseph Chamberlain the Colonial Secretary, an expansionist of the new kind, impulsive and insatiable, who had even gone so far as to install electric light in the Colonial Office. It all went with an almost frantic gusto, like universal craze.

Among the better-informed, doubts also played their part. Complete though British supremacy might appear to be, the era of

[1] Gladstone, whose family fortunes were founded on the Indian and Caribbean trades, remained vehemently anti-Imperialist, and at 87 took no part in the Jubilee events—he thought the Queen ought to celebrate the occasion by abdicating. He died in the following year.

[2] The British, who theoretically ruled the Sudan in the name of Egypt, had decided in 1883 to withdraw the Egyptian garrisons from the country in the face of a rebellion led by a Muslim prophet known as the Mahdi. For this task they chose Charles Gordon, then 50 years old and already a national hero, who had made his name in China and had served in the Sudan before. Having successfully organized the withdrawal of the garrisons, Gordon himself held on in Khartoum, against orders, until in 1885 the city fell and he was killed. A British relief expedition reached the city too late, and Gordon was virtually canonized in England as the archetypical Christian soldier. Kitchener's expedition to reconquer the Sudan had started south from Egypt in 1896.

splendid isolation was ending. New rivalries abroad seemed to compel the British towards an imperial, rather than an insular, sufficiency. The rise of Germany was apparently forcing Britain out of Europe, while Bismarck's bid for German colonies in Africa and the Pacific had transformed the leisurely old habits of Empire-building into urgent power politics. There were technical challenges from Germany, too, commercial challenges from America, and standing political challenges from the Russians and the French. Britain's essential vulnerability, with her extended colonial frontiers, her dependence upon imported food, her excess of population and her *smallness*—the basic fragility of the British position in the world goaded her into imperialism. European reactions to the fiasco of the Jameson Raid had brought home to the British how bitterly they were envied and disliked on the Continent.[1] Britain's industrial lead was still absolute, but it was lessening each year. Both the Germans and the French were building powerful new navies. There was a subconscious feeling, perhaps, that British ascendancy could not last much longer, and must therefore be propped up with pomp and ceremony. The ghosts of imperial heroes seemed to be calling out of the past, urging the nation to be mightier yet—Livingstone and 'Chinese' Gordon, dead in the Christian cause; Nicholson and Havelock from the shambles of the Indian Mutiny;[2] philanthropists like Wilberforce; explorers like Burton and Baker;

[1] The Boer Republic of the Transvaal in South Africa was only theoretically subject to British suzerainty, but its gold reefs on the Rand were being exploited by a predominantly British community—whose members, known as Uitlanders, were allowed no political rights. In 1896 Cecil Rhodes, Prime Minister of the Cape Colony and a diamond millionaire, had given his sanction to a plot designed to seize the Transvaal for the Empire. His lieutenant, Leander Starr Jameson, led a raid into the Republic intended to coincide with a rising of Uitlanders in Johannesburg, but the rising did not take place and Jameson's posse was ignominiously captured by the Boers, the Kaiser sending a congratulatory telegram to President Kruger of the Transvaal. In the summer of 1897 a Select Committee of the House of Commons was inquiring into the circumstances of the raid.

[2] The Mutiny (1857–8) was a rising by Indian sepoys of the Bengal Army which became a popular insurrection in some provinces of central India. It was caused by Indian resentment at certain British reforms, fear of compulsory Christianization, and the issue of cartridges greased with animal fats that were offensive to Hindu and Muslim soldiers.

generals like Lord Napier of Magdala; Disraeli, the glittering impresario of Empire; Raffles, the saintly merchant-venturer.

All these circumstances, these memories, these currents of thought, these men, had so worked upon the British that the grand flourish of the New Imperialism properly represented, as G. M. Young once wrote, 'the concentrated emotion of a generation'. 'Imperialism in the air', Beatrice Webb recorded in her diary that June, 'all classes drunk with sightseeing and hysterical loyalty.' The Diamond Jubilee celebrated not only sixty years of the Victorian era, but the final assembly of the forces and satisfactions of imperialism. The idea of Empire had reached a climax, too. It had meant different things to different generations in Britain—military power, commercial opportunity, prestige. It had been discredited in the middle years of the century, when the colonies generally seemed more nuisance than they were worth, and to some Britons it still meant pre-eminently the establishment of British settlements abroad, rather than the subjugation of alien peoples. But in these last years of the Victorian century, these last decades, perhaps, of the Christian epoch, it was achieving the status of a creed. It was not merely the right of the British to rule a quarter of the world, so the imperialists thought, it was actually their duty. They were called. They would so distribute across the earth their own methods, principles and liberal traditions that the future of mankind would be reshaped. Justice would be established, miseries relieved, ignorant savages enlightened, all by the agency of British power and money.

Among the professionals of Empire, and among the governing classes in general, whatever their politics, this imperial duty became as self-evident as patriotism itself. The young Bertrand Russell was a self-confessed imperialist. H. G. Wells and Sidney Webb both declared imperialist sympathies.[1] Arnold Wilson, recalling his apprenticeship in the imperial service, described himself and his colleagues as 'acolytes of a cult—Pax Britannica—for which we worked happily and, if need be, died gladly. We read our Bibles, many of us, lived full lives, and loved and laughed much, but we knew, as we did so, that though for us all, the wise and the foolish, the slaves and the great, for emperor and for anarchist, there is one end, yet would our work live after us, and by our fruits we should be judged in the days to come.'[1]

[1] Russell did not keep it up for long: by 1901, when he was 27, he was a pro-Boer and a pacifist, and abandoned the Empire for ever—much regretting, he says in his autobiography, the imperialist letters of his youth. Wells (1866–1946) was already a Socialist, and his imperialist ideas presumably blossomed into the World State conception of his later years. Webb (1859–1947) had long been a Socialist, too, but had previously been a clerk in the Colonial Office, and was to become, as Lord Passfield, Colonial Secretary in the Labour Government of 1929.

Not so long before, when men spoke of Empire they were thinking of Napoleon III, the Tsar, or lesser foreign despots. Now they thought only of Victoria, Regina et Imperatrix. The British Empire was reaching its full flush—it had, thought the Indian administrator Sir George Campbell, 'pretty well reached the limits set by nature'.[2] Within the past ten years it had acquired new territories fifty times as large as Britain itself. Light had burst upon the British people, said Sir West Ridgeway, the Governor of Ceylon, in his Jubilee speech that day. 'It dispelled the darkness of ignorance, the scales fell from their eyes, the sordid mists which obscured their view were driven away, and they saw for the first time before them, the bright realm of a glorious Empire.'

4

Within two minutes, we are told, the Queen's message had passed through Teheran on its way to the eastern dominions of the Crown. By the time her carriage was clattering down the Mall, bobbed about by cavalry, her thanks and blessings had reached Ottawa, the Cape, the colonies of West Africa, the strongholds of the Mediterranean and the sugar islands of the Caribbean. London was a self-consciously imperial city, symbolically central, with channels of authority reaching out east and west across the oceans. *Punch*

[1] The cult predeceased the acolyte. Pilot Officer Sir Arnold Wilson, having been British High Commissioner in Iraq, a Member of Parliament, an admirer of Adolf Hitler and a visionary prophet of social security in Britain, was killed when his Blenheim bomber was shot down near Dunkirk in 1940. He was 55.

[2] In fact, ignoring nature, it continued to grow until 1933, when its area was 13.9 million square miles and its population 493 million.

celebrated the occasion with a cartoon of The Queen's Messenger—a winged, long-haired and androgynous figure of love, holding a dove close to the chest, flying very low over the sea and flourishing a piece of paper inscribed *Message V.R.* There was not much else in sight—only a very subservient sea and a few hangdog islands—and the effect of the picture was one of effortless mastery, universal right of way. As never before, London seemed the heart of the world.

Even the better-disposed foreigners generously recognized the fact. Animosities were suspended, and the London newspapers gratefully recorded the comments of their more flattering contemporaries abroad. *Le Figaro* roundly declared that Rome itself had been 'equalled, if not surpassed, by the Power which in Canada, Australia, India, in the China Seas, in Egypt, Central and Southern Africa, in the Atlantic and in the Mediterranean rules the peoples and governs their interests'. The *New York Times* claimed: 'We are a part, and a great part, of the Greater Britain which seems so plainly destined to dominate this planet.' Even the *Kreuz Zeitung* in Berlin, the mouthpiece of the hostile Junkers, described the Empire as 'practically unassailable'. Everywhere, in paying their respects to the Queen, the nations appeared to be paying homage to Britain. In Vienna the Emperor Franz Josef called at the British Embassy wearing the Garter and the uniform of his British regiment. In Gibraltar the Governor of Algeciras, swallowing two centuries of Spanish resentment, drove to the Rock for a parade of British troops. In Brooklyn the Women's Health Protective Association sang *God Save the Queen* at a jubilee meeting, and in Philadelphia the poet Alfred Raleigh Goldsmith eulogized England in epic verse:

Our father's land! Our mother's home!
By freedom glorified!
Her conquering sons the wide world roam
And plant her flag in pride!
For England's fame, for thy lov'd name,
Have bled, have won, have died.
Victoria! Victoria! Long live our nation's Queen.
Victoria! Victoria! God bless Old England's Queen.

5

More gratifying still was the tribute of the Empire itself. It is true that somebody had stolen the £300,000 diamond intended by the Nizam of Hyderabad as a present for the Queen, and the suggestion that every one of her 372 million subjects should send her a congratulatory telegram was fortunately not pursued: but everywhere in the Empire that day statues were being unveiled, garrisons were being inspected, thanksgiving services were being held in thatch-roofed outposts of the Anglican communion, ships were dressed overall and commemorative horses' drinking troughs were unveiled. Even President Kruger of the Transvaal, the Queen's most difficult tributary, obligingly released two obdurate Englishmen held in Pretoria gaol since the Jameson Raid, and in Hyderabad every tenth convict was set free (asked why, one of them said he understood Her Majesty had at last given birth to a son and heir). At Alligator Pond in Jamaica a week's free food was distributed to poor families. In Baroda there was free travel on the State Railways for twenty-four hours. In Aden the 'poorer natives' were feasted at the expense of the British community. There was a grand ball at Rangoon, a dinner at the Sultan's palace in Zanzibar, a salute of gunboats in Table Bay, a 'monster Sunday-school treat' at Freetown, a performance of the Hallelujah Chorus in Happy Valley at Hong Kong.

And into London there poured, to the amazement and delight of all, the gilded emissaries of Empire. As the poet Laureate, Alfred Austin, wrote:

From Afric's Cape, where loyal watchdogs bark,
And Britain's Sceptre ne'er shall be withdrawn,
And that young Continent that greets the dark
When we the dawn;

From steel-capped promontories stern and strong,
And lone isles mounting guard upon the main,
Hither her subjects wend to hail her long
Resplendent Reign.

The Colonial contingents for the Jubilee procession were mostly encamped at Chelsea, where curious crowds had been wandering among their tents for days. The Premiers of the eleven self-governing colonies, with their ladies, were put up at the Cecil, the largest hotel in Europe: they were often to be seen driving here and there to official functions, choosing gloves at Dents' or silk hats in St James's Street, or alighting at great town houses to take tea with duchesses. Wilfrid Laurier, the Prime Minister of Canada, was knighted on Jubilee morning, and the newspapers recorded approvingly that the Premier of Tasmania, Sir Edward Braddon, was the author of a book about big-game hunting in India—just the speciality the British public expected of a proper Empire-builder.

At the Grosvenor Hotel, the gossip columns reported, was staying 'Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeeboy, an eminent Parsee'—in whose employment, as principal of a private art school in Bombay, Rudyard Kipling's father Lockwood had first gone to India. Another eminent guest was James Tyson, who had made a fortune supplying food to the gold-diggers in Australia, and was now reputed to be worth more than £5 million. There was an Imperial Fête in Regent's Park, and an Imperial Ballet at Her Majesty's Theatre, the Australian prima donna Nellie Melba was singing at the Opera, and all the visiting colonial and Indian officers had been taken by special train to a demonstration in Kent of the new Maxim-Nordenfeldt gun. In the parks, cafés and music-halls of the capital were to be seen princes and sultans, Sikhs and Chinese, exquisite Malay ladies, and West African policemen clumping uncomfortably about in boots, the first they had ever worn.

The British were still astonishingly ignorant about their possessions, and they viewed all this with genial if rather patronizing innocence. Contemporary accounts of the event are full of wonder, precariously avoiding prejudice: were it not for the British uniforms and the Union Jacks, one feels, the responses to these colourful visitors might have been different. As it was, all those strange figures of Jubilee were brothers-in-Empire, and a writer in the women's page of the *Illustrated London News* even suggested that the British male might learn a thing or two from their uninhibited fineries. The British saw the whole celebration as a kind of family reunion, however vague they were as to the exact origins of the Hausa constables, the jurisdiction of the Privy Council over the protected persons of Basutoland, or even the constitutional status of Western Australia. It was not a sophisticated occasion, the Diamond Jubilee. It was full of sentiment and extravagance, indulgent tears and thumping brass bands, strung about with flags and lavishly illuminated. 'It may safely be said,' one commentator wildly claimed, 'that the Jubilee will be the costliest event in the world's history.'

6

The procession itself was a superb display of braggadocio. With its 50,000 troops, it was thought to constitute the largest military force ever assembled in London, and as it marched in two separate columns through the streets of the capital, to converge upon St Paul's for the thanksgiving service, even the exuberant reporters of the nineties sometimes found themselves beggared of hyperbole. 'How many millions of years has the sun stood in heaven?' inquired the *Daily Mail*. 'But the sun never looked down until yesterday upon the embodiment of so much energy and power.' It was, wrote G. W. Steevens, 'a pageant which for splendour of appearance and especially for splendour of suggestion has never been paralleled in the history of the world'.[1] 'History may be searched,' thought *The Times*, 'and searched in vain, to discover so wonderful an exhibition of allegiance and brotherhood amongst so many myriads of men. . . . The mightiest and most beneficial Empire ever known in the annals of mankind.'

One half of the procession was led by Captain Ames of the Horse Guards, at six foot eight inches the tallest man in the British Army, and looking more stupendous still wearing his high plumed helmet, swelled out with breastplate and cuirass, and astride his tall charger. The other half was led by Field-Marshal Lord Roberts of Kandahar, the most beloved of imperial generals, riding the grey Arab,

[1] Steevens, who was born in 1869, was the *Mail*'s most brilliant recruit. A distinguished classicist at Oxford, he became the paper's star descriptive reporter, and expressed more vividly than anyone the heightened emotions of the New Imperialism. He died as a war correspondent in the siege of Ladysmith during the Boer War, aged 31, and is buried in the cemetery there.

Vonolel, which had conveyed him from Kabul to Kandahar in his victorious march of 1880.[1] Not far behind Lieutenant Festing rode the Sudanese horse which had taken him to the capture of Bida in West Africa, and cheers of sympathy greeted the empty sleeve of the Honourable Maurice Gifford, wounded during a recent skirmish with the Matabele.

Before, behind and among these champions marched a weirdly imperial force of arms. There were cavalrymen from New South Wales—gigantic soldiers, the papers reported, with an average height of five feet ten and a half inches and an average chest of thirty-eight inches. There were Hussars from Canada and Carabiniers from Natal, camel troops from Bikaner and Dyak head-hunters from North Borneo, wearing bright red pillbox hats and commanded by Captain W. Raffles Flint. The seventeen officers of the Indian Imperial Service troops were all princes, and the Hong Kong Chinese Police wore conical coolie hats. There were Malays, and Sinhalese, and Hausas from the Niger and the Gold Coast, Jamaicans in white gaiters and ornately embroidered jackets, British Guiana police in caps like French gendarmes, Cypriot Zaptiehs whose fezzes struck so jarring a chord that some of the crowd hissed them, supposing them to be Turks, and a jangling squadron of Indian lancers led by a British officer in a white spiked helmet. London had never seen such a spectacle. One of the Maoris weighed twenty-eight stone. One of the Dyaks had taken thirteen human heads. It was a properly Roman sight, a pageant of citizens and barbarians too, summoned from the frontiers to that grey eternal city. The British-bred colonials, said the Golden Issue of the *Daily Mail*, printed throughout in gold ink and sometimes breaking into exultant cross-heads, were 'all so smart and straight and strong, every man such a splendid specimen and testimony to the

GREATNESS OF THE BRITISH RACE

that there was not an Imperialist in the crowd who did not from the sight of them gain a new view of the glory of the British Empire'.

[1] Vonolel, who had been awarded the Afghan war medals by special order of the Queen, died in 1899, aged 27, and was buried in a corner of the Royal Hospital grounds in Chelsea: but the whereabouts of his grave seems to have been forgotten.

Through welcoming banners and fluttering handkerchiefs this allegorical pageant passed, with *Soldiers of the Queen* up the Strand and 'Three Cheers for India' at the end of Fleet Street, with applause for the dazzlingly ostentatious uniform of Sir Partab Singh, and a rippling of black and white from the massed clergy outside St Paul's—through the massed hierarchy of Civil Servants on Constitution Hill, past the survivors of Balaclava assembled at a window on Ludgate Hill—with cheers rolling across London, with the thump of drums and the singing of patriotic songs along the route, with an empress, a crown prince, twenty-three princesses, a grand duke, three grand duchesses, four duchesses, forty Indian potentates riding three abreast and gorgeously decorated, with guns booming and bells chiming, beneath a banner in St James's proclaiming in English and Hindustani that Victoria was alone the Queen of Earthly Queens, with the Papal Nuncio sharing a carriage with the representative of the Emperor of China, and the Princess of Wales in mauve spangle-trimmed satin, with rajahs glittering in diamonds and their ladies all in gold, and tens of thousands of Union Jacks, flying from towers, draped from windows, merry in the hands of school-children or haughty above the bearskins of colour sergeants. The Queen wore a bonnet with ostrich feathers in it, beneath a white silk parasol, and she was greeted at St Paul's by her son the Prince of Wales, who was on horseback in a plumed hat, and received her with knightly courtesy.[1]

7

Everybody agreed it was a great success. As an affirmation of national pride it justly expressed the mood of the people, and gave an explicit warning to foreigners that Britain had not lost the taste for greatness. As a tribute to Victoria it was a moving reminder of all that had happened to the British since she had come to the

[1] The Queen could not walk easily, and it had been proposed that a ramp should be built up the steps of St Paul's, enabling her carriage to be driven inside. She would attend the Jubilee service sitting in her carriage directly beneath the dome, her six white horses held steady by grooms. This truly imperial scene was never enacted, for they lost their nerve and held the service outside the cathedral instead.

throne, so long ago that most of the spectators could hardly imagine a Britain without her. As Mark Twain wrote, the Queen herself was the real procession—'all the rest was embroidery'. Victoria returned to her palace in the evening, exhausted but marvellously pleased, through the blackened buildings of her ancient capital, whose smoke swirled and hovered over the grey river, and whose gas-lamps flickered into tribute with the dusk. At home she found that most of the colonies had already replied to her Jubilee message: their answers were being prepared for presentation to Her Majesty, and for later publication as a Blue Book.

CHAPTER TWO

Palm and Pine

What if the best of our wages be
An empty sleeve, a stiff-set knee,
A crutch for the rest of life—who cares,
So long as the One Flag floats and dares?
So long as the One Race dares and grows?
Death—what is death but God's own rose?
Let but the bugles of England play
Over the hills and far away!

W. E. Henley

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2

THE Diamond Jubilee crystallized the new conception of Empire, and made people feel they were part of some properly organized working unit. The notion of a Greater Britain had been devised by the young Charles Dilke[1] thirty years before: but though the phrase had caught on among educated people, until the eighties and nineties the great British public had never really seen their Empire as anything but a vague and ill-explained appendage to sea-power, scattered somewhere beyond the horizon, and sporadically growing. It was Sir John Seeley who remarked, in his seminal book *The Expansion of England*,[2] that the Empire had been acquired 'in a fit of absence of mind'. He did not mean that it had been won by wool-gathering, but that the public at home was cheerfully indifferent to the whole 'mighty phenomenon of the diffusion of our race and the expansion of our State'.

Not long before the statesmen themselves had often doubted whether the Empire was worth its trouble, and not only radicals but High Tories and even colonial officials had assumed it would eventually disintegrate. Gladstone the Little Englander had expressed a popular view, when he called the triumphs of Empire 'false phantoms of glory'. The Bill which, in 1876, created Victoria

[1] Charles Dilke (1843–1911) was a rare kind of politician, a radical imperialist. His book *Greater Britain*, written at 23 after a world tour, was an immense popular success, offering educated Britons a new vision of themselves as a benevolent master race. Dilke's distinguished career as a Liberal republican was ruined by a famous divorce case in 1886, in which he was accused of adultery with the wife of another M.P.

[2] *The Expansion of England* was a series of lectures delivered by Seeley (1834–95) as Professor of Modern History at Cambridge. It dealt with the period 1688–1815, but served to give the British a wider view of their imperial mission, and was one of the source books of the New Imperialism, remaining in print until 1956—the year the British realized that their expansion had ended.

Empress of India, had aroused furious opposition. Disraeli, its progenitor,[1] loved addressing her as 'Your Imperial Majesty', but Gladstone called it 'theatrical bombast and folly', and *The Times* thought it 'tawdry'. In those days the word 'Empire' still referred, in liberal British minds, to the dominions of foreign tyrants, and the idea of a *British* Empress seemed a monstrous negation of principles.

Twenty years had passed, Gladstone was dying, and Greater Britain had grown so explosively that the Colonial Office List, 153 pages long in 1862, occupied 506 pages in 1897. The Empire had become an official enthusiasm. Victoria approved of it. Tennyson had hymned it. The public now surveyed Greater Britain with a proprietorial concern, as though they were inspecting a hitherto neglected piece of family property. What they saw was this: an immense conglomeration of territories, of every kind, climate and state of development, linked only by Britain's mastery of the sea, and strewn untidily across all the continents. The British Empire was a gigantic hotchpotch. Represented in pillbox hats and embroidered jackets, with British officers swankily in the van, the constituent colonies may have seemed to possess a certain uniformity, if only of foot-drill. In fact they were a wild jumble of territories, and ranged from proper nations like Canada, negotiating its own commercial treaties and announcing its own tariffs, to backwaters like British Guiana, into whose murky hinterland no Englishman had ever penetrated.

2

Outside this heterogeneous mass there shone a reflected glow of Empire. There were many foreign countries in which an Englishman did not feel himself altogether abroad, in which he enjoyed the advantages of an economic influence, a cultural understanding or an historical link: countries like the Argentine, where British enterprise had lately provided not only the first shorthorn, sheep-dip

[1] Progenitor, too, of the New Imperialism. Disraeli (1804–81) had first given glamour to the imperial idea, with gestures like the acquisition of Suez Canal shares, strokes of policy like the movement of Indian troops to Malta to confront Russia, and phrases like: 'The key of India is not Herat or Kandahar, the key of India is London.'

and game of polo, but also the first electric light, steamship, tramway, bank, telephone service and insurance company, and all the original railways; or Nepal, where a British Resident lived in semi-regal style, surrounded by his own protective cavalry; or Siam, whose foreign trade was almost all in British hands; or even the United States, where England was still commonly regarded as the Mother Country. All sorts of special privileges, accorded to British subjects in many parts of the world, acknowledged the fact of imperial power. Colonies of Britons thrived, their conceits humoured and their extravagances welcomed, in places like Florence, St Petersburg and Bordeaux. Consular courts stood outside the local law in countries like Persia and Turkey—the British court at Constantinople had its own gaoler. Some of the China treaty towns were virtually self-governing British colonies. The military adviser to the Sultan of Morocco was a Scotsman, the Inspector-General of the Chinese Customs an Irishman, Thomas Cook's the travel agents owned the funicular up Mount Vesuvius.[1] The Imperial Bank of Persia was a British registered company and the British colony in Venice kept, against all the rules, seventeen cows in a garden. All this was the nimbus of Empire, or the earthshine.

One degree nearer the Crown were those many territories which, though unquestionably British, were only coloured red on the map by courtesy of the adventurers. The world was still unfolding itself before the Victorians, largely at British instigation, and the great age of African exploration, only just ending, was inextricably linked with the imperial saga. The public was addicted to tales of far adventure, and tall stories of Empire (the crows of northern Australia, it was said, flew backwards to keep the dust out of their eyes, while in New Guinea there was alleged to be a mountain 32,000 feet high). The British Empire was half-empty and half-explored. Its

[1] The Scotsman was Harry Aubrey de Vere Maclean (1848–1920), who played the bagpipes and the guitar and was an indefatigable amateur inventor. The Irishman was Robert Hart (1835–1911), resident in China for fifty-four years and virtually the creator of the Chinese maritime customs service.

The Vesuvius funicular, the subject of the song *Funiculì Funiculà*, was destroyed in the eruption of 1944, and Cook's sold its remains after the Second World War, retaining a share in the ownership of the chairlift that has replaced it.

average density of population was 36.8 to the square mile, compared with 373.3 at home in Britain, and there was room for every sort of wildness: the aboriginal mothers of Australia habitually ate their new-born children, the Gonds of Nagpur worshipped serpents and the smallpox. In every continent men of British stock and nationality were still extending the limits of the Pax Britannica, into territories that grew wilder and less hospitable as they grew scarcer. In Africa they were pressing up the Nile, across the Zambesi, inland from the Gold Coast and the mouth of the Niger. In Asia they had recently moved into Upper Burma, North Borneo, and many islands of the South Pacific. In the south they were penetrating the miserable heartland of Australia, and ih the west the Klondike gold rush was luring thousands of prospectors into the Yukon. This was the moving frontier of the British, the uncompleted adventure.

Then there were the islands, fortresses and coaling stations, strung out along the shipping lanes. Gibraltar, Malta, Aden, Singapore and Hong Kong stood along the orient route. St Lucia guarded the West Indies, Bermuda lay in mid-Atlantic, Halifax in Nova Scotia was the home of one British squadron, Esquimalt in British Columbia the base of another. Everywhere British ships could berth in British harbours, stock up with British coal, replenish their supplies of British beer or biscuits, paint their hulls with British paint, pick up their instructions from British cable stations beneath the protection of British guns. In every sea a ragbag of islands announced the imperial presence: islands close at home, like the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man, which were technically not parcel of the realm, but overseas possessions; petty islands of the south Atlantic, like St Helena where Napoleon died, or Ascension where the Lord Mayor of London's turtles came from; desert islands like Perim or Socotra; high-sounding islands like the Solomons, the Spice Islands or the Leewards; islands everyone hankered after, like the Bahamas or the Seychelles, and islands that nobody had ever heard of, like the Chagos Islands, or Dudosa; islands as big as Newfoundland or as infinitesimal as Diamond Rock, a granite lump in the Caribbean which had been garrisoned by the Navy in the Napoleonic Wars, and given the prefix 'H.M.S.'. There were valuable islands, useless islands, heavenly islands, ghastly islands. Barbados was claimed to be the most

densely populated island on the globe. Bermuda lived chiefly by supplying early vegetables to the city of New York. For the possession of the island of Cyprus the British paid £92,800 a year in tribute to the Sublime Porte, together with 4,166,220 okes of salt—fortunately more than covered anyway by repayments on a British loan to Turkey made forty years before.

Many of these strongpoints and outposts stood on the road to India, the grandest of the imperial possessions. India was different in kind from the rest of the Empire—British for so long that it had become part of the national consciousness, so immense that it really formed, with Britain itself, the second focus of a dual power. If much of the Empire was a blank in British minds, India meant something to everybody, from the Queen herself with her Hindu menservants to the humblest family whose ne'er-do-well brother, long before, had sailed away to lose himself in the barracks of Cawnpore. India was the brightest gem, the Raj, part of the order of things: to a people of the drizzly north, the possession of such a country was like some marvel in the house, a caged phoenix perhaps, or the portrait of some fabulously endowed if distant relative. India appealed to the British love of pageantry and fairy-tale, and to most people the destinies of the two countries seemed not merely intertwined, but indissoluble.

And finally there were the white colonial settlements, for many Britons the core and real point of their Empire. Into almost every temperate territory of the unoccupied globe the British had moved—only in Latin America had they been irrevocably forestalled. Full-scale British nations flourished in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa. Lesser settlements were implanted in the Falkland Islands, the sugar islands of the Caribbean, Bermuda, Fiji, Ceylon and India. Hundreds of thousands of Englishmen had settled in Ireland. The first emigrants were prospecting the farming country of the East African highlands, and out-spanning their ox-wagons in the Rhodesian veldt. Wherever there was White Man's country vacant, the British had seized and occupied it, filling in the empty spaces of the world, and setting up their own kind of society wherever they went. Such was, so the romantic idealists thought, the manifest destiny of the Empire.

3

All this the British people surveyed, as they thumbed through the Jubilee souvenirs, or wondered at the sweep of red on the schoolroom map. It was an extraordinary estate. Disraeli had called its character 'peculiar—I know no example of it, either in ancient or modern history'. An inventor had to take out thirty-five separate patents if he wished to protect his device throughout the Queen's possessions. The Roman Empire in its prime comprised perhaps 120 million people in an area of 2½ million square miles: the British Empire, now that it had reached 'the limits set by nature', comprised some 372 million people in 11 million square miles—ninety-one times the area of Great Britain. Throughout this immense dominion, this quarter of the globe, the British enjoyed rights of suzerainty, shading away from automatic citizenship in Canada or Australia to a very probable invitation to the New Year Durbar at the British Residence in Bahrein,[1] or a distinctly better chance than most of getting a room with a bath at Shepheard's.

The acquisition of it all had been a jerky process. Absence of mind it never was, but it had happened so obscurely that to the ordinary Briton the rise of the Empire must have seemed more like some organic movement than the conscious result of national policies. There seemed no deliberation to it. One thing simply led to another. There had been a British Empire for nearly three hundred years, and though colonies had come and gone since then, there were distant parts of the world which had been British for twice as long as the United States of America had been in existence. Greater Britain was born in 1583, when Sir Humphrey Gilbert took nominal possession of Newfoundland, and by 1609 the first imperial settlers, a company of castaways, had been washed up on Bermuda—to inspire the first imperial work of art, *The Tempest*. Later in the seventeenth century the British implanted their authority in several

[1] This traditional function is still going strong. Its guests, proceeding to the Residency from their air-conditioned villas, generally think they are merely celebrating the passage of another year of exile, but in fact they are honouring the proclamation of Victoria as Queen-Empress on January 1, 1877.

Caribbean islands, in North America, in Honduras, West Africa and India. In the eighteenth century they extended themselves in Canada and India, took over Ceylon and the Cape of Good Hope and sent their first convict settlers to Australia. In the nineteenth century they had acquired a vast new empire in Africa, besides New Zealand, Fiji, North Borneo and much of Malaya. And through all these centuries they had been picking up islands, forts and spheres of influence along the way, St Helena (1651) to Cyprus (1878), and what the Colonial Office List described as 'countless smaller possessions and nearly all the isolated rocks and islands of the ocean'. The Empire had never been static, and would never be complete. The Romans honoured a God of frontiers, Terminus, who used to be represented as a very large stone. A comparable British deity would be symbolized by something far more portable, for their Empire grew in jumps, sometimes leapfrogging a continent to possess a further island, sometimes by-passing a river basin, sometimes swapping one territory for another, sometimes even refusing one—the Dualla chiefs of the Cameroons repeatedly asked to be annexed, but the British either declined or took no notice at all.

Most Englishmen, asked what it was all about, would probably have described it as a trading system, but this was only partly true. The trading instinct had led to the early settlements in India, and to the slave colonies of West Africa with their protective forts, but most of the British possessions were acquired either for *Lebensraum* or for strategy. In India the British were gradually forced into conquest to protect their original interests, rather than to extend them: first across the subcontinent itself, then beyond the perimeters of India—into Baluchistan in the west, Burma in the east, Sikkim and Bhutan in the north, and across the Indian Ocean into Aden, East Africa and Egypt.

French Canada and many of the Caribbean Islands were acquired as a result of European wars. Ascension Island and Tristan da Cunha were occupied as garrison islands, to prevent a rescue of Napoleon when he was imprisoned upon St Helena (when Napoleon died and the troops were withdrawn three men, with a woman and two children, decided to stay on Tristan—their descendants formed its population still, and their settlement, officially Georgetown, was

always known as Garrison). Cyprus was taken over from the Turks under a convention engaging Britain to help the Sultan defend his Asiatic possessions against Russia. Australia was glumly colonized when the loss of the American colonies deprived the British of a convict dumping-ground. The partition of Africa in the past two decades, which had given Britain a lion's share of the continent, was largely a diplomatic or strategic exercise—less a matter of getting oneself in than of keeping others out.

Often the causes of Empire were petty. Honduras became British because ships' companies used to cut logs upon its beaches, and Bombay was part of Catherine of Braganza's dowry when she married Charles II. Hong Kong fell into British hands in 1841 as a result of the Opium War, fought to protect the interests of British opium-growers in India. Perak became British ostensibly because of feuds there between rival groups of Chinese miners. Some territories were imperially acquired to rescue them from local empire-builders —New Zealand, for instance, which was plagued by lawless British adventurers, or Basutoland, whose King asked to be taken under imperial protection to forestall annexation by the British settlers of the Cape, and who later wrote to Queen Victoria that 'my country is your blanket, and my people the lice upon it'.

4

So they were motley origins: but the British were generally able to rationalize the expansion of Greater Britain—if not the movement as a whole, at least each spasm of growth. This is how Sir F. W. R. Fryer, of the Indian Civil Service, explained the three invasions by which the British eventually acquired dominion over Burma. The first Burmese war, 1824, was 'due to the encroachment of the King [of Burma] upon our borders'. The second war, 1852, was 'due to a succession of outrages committed on British subjects by the Government of Burma'. The third war, 1885, was 'due to the oppressive action of the King towards a British company, and to his advances towards a foreign Power'. Such an expansion of British boundaries, Fryer thought, was inevitable: oriental Powers were 'sooner or later unable to appreciate the fact that it is for their own interest to

maintain peace and to abstain from provoking their European neighbours'.

'Adjusting the relations between the two countries' was a favourite euphemism for the process, and a whole vocabulary of evasive justification was devised to illustrate the strategies of Greater Britain, and define the blurred edges of the Empire. Frontiers were habitually rectified. Spheres of influence were established. Mutually friendly relations were arranged. River systems were opened to trade. Christian civilization was introduced to backward regions. One spoke vaguely of the confines of Egypt, the basin of the Zambesi, the watershed of the Niger, and one naturally could not afford to allow the Sultanate of Witu to fall into the hands of a potentially hostile Power. The imperial records were full of paramountcies, suzerainties, protectorates, leases, concessions, partitions, areas of interest, no-man's-lands and related hinterlands—this last, an especially convenient conception, picked up from the German within the past ten years.

Accounted for in these diverse ways, one acquisition seemed to lead logically to the next. Trade led to the defence of trade, exploration led to settlement, missionaries needed protection, where once the Liverpool merchants loaded their transports with slaves for America, now the Royal Navy needed bases to keep foreign slavery in check. It was like a monumental snowball, and though in the past the lesser campaigns of Empire had scarcely fired the passions of the public, now the British had suddenly become aware of the staggering momentum of it all. During Queen Victoria's reign they had acquired eighteen major territories, and now scarcely a month passed without another satisfactory adjustment of relations.

5

Never since the world began, Seeley had written, did any nation assume anything like so much responsibility. 'Never did so many vast questions in all parts of the globe, questions calling for all sorts of special knowledge and special training, depend upon the decision of a single public.' Literally thousands of languages and dialects were spoken in the British Empire, from Hindustani, Chinese and Arabic

to the shadowy remnants of Manx, still occasionally to be heard in hill farms on the Isle of Man. Every world problem was Britain's problem. She was the greatest Hindu and the greatest Muslim Power, and there was no kind of climate or terrain with which Englishmen of the day were not familiar. The official lists of imperial appointments wonderfully demonstrated this range and versatility. What a state it must have seemed, when one could thumb through a red-bound register to see which of one's fellow countrymen was Governor of Madras or Agent in Egypt, which was the officer in charge of the ex-Amir of Kabul, who commanded H.M.S. *Alert* on the North American Station, who was presently Inspector of Steam Boilers and Prime Movers in Bombay, and who it was in charge of the police post on the Yukon trail between Skagway and Dawson City!

Never so much responsibility: but then at that moment of her history Britain was settled in the habit of authority—authority in the family, in the church, in social affairs, even in politics. It was the last heyday of the patricians. British Governments, for all the liberalizing influences of reform, were still paternally authoritarian, and the English posture abroad was habitually one of command. To the educated Englishman responsibility came naturally. No other Power had been so strong for so long, so stable in its institutions and so victorious in its wars: and Britain's naval supremacy really did give the country a measure of universal sovereignty, that immemorial dream of conquerors. In theory no other state could ship an army across the seas without British consent, and in practice the merchant shipping of the rest of the world was largely dependent upon British cables and coaling stations. The presence of the sea, at once insulating the Mother Country and linking it with the Empire, gave the British an imperial confidence. 'I do not say the French cannot come,' as Admiral St Vincent had once remarked; 'I only say they cannot come by sea.'

6

So it looked to the British. By means complex and often shadowy, they had acquired a quarter of the world, and could behave with privileged immunity in much of the rest. There was a good deal of

brag to the Britain of the nineties, but then there really was a good deal to brag about. It was expressive of the size and variety of the British Empire that papers marked S.L. often went astray in the Colonial Office: nobody could be sure whether they were intended for Sierra Leone, a colony for liberated slaves on the west coast of Africa, or for St Lucia, an island in the West Indies ceded by France under the Treaty of Paris, where the laws were mostly French, the food was mostly Creole, and the mongoose had recently been introduced from India in an attempt to keep down the rats.

Morris. Pax Britannica.
The Climax of an
Empire.

CHAPTER THREE

Life-lines

Sons, be welded, each and all
Into one imperial whole,
One with Britain, heart and soul!
One life, one flag, one fleet, one Throne!
Britons, hold your own!

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

3

THE Roman Empire was self-contained. The Spanish Empire was concentrated. The Russian Empire was continental. The British Empire was broadcast across the earth, and communications were the first concern of its late Victorian rulers. The electric telegraph and the steamship had transformed the Pax Britannica. Fifty years before the imperial offices in London had been geared to time-lags of months or even years. Now the mail took four weeks to Australia, and there were only a few remote or recent colonies to which the Queen's Jubilee message finally made its way in the pouch of a native runner. The whole Empire was suddenly accessible, and every new link seemed to be welding it into something more muscular and permanent. The communications of the world were overwhelmingly in British hands. It was a preoccupation of the British to keep them so, and to ensure that every territory of the Empire was linked to London by British routes—All-Red Routes, in the jargon of the day. Cecil Rhodes's idea of a Cape-to-Cairo railway line was more than just a speculator's dream: it vividly expressed the national vision of British-controlled highways criss-crossing all the continents.

Of course the control would be asserted, the British emphasized, for the benefit of everybody: but as the Russian Foreign Secretary remarked, when told in 1889 that the British were opening up the Karun River in Persia for the advantage of all nations, '*c'était là une manière de parler*'. To other nations the imperial methods often seemed preposterously high-handed. The British roamed the seas as though they owned them, and treated waters particularly important to their strategy, like the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, more or less as territorial preserves. The Navigation Acts, which reserved British imperial traffic for British ships, had been repealed half a century before: but the Empire still depended upon British command of its

arteries, and phrases about the life-lines and the imperial links occur with such monotony throughout the literature of imperialism that one would expect them to lose their impact by sheer repetition, like soldiers' swear-words.

2

A favourite map of the time was the kind that showed a small red blob for each British ship at sea—like thousands of corpuscles sprinkled through the veins of the world. It was on the shipping lanes, more than anywhere, that British supremacy showed. At sea at any one moment, we are told, were British ships carrying 200,000 passengers and as many merchant seamen. More than half the merchant shipping of the world flew the Red Ensign—13½ million tons of it, or half as much again as in 1877. A thousand new ships were launched in the years 1896 and 1897, and of every thousand tons of shipping passing through the Suez Canal in the 1890s, 700 tons were British (95 were German, 63 were French, 43 were Dutch, 19 were Italian: 2 were American). The British had originally enjoyed a monopoly of the steamship trade, and they were still vastly more experienced than any of their competitors.

The three biggest shipping lines, Peninsular and Oriental, Elder Dempster and British India, had all based their fortunes on the Empire trade, and scores of lesser companies lived by it, from ex-slavers of Liverpool to raffish schooner partnerships of the South Seas, their captains cheerfully drinking and whoring their way from one cargo to another. The Royal Mail Steam Packet Company had direct imperial origins—it was chartered in 1839 because the Government thought a steam service to the West Indies an imperial necessity, and still sent its ships to Barbados once a fortnight. The New Zealand Shipping Company prospered by feeding Britain with frozen mutton from the Antipodes. The 'Blue Funnel' Line—the Ocean Steamship Company—based many of its ships on Singapore, never bringing them home at all. The Shaw Savile ships on the New Zealand run went out by the Cape of Good Hope and came back by the Horn, circumnavigating the globe every three months.

Four big shipping lines ran from England to Canada; two went from Liverpool to West Africa, following the slavers' route; there was a weekly service to South Africa. Britain had a greater share of ocean traffic than ever before in her history, and much of it was on the imperial routes. In every imperial port the London shipping agents were the mainstays of commerce, and in smaller places the arrival of the boat from England was a great event. High on Signal Hill at St John's, Newfoundland, above the narrow entrance to the harbour, the house flags were hoisted on a yard-arm—James Murray, Shea and Co, Campbell and Smith, Rothwell and Bowring, James Baird: and beneath that fluttering welcome, announcing their arrival to the city far below, the weathered ships would beat in from the Atlantic, into the deep cold harbour behind the bluffs, while the Newfoundlanders hastened down their hilly streets to greet them at the quays.

On the Far East route the service had become almost institutional, so long and so regularly had the steamships been carrying Anglo-Indians to and from their dominions, the brisk young cadets so fresh, pink and assured, the brown stoop-shouldered veterans sickly from a thousand fevers. P. and O. and British India ran the service in partnership, each a company of profound and crotchety character. Kipling said British India offered 'freedom and cockroaches', while P. and O. acted 'as though twere a favour to allow you to embark':

> *How runs the old indictment? 'Dear and slow',*
> *So much and twice so much. We gird, but go.*
> *For all the soul of our sad East is there,*
> *Beneath the house-flag of the P. and O.*

It took about seventeen days to India—£50 up—and one of the great daily functions of the Victorian world was the passage of the British liners through the Suez Canal: black-hulled ships with high-sounding names, *Coromandel* or *Kaisar-i-Hind*, *Ophir*, *Bezwada* or *Pentakota*, their high superstructures spick and span above the sand, look-outs alert on their flying bridges, muslin and scarlet gaily at their rails and Red Ensigns fluttering one after the other down the waterway.

So much a part of Empire was their passage that the common abbreviation for the best combination of cabins on the India run (Port Outward, Starboard Home) had already gone into the language: Posh.

The British were obsessed with distance. It was Macaulay who had written, in 1848: 'Of all inventions, the alphabet and the printing press excepted, those which abridge distance have done most for the civilization of our species'—and he was thinking in particular, perhaps, of the steamships of the P. and O., which had only four years previously opened their Indian service.[1] To the later Victorians steam had 'annihilated distance'. In Macaulay's day the passage to India took four months, and merchants went out to settle there for life, sometimes never going home at all. Now they generally returned to England after five years, to marry; after ten years their children went home to school, their wives returning every other year to see them; and after twenty years, when they were important enough in the business, they were quite likely to retire to the English shires themselves, leaving the firm in the hands of junior partners, and occasionally pottering out to Calcutta on supervisory visits. For hundreds of British families the Eastern journey was part of life, like the beginning of term, or the annual session with the dentist. They generally met friends on board ship, and at Suez two imperial streams joined, the Anglo-Indians and the Anglo-Egyptians inspecting each other coolly, each finding the others insufferably provincial and, with their affectations of dress and language, their *tiffins* or their *suffragis*, their tarbooshes and ill-advised saris, often a little comic too.

The ships that maintained these imperial services were very small. The largest P. and O. boat was the *Egypt*, launched in Jubilee year: less than 8,000 tons, an ugly square-prowed ship with

[1] Thomas Macaulay (1800–59) spent three and a half years in India as a member of the Supreme Council under the East India Company, coming home in 1838 to write those *Lays of Ancient Rome* which were so to colour the ethos of Empire—

Then lands were fairly portioned;
Then spoils were fairly sold;
The Romans were like brothers
In the brave days of old.

two slightly leaning funnels, giving it a vacuous look. The biggest ship on the New Zealand run, the *Roxaia*, was less than 6,000 tons, and the Allan Line passenger liners to Canada were mostly 3,000 or 4,000 tons. Passengers were often wryly amused by the ponderous gentility of these little ships. G. W. Steevens, when he sailed to India in the 1890s, thought the green-tiled smoking-room of his P. and O. like 'a bedroom suite in the Tottenham Court Road'. The Austrian traveller Baron von Hübner, who made a long voyage in the British India liner *Dorunda* in 1885, recorded in near-despair the awfulness of a shipboard Sunday—no whist, no bezique, even smoking was unpopular. 'Young M. caught with a novel in his hand: a lady looks at him fixedly, utters the word "Sunday", takes away the novel and slips into his hand a hymnbook instead.'

Still, the shipping lines were intensely proud of their ships, and advertised them extravagantly. The Orient Line Guide records what life was like on one of the latest Australia steamers. The new *Ormuz* was 6,000 tons, a steamer with a trace of sail about her, in her four tall masts and complicated rigging. Her engines were so smooth, the book said, that it was sometimes difficult to believe the ship was moving at all, and her third-class arrangements were particularly complete, 'the object being both to insure the comfort of the steerage passengers, and also to avoid any annoyance to the travellers in the first and second saloons'. Pictures of the ship pungently suggest oiled wood, creaks, fairly stiff conversations and incipient flirtations. There was an organ in the picture gallery, and in each first-class cabin there was 'an arrangement by which the electric light can be turned on and off at pleasure by the occupant'. In the first-class dining saloon the passengers, in evening dress, sat in arm-chairs at heavily naped tables, waited upon by bearded stewards and surrounded by potted palms. In the second-class saloon they sat at long communal tables, rather like cocktail bars, with decanters slung on trays from the ceiling above their heads. The *Ormuz* was so powerful, we are told, that 'all the horses in use in the British Army, if we could compel them to join in a gigantic tug of war with the *Ormuz*, would be pulled over'. Passengers were advised to bring a deck-chair with them—'it should be plainly marked with the owner's name, in a conspicuous place, not on the

back'—and ladies would find 'what are called tea gowns' very convenient in the tropics.[1]

On the day of Queen Victoria's Jubilee the old Allan Line steamer *State of California* was making her last voyage from Liverpool to Canada. At dinner that night, in mid-Atlantic, they honoured the Queen with a banquet. The menu included Balmoral pudding, Victoria cream and Windsor biscuits, 'and through the generosity of the cabin passengers, a set of handsome prizes were competed for by the steerage in a series of athletic events that created great enjoyment and merriment'.

3

Elaborate systems of supply, defence and communication serviced these vessels along the imperial seaways, and the sole purpose of some British possessions was to keep the traffic moving: the South Atlantic coaling station of St Helena, for example, was ruined when the Suez Canal was opened. Vast supplies of coal were piled up at stations all along the route—fuel for their own ships figured largely in the British export statistics—and foreign shipping, too, depended largely upon British bunker supplies.[2] The British held key ports and maritime fortresses all over the world, and their instinct had always been to gain control of communications, before carrying sovereignty further. They occupied most of the Indian seaboard, before they extended their authority inland. They established great ports at Hong Kong, for the China trade, and Singapore, for the East Indies; Hong Kong's traffic was greater than Liverpool's, and

[1] The *Ormuz* sailed the imperial waters until 1912, when she was sold to a French company, renamed *Dovona*, and forgotten.

[2] When, in 1904, the brave and unhappy Admiral Rozhestvensky sailed his Second Pacific Squadron from Kronstadt to the China Sea to fight the Japanese, the British refused to allow his forty rickety warships to refuel at their stations on the way. He arranged with the Hamburg-Amerika line to refuel from colliers at sea, and his fleet laboured filthily across the oceans with coal crammed into every corner of every ship, piled high on deck, shoved into passages, between guns, even in officers' cabins. During long stretches of this tragic voyage pairs of British warships, impeccably clean and superbly seamanlike, shadowed the ramshackle Russian squadron as it sailed towards its virtual annihilation at Tsu-shima.

fifty lines of ocean shipping regularly used Singapore. They had recently acquired Mombasa, which they saw as the key to the riches of Central Africa, and they still hoped to wrest from the Portuguese the harbour of Delagoa Bay in South-East Africa, the nearest outlet to the goldfields of the Rand.

They were the arbiters of maritime affairs, and set the world's standards in matters like seaworthiness and navigational aids. The Greenwich Standards Department verified not only British weights and measures but United States and Russian standards, too. A1 at Lloyd's was already a world criterion, and it was often British pressure that impelled foreign governments to erect lighthouses and moor lightships. For years the British tried unsuccessfully to persuade the Turkish Government to establish proper navigational aids in the Red Sea: in the end they erected lighthouses themselves —P. and O. built and maintained the lighthouse at Daedalus Reef, a coral strand in the northern Red Sea—and even manned some of them with British lighthouse-keepers.

So for the most part, by right or by effrontery, the British kept a firm hand upon the sea lanes. The one vulnerable thread in the system was the Suez Canal, through which the mass of the Eastern shipping passed. (More than half the Australian traffic used the Cape route, and other ships went round the Horn: but on the homeward passage, loaded with perishable cargoes, all these ships used the Canal.) The British Government owned 48 per cent of the Canal Company's shares, and the defence of the Canal was the responsibility of a British garrison in Egypt. Most of the traffic was British—Royal Mail steamships actually had priority of traffic, and the big India liners regularly paid up to £1,000 in dues. But there was £65 million of French capital in the Canal Company, compared with only £31 million British, and there were twenty-two French directors against ten British. They constantly squabbled about transit fees, the British always wanting them lower, the French higher. Worse still, the Canal was too small for British imperial requirements: large battleships could only go through by dismounting their heavy guns into lighters, and coaling at the far end of the canal. Suez was like an exposed nerve in the anatomy of the Empire. Sometimes the British thought of cutting a rival British canal

through the Sinai Peninsula, to link the Mediterranean with the Gulf of Akaba. But they never did.

4

Backwards and forwards along the imperial shipping lanes went a large proportion of Mr Stanley Gibbons's stamp catalogue (then in its thirty-second year), for the Empire's mail services were advanced and elaborate, and many of the British possessions were already issuing their own stamps. Most of them merely carried the Queen's head, but New South Wales had been issuing pictorial stamps for nearly fifty years, Newfoundland celebrated the Jubilee with engravings of icebergs, seals, caribous and ptarmigans, while the 16 cent North Borneo issue had a picture of the island's only railway train.[1]

When the Colonial Premiers met in London that summer most of them agreed to a penny imperial post for 1898. Until then the rate would remain at 2½d per half-ounce, for imperial as for foreign letters, and the mails were carried under contract by the great shipping lines, entitling them to prefix their ships' names with the initials R.M.S. The Royal Mail Company handled the West Indian mails, the Castle Line and the Union Steamship Company shared the South African. The P. and O. was paid £330,000 a year for conveying the Indian mails. Cunard carried a large proportion of the Canadian mail via New York: the Orient Line and P. and O. carried the Australian mail in alternate weeks. All was under the control of the Postmaster-General in London, the Australian and South African colonies contributing to the cost, and by the nineties well over 22 million letters and postcards went from Britain to her possessions in a single year.

To elderly Victorians the speed of the mail service was astounding. Only thirty-eight days to Sydney! Only seventeen days to India! Post a letter in London on Sunday, and it would reach Ottawa on Monday week! Even so, they were constantly experimenting

[1] The oddest imperial issues were those of Heligoland, a British possession until it was ceded to Germany in 1890. These had been printed for Queen Victoria in Berlin.

with new combinations of sea and overland mails. Rhodes hoped his Cape-to-Cairo railway would provide the fastest mail route between England and South Africa, and some people thought the German scheme for a Berlin-to-Baghdad railway would be a blessing to the British by shortening the time to India. They planned to drop the Australian mails at Fremantle, when an east-west Australian railway was built, and there was already a postal route to the Far East via the Canadian Pacific Railway. The direct Canadian mails were dropped at a hamlet called Rimouski, near the mouth of the St Lawrence, and whisked into the interior by train. The Indian mails went by packet-boat every Friday afternoon to Calais, where a train of two engines, three coaches and three mail-vans awaited them, with two British Post Office men on board: by Sunday night they had crossed the Alps and reached Brindisi, and one of the fast P. and O. Mediterranean packets, the 1,700 ton *Isis* and *Osiris*, then sped them to Port Said to catch the Bombay steamer—which had left London a week before the letters.

Since 1885 there had been an imperial parcel post—first of all to India, which had thus come within reach of the thousands of plum puddings, sprigs of holly, mistletoe berries and haggises sent out there annually ever since. Even this domesticity, though, had not taken the romance out of the imperial mails, which strongly appealed to the British sense of far-flung order. The English mail rattled into Johannesburg, with view halloos and whinnies, in two great wagons drawn by teams of ten horses apiece. It reached the Australian mining camps, as the poet Henry Lawson recalled, in Cobb coaches, as in the American west:

Oft when the camps were dreaming,
And fires began to pale,
Through rugged ranges gleaming
Swept on the Royal Mail.
Behind six foaming horses,
And lit by flashing lamps,
Old Cobb and Co, in royal state,
Went dashing past the camps.

In Rhodesia it was carried by runners, wearing khaki shorts and

fezzes, with an average bag of 40 lb and an average daily range of thirty miles. And what could be more resoundingly Kiplingesque than the Indian runner service, by which the letters of the Imperial post reached the last outposts of the Himalaya?

In the name of the Empress of India, make way,
O Lords of the Jungle, wherever you roam,
The woods are astir at the close of the day—
We exiles are waiting for letters from Home.
Let the rivers retreat—let the tiger turn tail—
In the Name of the Empress, the Overland Mail![1]

5

The British had invented submarine cables, and by the 1890s had encompassed their Empire with them. Of the inhabited British territories, only Fiji, British Honduras, Tobago, the Falkland Islands, Turks Islands and New Guinea were not on a cable at all. The several imperial cable networks, upon which the Empire depended for its intelligence and its central control, were nearly all operated by private companies, though many of them received official subsidies, and most were possessed by the ambition to be All-British Routes, running exclusively across British landscapes or under British-dominated seas. Half the cables had been laid within the past twenty-five years, some of them by Brunel's gargantuan steamship the *Great Eastern*, originally designed for the Eastern service, but reduced at last to this humdrum chore: since 1870 the Colonial Office telegraph bill had risen from £800 a year to about £8,000.

To the New Imperialists the cables had a symbolic quality, and visionaries saw them developed into an absolutely British, earth-

[1] Sixty years later in Nepal, which had been a British sphere of influence at least since the 1820s, I used runners to send dispatches from the Sola Khumbu region, in the Himalaya, to the British Embassy (ex-Residency) in Katmandu. Two of them did the 180-mile journey in five days, including the crossing of three 9,000-foot mountain ranges. Whenever I watched them sloping away down the glacier, or melting into the wet mists of the monsoon, slung about with bags and trappings, long sticks in their hands, I had a very imperial feeling myself.

embracing system. 'Such a perfected system,' wrote one commentator, 'traversing the deepest seas, touching only British soil, protected at every point of landing by British vigilance and courage, would be as reliable for the direction of our navies, and for combined military action in time of war, as it would be useful in time of peace for the development of commerce and the interchange of thought and information on national affairs.' These majestic dreams excited Kipling hardly less than the Overland Mail, and he wrote a poem about them, too, called *The Deep-Sea Cables*—

They have wakened the timeless Things; they have killed their father Time;
Joining hands in the gloom, a league from the last of the sun.
Hush! Men talk today o'er the waste of the ultimate slime,
And a new Word runs between: whispering, 'Let us be one!'

In 1897 the network had its weaknesses. The transatlantic routes were secure enough, running direct to Newfoundland and Canada, and the seven American cables across the Atlantic called first at Canada, too, and could be commandeered, it was thought, in time of war. But the South American cable ran via Portuguese Madeira, and the two South African lines, down the west and east coasts, both crossed Portuguese territory. The line to Australia had to cross the Dutch island of Java; it ran by a special wire, worked by British operators, but still the Admiralty distrusted it, and pressed for an alternative line touching only at British relay stations. The line from Singapore to Hong Kong, via Labuan, was laid in 1894 specifically to avoid French Saigon, and on the China coast the British were perpetually scheming to evade the near-monopoly of Chinese cables held by a Danish company—the British cable from Hong Kong to Shanghai was worked from a hulk in the middle of the Min River, to avoid the several embarrassments of relay stations on shore.

But it was the route to India that chiefly preoccupied the imperial strategists. There were three lines from London to Calcutta, but none of them was altogether secure, and commercially the German and Russian Governments could prevent any reduction in the very

expensive tariff. This was because the first and most profitable of the routes began as a North Sea cable from Lowestoft to Germany. It then ran across Germany and Russia to Teheran (two minutes flat, as we know, from Buckingham Palace) and so to India. The German section of this cable was owned by the German Government, and the Russian by the Russian Government—neither of whom used it much, but both of whom, by the terms of their concessions, could keep its prices awkwardly high.

The second Indian route was also unsatisfactory. It ran across Europe to Constantinople, across Turkey to the Persian Gulf, and by submarine cable to Karachi (Kurrachee, as they spelt it then). It was never very effective, because of the murky inconsistencies of Turkish administration, and in 1870 the British had opened a submarine cable via Gibraltar, Malta, Alexandria, Suez and Aden—all safely Red—to Bombay. Even this, though, had to call at Spanish relay stations, and in fact most of its traffic went by land to Marseilles, picking up the big cable line in Malta. If all these three routes were cut, there was no southern link from India: the only alternative was the vulnerable line to Australia, through Java.

No wonder the safety and privacy of these lines gave the British so much anxiety. Keeping them open and efficient was one of the great technical tasks of Empire. The hazards were varied and sometimes violent: silt, uncharted currents, hostility from tribespeople or fishermen, winds—during the monsoon no Indian Ocean cable could be mended at all. Even the webs of the more portly tropical spiders could interrupt an imperial dispatch. The tariffs were understandably high. It cost 4s a word to send a cable at the standard rate to India, 4s 9d to Australia, 6s 9d to Sierra Leone: yet sometimes the demand was so feeble that the average traffic in and out of the West Indian island of St Vincent, for instance, was worth just 15s a day.

All over the world Englishmen were at work laying or maintaining these cables, or operating booster stations along the line. In every British colony the local cable manager was an important member of society, and in remoter parts his cable station became a focus of nostalgia, so evocative were the clickings of its Morse keys from across the oceans. Among the most suggestive of all must have

been the nine little repeater stations erected down the line that crossed Australia from the Northern Territory to Adelaide. Long before a road or a railway crossed the Outback, the Overland Telegraph was erected—2,000 miles of line, with 36,000 telegraph poles. Seven or eight men lived in each station, with 20 or 30 horses, a few cows and a flock of sheep. All around was wilderness, and the stations were protected by brick walls with loopholes, in case of aboriginal attack. At Barrow Creek, in 1874, two cable men were speared to death by Warramunga tribesmen,[1] and the aborigines were constantly stealing insulators to use as axe-heads, and wire for multi-pronged spears. Building the line had taken two years. As the gap between the two ends narrowed, messages were carried from one to the other by horsemen: the original charge was nine guineas for twenty words.

The central station of the Overland Telegraph was at Alice Springs, the first nucleus of that famous little town. It was a clump of shacks and a stone bungalow above the springs, themselves named for Alice Todd, wife of the chief engineer. This was one of the loneliest places in the Empire. It was a thousand miles north to Darwin, a thousand miles south to Adelaide—the nearest towns. For company the little group of cablemen had only themselves, their animals, the odd incoherent bushman, and the occasional grazier or overlander dropping in for a beer in a country where the hospitality of the pioneers was still a rule of life. At night especially the Alice cable station must have seemed a properly epic outpost. Then the wind rustled off the desert through the eucalyptus thicket, armies of frogs croaked in the fringes of the pool, the air was heavy with dust and gum-smell, and the horses stood silent beneath the pepper trees. Oil lamps shone through the windows of the huts, and sometimes a sudden chatter of the Morse machine miraculously linked the Alice, for a moment or two, with Calcutta, Malta and the imperial capital on the other side of the world.[2]

[1] They are buried outside the hotel at Barrow Creek, some 770 miles south of Darwin on the Stuart Highway—colloquially known in those parts as the Bitumen.

[2] The station is still there, a mile or two north of the present town, designated a National Park, but still, in the brilliance of the Australian night, a wonderfully evocative place.

6

All this vast expertise, of ships and mails and cable stations, had made the British prime masters of international movement. Nobody else operated on such a scale, and whether one wished to ship a boiler to Canton, send a Christmas telegram to Montevideo, or merely go on a holiday voyage in the Mediterranean, the chances were that Britons would be making the arrangements. Nobody symbolized this command more famously than Thomas Cook, the booking clerk of the Empire. The original Cook had died in 1892, but his son had succeeded him in the firm, and 'leaving it to Cook's' had gone into the language. Cook's had virtually invented modern tourism, and their brown mahogany offices, with their whirring fans and brass tellers' cages, were landmarks of every imperial city. They held the concession for operating steamers on the River Nile: all the way up to Abu Simbel the banks of the river were populated by Cook's dependants—keeping Cook's donkeys, growing Cook's vegetables, rowing Cook's boats or raising Cook's fowls, porters, waiters, washerwomen, stately fly-whisked dragomen wearing Cook's familiarly emblazoned jerseys. Cook's made the travel arrangements for the Queen-Empress herself, and that summer they were helping to move Kitchener's forces into the Sudan. Since 1880 they had actually been organizing pilgrimages to Mecca; their Eastern Princes' Department once arranged a visit to Europe for an Indian prince with two hundred servants, twenty chefs, thirty-three tigers, ten elephants, a thousand packing-cases and a howitzer.

CHAPTER FOUR

Migrations

How could you go? Whilst Spring with cuckoos calls,
With all the music in which wood-birds woo,
With hymning larks, and hedgerow madrigals
Girlish with sunshine, sweet with cushat's coo,
Bade you to dream; how did you dare to do?

Nay, rather, could you stay? Through warm red loam
Ran the sea-rover's path. A wild salt scent
Blown over seas, pierced through the apple bloom;
The dove's soft voice with Ocean's call was blent.
You could not stay; you could not be content.

Clive Phillipps Wolley

Morris. Pax Britannica.
The Climax of an
Empire

CHAPTER TEN

Imperial Order

I am that Freedom; I that made you great;
I am that Honour, and uphold you still;
I am that Peace, and bound you, State to State,
Even as the stars are bound to one high will;
I am that One, and made you one in Me,
Reign by that law which sets all nations free.

Alfred Noyes

10

'NO Caesar or Charlemagne,' Disraeli once said, 'ever presided over a dominion so peculiar. Its flag floats on many waters, it has provinces in every zone, they are inhabited by persons of different races, different religions, different laws, manners, customs.' How to govern this prodigious sprawl was one of the great political challenges of history. Fifty years before most Englishmen would have preferred to decline it: the colonies were considered a nuisance then, and the general view was that the sooner they dropped off the family tree, the better. Now the New Imperialism welcomed the challenge, and fostered a response. The Empire was to be consolidated, and it was to be given System.

Disraeli's vision of the British Empire was still valid in the 1890s. He frankly recognized its precarious diversity. There was a core of white colonies bound to Britain by blood, taste and common history: but there was an equal mass of territories, mostly tropical, whose allegiance had been imposed upon them, and whose people had nothing in common with the British except the fact of sovereignty. Some of these peoples, as Disraeli saw it, were bound to Britain because it was British power that secured their personal liberties. Some were bound by 'material as well as moral considerations'. Many more were bound because they had to be, because they recognized 'the commanding spirit of these islands that had formed and fashioned in such a manner so great a portion of the globe'.

The commanding spirit was still there. Legally there was no such thing as a British Empire. It had no constitutional meaning. Physically, too, it was a kind of fiction, or bluff, in that it implied a far stronger power at the centre than really existed. But in the 1890s the British were determined that this heterogeneous structure had logic to it, and that it could be rationalized or emotionalized into order.

2

The one immovable thing about it was the Crown. This was a Royal Empire, and the idea that people could share in the Pax Britannica without paying allegiance to the monarchy would have struck the New Imperialists as unnatural, or worse still perfectly senseless. Everywhere in the Empire the symbol of the Crown, on post-boxes and dockyard gates, on postage stamps and above newspaper mastheads, sombrely surmounting the judges' bench or gaily glittering at the warship's head—everywhere the Crown stood for the one overriding authority, almost beyond human reach, which linked one part of the Empire with the other. There was no people in the Empire, advanced as Canadians or backward as Bechuana tribesmen, who did not dimly recognize the power of the Crown. In every territory the Queen's representative enjoyed a regal consequence himself, lifting him far above petty politics: in India a Viceroy, in Canada a Governor-General, in Jamaica a Captain-General, in the Turks and Caicos Islands a Chief Commissioner, in St Vincent an Administrator. Splendid and full of symbolism was the aura of command surrounding such men, reminding the people that the Governor was the voice of the Queen herself, as the priest speaks for God. The Governor of Natal, in his mansion at Pietermaritzburg, was attended by barefoot Zulu servants, wearing white linen jackets hemmed with yellow. A Fijian waited upon the table of the Governor of Ceylon. Government House at Melbourne, modelled upon Queen Victoria's house at Osborne, in the Isle of Wight, had a ballroom eighteen feet longer than the great hall of Buckingham Palace.

Grandest of all was the Viceroy of India, Victoria's shadow in the greatest of her dominions. The title was little more than an honorific, the power of the office arising from the subsidiary rank of Governor-General: but it had an imperial ring to it, and was borne by only one other dignitary of Empire—the Queen's man in Ireland. There had been ten Viceroys of India since the Crown took over from the East India Company in 1858. The tenth was Victor Alexander Bruce, 9th Earl of Elgin and 13th of Kincardine, the son of

another Viceroy of India (who was buried in India), and the grandson of Lord Durham, author of a celebrated report on the Canadian Constitution. Elgin was educated at Eton and Balliol, under the famous Dr Jowett, and had married a daughter of the Earl of Southesk. In 1893 this tremendous swell had reluctantly accepted the Viceroyalty. He thought himself incompetent for the job, and, wrote Sir Frank Brown in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, 'his recognition of his own limitations was so far justified that he cannot be reckoned among the outstanding governors-general of India'.

At least he assumed his dignities as to the manner born. To anyone with a background less gorgeous than that of a British aristocrat at this opulent moment of British history, the Viceregal circumstances might have seemed daunting indeed. In Calcutta the Viceroy lived in a palace fit for any king.[1] Huge lions surmounted its gates and sphinxes couchant guarded its doors, together with cannon on pale blue carriages, and one borne on the wings of a dragon. Brilliant Indian lancers clattered through the courtyards, thirteen aides-de-camp deferentially awaited instructions, servants in liveries of gold and crimson padded down vast corridors beneath the trophies, treasures and monumental portraits assembled during the three centuries of the British presence. In the marble-floored dining-room six busts of Caesars, taken from a captured French ship, reminded Lord Elgin of his imperial status, even over the soup.

A portrait of the Viceroy's own father, the 8th Earl, hung in the Council Room, along a wall from Clive and Warren Hastings, and there were portraits, too, of Louis XIV, an eighteenth-century Shah of Persia, an Amir of Kabul and several English kings and queens. The ballroom was upstairs, with a vast chandelier originally intended as a present from the King of France to the Nizam of Hyderabad, and artlessly displayed upon an anteroom table were a sheaf of ancient treaties—with Hyderabad, with Mysore, with Seringapatam, agreements which had first consolidated the British Raj in India, and thus laid the foundations for all this splendour.

From this house the Viceroy moved magnificently through India,

[1] It was modelled upon Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire, and when in 1898 Lord Curzon of Kedleston became Viceroy he found himself particularly at home.

resplendent with all the colour and dash of the vast Empire at his feet, with his superb bodyguard jangling scarlet beside his carriage, silken Indian princes bowing at his carpet, generals quivering at the salute and ceremonial salutes of thirty-one guns—independent Asian sovereigns were only entitled to twenty-one, and even the Queen-Empress herself only got 101. He had a pleasant country house at Barrackpur, twenty miles up the Hooghly River, with moorings for the Viceregal yacht: and when the summer came, and the heat of the Indian plains became incompatible with the imperial dignity, up he went with his army of attendants to the hill station of Simla. There on a hill-top his summer palace awaited him, scrubbed and gleaming for the season, its major-domos, secretaries, chefs and myriad maidservants immaculate and expectant in their several departments—a sprawling chalet set in a delicious garden, where a Vicereine might stroll in the mountain evening spaciously, as a great chatelaine should, and the pines, streams and crispness reminded visitors that these were rulers from the distant north, sent by royal command to govern with such grandeur the sweltering territories of Asia.

3

The Crown at the very summit, with the Queen-Empress to sign the imperial decrees, and such superb courtiers stationed across the Empire: below it something very different, Parliament. The British Parliament in Westminster stood as trustee of the Pax. The supreme source of imperial policy was the elected assembly of the British people, which had nothing celestial to it at all, wavered inconsistently from view to view, was quite likely to reverse its entire imperial attitude from one general election to another, and had been until recently notoriously uninterested in imperial affairs anyway. This was the legislative authority of Empire, and its executive heads, under the Queen and the Prime Minister, were the Secretaries of State for India and the Colonies, politicians appointed to those offices as stages in a public career.

Parliament had traditionally left the running of the Empire to the executive, and in imperial matters generally did what the

Government asked. Ireland, the one exception, had been a running passion of parliamentarians throughout the century, but India seldom aroused a debate. 'The real trouble is', as the Duke of Wellington had remarked long before, 'that the public cannot be brought to attend to an Indian subject.' In the nineties there was rather more interest at Westminster, thanks to the popularity of the New Imperialism, and several active lobbies kept the issues of Empire in Hansard's columns, even between imperial crises. The philanthropic lobby nagged the conscience of M.P.s with questions about the mistreatment of Kaffirs, or the Indian opium monopoly, or slave-running in the Persian Gulf. The financial lobby urged the interests of the chartered companies, the military activists pressed for a Forward Policy on the Afghan frontier, retired colonial administrators fought against suggestions of weakness or withdrawal. Sometimes parliamentarians actually went out to the colonies to see for themselves, and to earn the contempt of those who, like Kipling, despised the instant expert.

For the run-of-the-mill politician, however, at more run-of-the-mill moments, the issues of Empire were mostly glamorous irrelevances, whose effect on domestic politics was normally peripheral, and whose meaning in terms of votes had never been thoroughly examined. It was a paradox of history that so tremendous an Empire lay at the disposal of such fluctuating wills and interests: for Parliament could pass laws binding in every single imperial possession, even the self-governing colonies, and colonial laws were void if they clashed with Westminster's Acts. It was not called an Imperial Parliament for nothing (though in fact the title was only adopted when, in 1800, the Dublin Parliament was abolished, and Westminster assumed its duties too).

4

From the graceful little iron suspension bridge that spanned the lake in St James's Park one of the most celebrated views in London could be obtained. It was a delectably frivolous spot in the very centre of the capital, and had been for centuries a favourite place of dalliance and promenade. A Venetian smell of water and damp earth

hung about the bridge, and the skyline was brushed with ornamental trees. Geese strutted magnificently across the lawns; the famous park pelicans flapped their great wings upon their rock. Beyond the wooded island at the east end of the lake sat a rustic lodge, the home of the park-keeper, and towering above it rose the halls of Authority: to the right, through the trees, Big Ben and the towers of Westminster Abbey, to the left the exotic cupolas of the Horse Guards, and in the centre, ponderous and elaborate, the offices of Empire, with a square tower and a plethora of flagstaffs.[1]

Below Parliament, and subject to its Secretaries of State, two professional departments presided over the British Empire. They were both housed in George Gilbert Scott's Italianate Government offices in Whitehall, south of Downing Street, east of St James's Park. The building had been the subject of a famous architectural controversy of the fifties—Scott wanted to build it in the Gothic style, but Gothic had come to be identified with Toryism, and when the Whigs returned to power in 1857 Lord Palmerston insisted on Renaissance. The structure stood there now in tremendous mediocrity, vast but uncompelling. The Colonial Office, in the north-west corner of the block, was decorated with symbolic figures of Empire, together with portrait medallions of nine former Colonial Secretaries: the India Office had a tower overlooking the park, and was embellished with Governors-General, emblems of Indian rivers and cities, Indian racial types and loyal feudatories. The Colonial Office, furnished in dark mahogany and deep leather, with smoky coal fires and high narrow corridors, possessed a fireplace, taken from the waiting-room of its old premises in Whitehall, before which Nelson and Wellington had warmed themselves during their only meeting, shortly before Trafalgar. The India Office contained fine collections of imperial statuary, clocks, old furniture and pictures, inherited

[1] The bridge, which could be seen from the windows of the India Office, was the last work of James Rendel (1799–1856), engineer of the East India Railway and father of Alexander Rendel (1829–1918), one of the greatest Indian railway-builders. It was wickedly demolished in 1957, but the view from its successor, though modified by taller buildings in the background, remains as magical as it was in 1897. The imperial buildings now house the Foreign and Commonwealth Offices: the Colonial Office has been absorbed into the latter, and of the India Office only the magnificent library survives.

from the East India Company and now disposed about its immense staircases, its library and its majolica-ornamented covered courtyard. Each department was run by a Permanent Under-Secretary from the Home Civil Service, but each had its own pronounced character and body of tradition. There had never been a single imperial administration, just as there was never a Minister of Empire.

The Colonial Office was established in 1854: until then the colonies were thrown in with the armed forces under the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies. It was organized in five territorial departments: the West Indian; the North American and Australian, to which Cyprus and Gibraltar were attached; the West African, which also handled Malta; the South African; the Asian. India was outside the office's concern, and several protectorates of the Empire were administered by the Foreign Office (elsewhere in the same building). It was a very small establishment to govern such a domain: like a comfortable and unpretentious club. Many of its senior members were bachelors. They all knew each other well, nobody called anybody 'sir', one entered a colleague's room without appointment, without even knocking on the door. There were only twenty-three first-class clerks, as its senior functionaries were called, and to administer the Empire in detail they would have required an encyclopedic familiarity with matters ranging from tropical crop-rotation to the circumcision of females. Fortunately they normally left the colonies to run themselves. Most colonial governors were professionals, many of them former first-class clerks themselves, and if things went reasonably smoothly in St Lucia, Fiji or Ceylon it was the prudent practice of the Colonial Office to leave well alone.

Since the days of Sir James Stephen, Colonial Under-Secretary from 1836 to 1847, the bias of the Office had generally been towards a liberal generosity. Stephen ('Mr Mother Country', 'Mr Over-Secretary') had been a leading figure of the anti-slavery movement—one of the only two Sabbaths he ever deliberately broke was spent in drawing up the Abolition Bill of 1833—and since its inception the Colonial Office had, in an often timid but generally consistent way, regarded itself as a trustee for the underdogs of Empire. It was often blamed for sickly weakness by the more hell-for-leather class of

colonist, and there were settlers from Jamaica to Bulawayo to whom its very name spelt a betrayal of white interests, of *imperial* interests, in the name of fuddy-duddy philanthropy. If ever an African tribal leader felt impelled to appeal over the heads of the local British authorities to the distant metropolitan power, it was the Colonial Office to which, buying himself a frock-coat and a top-hat, and packing the insignia of his decorations, he trustfully made his way. The Colonial Office was also, in a way, the London embassy of the colonies. Under its wing were the Crown Agents for the Colonies, who represented the dependent possessions, and the Agents-General of the self-governing colonies. The Colonial Office was the Empire's link with Westminster, and all the official cables from Ottawa, Perth, Colombo, Durban or Wellington were handled by its clerks, or its new corps of 'lady type-writers'.

The India Office was altogether grander and more stately. It, too, was really an agency: India was ruled from Calcutta, and its practical executive was the Viceroy. But the India Office, his link with the Imperial Government, was an *alter ego* of the Raj. All the departments of Indian Government had their microcosms there in Whitehall, and the Office had its own stores depot, audit office and accountant-general. The Colonial Office was less than half a century old: the roots of the India Office lay deep in the romantic past of the East India Company, with its London headquarters at India House in Leadenhall Street. The Office was financed out of Indian revenues, and its officials were advised by a body called the Council of India, consisting of retired generals and administrators with Indian experience. Its authority was concentrated: Lord Bryce once wrote that the whole course of legal reform in India in the nineteenth century, a profound and historic codification, had been arranged by two or three officials in Whitehall and two or three more in Calcutta.

Everything about the India Office reflected Britain's ancient association with the East. From the walls gazed down the faces of eighteenth-century administrators, heroes of the Mutiny, generals and pro-consuls: at the street door stood the ex-Army commissionaires, Indian campaign ribbons on their chests, ready to greet visitors in the rough-and-ready Hindustani familiar to generations

of British soldiers. In the library a succession of eminent Sanskrit and Arabic scholars had guarded the great collections of Indian literature—priceless Tibetan and Burmese manuscripts, a Sanskrit series that was probably the finest in the world, a modern deposit library that had a statutory right to every book published in India, in any language. The India Office was not a clubbable society. It was old, sombre, powerful and legalistic. It moved at a grand despotic pace. With its splendid library, its immense accumulated experience, its constant flow of dispatches, its innumerable visitors from the East, it perhaps knew more about India than any office of government, anywhere, had ever known about another country.

These were the two metropolitan departments of State which, from their gloomy but grandiose headquarters beyond the park, sent out their young men to rule the Empire.

5

It was an imperial maxim that the administrators of Empire should be chosen by the authorities in London, not by their seniors in the field. The intention was to avoid jobbery: one of the results was that both the India Office and the Colonial Office recruited their men overwhelmingly from the same stratum of society—the upper middle classes, stamped to a pattern by the public schools and the ancient universities. There was, though, no single method of entry to the imperial services. The two departments selected their people in very different ways.

The Indian system was developed from the methods of the old East India Company. It was designed to raise a dedicated caste of professional administrators, intellectual, well paid, far above petty parochial controversies, and apparently as permanent and invulnerable as the sun itself. The purpose had a classical purity, and the selection was by a fairly stiff academic examination. Suppose a young man with a recommendation from his headmaster, and a good word from his tutor at Oxford, decided one day to have a shot at the Indian Civil—in those days one of the plum prizes of undergraduate ambition. Up he would go to London, if he were not under 21 nor over 23, and he would sit down to an examination in which

he was offered twenty-one different papers, any one of which he could try if he liked, but none of which was compulsory. They ranged from Sanskrit to Logic and Mental Philosophy, and were of different value: advanced mathematics could earn a maximum of 900 marks, but Roman History was worth only 400. Seven papers were offered under the heading Natural Science, and there were papers in Arabic, French, German and Political Science. The set books for English Literature had been announced the year before: in 1897 they were two Shakespeare plays, two Ben Jonson plays, *Paradise Lost*, the poems of Marvell, Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel*, Bacon's essays and Browne's *Religio Medici*. In addition a candidate who took this paper was expected to have a 'general acquaintance' with twenty-five standard British authors, Chaucer to Macaulay.

All this invited 'cramming', and many private tutors specialized in bringing a young man up to the mark for the Indian Civil. If, against heavy odds, he succeeded, he then spent a year's probation at an English or Scottish university, and a second examination followed. This time he must take compulsory papers in Indian penal code and procedures, the principal language of one of the Indian areas, and the Indian Evidence and Contract Acts: he must take a paper in either the code of civil procedure or Hindu and Mohammedan Law, plus a choice of papers in Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, Chinese and the history of British India. He was also tested in horsemanship, including 'the ability to perform journeys on horseback': if he failed this, he could go to India anyway, but he would get no rise in salary until he passed his equestrian tests out there, generally under the effectively ferocious eye of a cavalry riding-master.

The Colonial Office was much less thorough, and looked for men of a different character. Civil Servants for Malaya, Hong Kong and Ceylon took the same examinations as those for India, but jobs in Africa and the lesser tropical colonies went by a kind of patronage. The private interview was the chosen method, and a quiet word in the right quarter often helped. Men were picked for a particular appointment, and they were likely to stay in the same colony all their lives, unless they reached the highest ranks (governors were moved every five years). There was no training programme—men

were expected to learn their trade on the spot: many subtleties of native life and custom escaped this slapdash novitiate, and British colonial officers were frequently ignorant about complexities like customary law and land tenure. As a whole the Crown Colonies were ruled by willing all-rounders of very varied quality—what ambitious man, in the days before malaria control, would wish to devote a career to Sierra Leone? They were recruited more for character than brain-power: it was said that a candidate with a first-class degree would actually be regarded as suspect. The Colonial Office had woven a mesh of contacts with university tutors and headmasters, and found its men quietly and privately on what the British would later call 'the old boy net'. 'Our methods were mole-like', wrote one Colonial Office official in retrospect. 'We learnt to eschew publicity and to rely on personal contacts in the most fruitful quarters: quiet, persistent and indirect.'

6

Steeped in the traditions of the team spirit, slightly glazed perhaps by the intoxications of the High Anglican revival, aglow still with the privileged pleasures, strawberries and Alpine reading parties of the English universities at their happiest, the young imperialist generally boarded his ship at Tilbury or Liverpool welcoming the worst that flies or savages could do to him. If the Indian Civil Service cadet knew he was joining a service of venerable order and regularity, the recruit off to Africa could hardly know what to expect, having no idea what his duties would be, still less how to perform them.

It was rare to find two entries in one year from the same school, but the Empire was administered very largely by graduates of the ancient universities. Against their permissive background, where a man could do as much or as little work as he pleased, the imperial administrators were expected to stand out in diligent distinction. Once in the field, they must be very hard-working indeed. The Conduct Rules for Indian Government Servants specified that Government was entitled to twenty-four hours a day of its employees' time, and often it was very nearly claimed. In those days

the classic picture of the junior Empire-builder's life was accurate enough. Often he really did sit in a leaky mud hut, several days from anywhere, all on his own with a few hundred thousand subjects. He really was policeman, judge, doctor, vet, handyman and oracle, all in one. Petitioners might come to his bungalow day and night, pleading for his help in solving a family dispute, dealing with a crop blight, or killing a man-eating tiger. From dawn to midnight he was seldom at leisure. He probably spent the morning as a magistrate, presiding over his own court; he spent the afternoon surveying his estate, inspecting crops, interviewing overseers; he spent the evening studying the local languages, receiving petitions, writing reports and letters. With luck he had a few other Englishmen at hand: a couple of traders on the river, perhaps, an engineer building a bridge, a missionary or an area doctor. If not, he considered himself alone, often without a telegraph, only a runner or his own horse to keep him in touch, and natives for company.

All over the Empire these administrators, like members of some scattered club, shared the same values, were likely to laugh at the same jokes, very probably shared acquaintances at home. An Australian governor, an Indian provincial commissioner, an officer of the North-West Mounted Police, busy Mr Cropper in St Lucia, beefy Philistine or grave classicist—place them all at a dinner table, and they would not feel altogether strangers to each other. To the outsider this sense of social or professional collusion could be intensely irritating. To the administrators themselves the easy fraternity of class, background and experience seemed an essential factor in the imperial system, giving strength to the web of Government, and providing consolation for lonely lives. Beneath the disciplines of convention and efficiency, an unexpectedly easy relationship linked senior and junior men. Although promotion was nearly always by seniority, outside the normal run men often reached positions of great responsibility in the Empire at surprisingly early ages. Egypt in 1897 was effectively ruled by three Englishmen, the Agent-General, the Sirdar of the Egyptian Army and the Financial Adviser: the first had assumed office at 41, the second at 40 and the third at 37.

7

Top jobs in the Empire sometimes went to grandees outside the two services. The Viceroyalty of India was a political appointment, governors of colonies were frequently noblemen or generals. For the rest the Indian Civil Service and the Colonial Service ran the dependent Empire, holding both political and administrative power in the colonies. In effect this was a State ruled by its own bureaucracy. Below the permanent secretaries in London came the governors on the spot; below them the chief secretaries; below them again the provincial commissioners and district officers. No tropical colony enjoyed any real degree of self-government, despite a few propitiatory sops. White settlements apart, the Empire was a vast despotism—or rather a group of despotisms, for liaison between region and region, or even perimeter and centre, was tenuous. We must imagine the different imperial branches like sections of a cloistered university: each faculty supremely knowledgeable in its own remote speciality, but seldom familiar with, or even interested in, the exercises of the philosophers, botanists or mathematicians across the quadrangle. Among colonial servants loyalty to colony, to region, to tribe was intense, and often exclusive: just as there were classicists, in those days, to whom the higher mathematics was upstart vulgarity, and probably slipshod at that.

A heavy thoroughness linked them all. The bureaucracy of Empire was overelaborate. 'Round and round like the diurnal revolutions of the earth went the file, stately, solemn, sure and slow': so Curzon wrote of an Indian proposal, and stateliness, solemnity, sureness and slowness were attributes of British imperial government almost everywhere. 'Documents no longer needed may be destroyed,' ran an apocryphal imperial directive, 'provided copies are made in duplicate': and in the Colonial Office List for 1897 there really was an advertisement for red tape. The annual General Index to the Administration of Aden gives us a glimpse of the ruling style. 'Lady type-writers' had not yet reached the tropical outstations, and the Index was written in a huge and splendid copper-plate hand that suggested Dickensian clerks on high stools, beneath the slowly

creaking punkahs of the forenoon. Here are some characteristic entries, not always scrupulously spelt:

Compressed Hay: enquiries regarding the practicability of obtaining from Italy.

Engine Driver: entertainment of an, for the Steam Launch *Rose*.

Ewes: purchase of Abyssinian, for Government Farm at Hyderabad.

Exumation: of the body of M. Boucher, late Commandant of the French gunboat *Etendard*.

Fee: sanction for payment of a, of Rs 200 for a surgical operation performed on a relative of the Abdali Sultan.

Mails: *re* fumigation of, Aden to Mauritius.

Opium: agents B.I.S.N.Co. petition for a reduction of transhipment fees levied on, to China *via* Bombay.

Pecuniary arrangements: Governments servants prohibited from entering into, with members of the department to which they belong in connection with the resignation of appointments held by them.

Pilgrims: copy of an unfinished report by Consul Moncrieff on the alleged ill-treatment of, at Camaran Island.

Slave girls: Home Government requires particulars regarding two, made over to the Good Shepherd Convent.

There is the ring of omniscience to such a list, written in such a script, in such a huge thick-leaved register of Empire. By and large only Britons from Britain were considered suitable for the senior imperial posts. There were exceptions: Australians administered New Guinea, New Zealanders the Cook Islands, a few Indians had succeeded in entering the higher ranks of the Indian Civil Service and a few Sinhalese shared in the Government of Ceylon. In the West African colonies there were some African senior officials, but they were soon to be replaced. This was a burden for white men, and candidates for the senior branch of the Colonial Service had to be 'of pure European descent'.

8

The law was different. To administer the imperial justice the British had to enlist the help of their subjects. In several parts of the Empire natives were acting not only as barristers but as magistrates and judges, too. The British could scarcely resent their participation, though nobody annoyed them more than a really litigious native lawyer, because the legal system of the Empire was so immensely involved, so interwoven with customary law and the codes of previous authorities, that often the local lawyer was the only person who really understood it.

The Common Law of England did not necessarily obtain throughout the Queen's Dominions. The principle was that an Englishman took with him 'as much of law and liberty as the nature of things would bear'. Acts of Parliament after the foundation of a colony only applied there if they expressly said so, and if a colony had its own laws before the British arrived, they remained in force until they were specifically superseded. A myriad different codes supplemented, modified or replaced the Common Law in different parts of the Empire, inherited from previous rulers or evolved as safety and common sense demanded. Even in the white self-governing colonies, those mirrors of England, the law was often locally modified: the Australians had changed the marriage law, and the New Zealanders had repealed the Statute of Uses, one of the most important statutes in English conveyancing.

In general the British respected indigenous laws, where they made sense, and seemed just: within their own islands, after all, they allowed a quaint degree of legal latitude to the Scots. British imperial scholars were the first to clarify and define the Islamic and Hindu laws of India—a memorial in Calcutta Cathedral proudly portrayed Sir William Jones, the great oriental jurist, with the tablets of the law in his hands, and Muslim and Brahmin sages respectful at his feet. Customary law was generally honoured, unless it was especially horrible, and even slavery, though legally abolished in the British possessions more than sixty years before, was not flatly forbidden everywhere: in countries actually annexed it was seldom

tolerated, but in Protectorates only its legal status was abolished—it was not an offence for a native to keep slaves, but slaves' children were born free, and a slave could always claim his freedom.[1] The advent of English law did not much affect the more advanced branches of native civil law in India, which were essentially religious, and the baffling procedures of West Africa, with all their rituals of fetish and oblation, were mostly left undisturbed, if only because few Britons could master them.

All this made for a dizzy variety of legislation. British India had its own superb Penal Code, drawn up by Macaulay. Stephen once described it as 'the criminal law of England freed from all technicalities and superfluities, and systematically arranged': anyone who wanted to understand the criminal law of India had only to read the Penal Code 'with a common use of memory and attention'. The French Canadians kept their archaic version of French law, as it had been before the Revolution, while Mauritius and the Seychelles had the Napoleonic Code. Sicilian law applied in Malta, Roman Dutch in Ceylon and Cape Colony, Ottoman in Cyprus. Traces of Spanish law still applied in Trinidad, and faint remnants of the old Brehon law in Ireland. In Sarawak, a British Protectorate, the White Rajah very often made the law up as he went along: generally with liberal intent, in an island where, for example, if an unmarried pregnant girl refused to reveal her lover's name, she was traditionally left to starve in the forest. In Jersey the *clameur de haro*, an ancient appeal to the Crown, could still be raised by a really determined litigant, and lawyers still went for their training to the University of Caen in Normandy.

Sometimes the law, whatever its nature, applied equally to rulers and ruled, English or native. Sometimes the imperialist found himself subject to special rules of his own, set apart from the laws of the country he ruled. In theory there was a special court in England to deal with offences committed by Englishmen in India. It was established in 1784, and consisted of three judges, four peers and six members of Parliament. It was a conscious copy of the tribunal of

[1] This led to an odd paradox. If an Englishman, subject to British law, returned a runaway slave to his owner, he was guilty of participation in slavery: if a native returned him, it was common assault.

Roman senators which, in the second century B.C., had been established to try offences committed by Roman officials against provincials: but it had never been summoned.

9

Loftily above it all, the supreme fount of imperial justice, sat the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. As the Crown was to the administration of the Empire, the Judicial Committee was to the law. It was the supreme court of appeal for the entire British Empire, outside the United Kingdom. The origin of this eminence was curious. When William of Normandy conquered England his subjects of Normandy and the Channel Islands retained, to differentiate them from the conquered Saxons, particular legal access to the King's person, by way of his Privy Council. Normandy was presently lost, but the Channel Islands kept this ancient privilege, and it was later extended to all the overseas dominions. (Citizens of the United Kingdom had the right of appeal to the House of Lords: in practice the two courts had become virtually identical.)

Oddly enough, in an Empire devoted to pomp and pageantry, the Judicial Committee flaunted few of the trappings of English law. Its members, half a dozen eminent jurists, met in modest upstairs chambers in Downing Street—John Buchan thought the premises 'shabby—the majesty of the imperial law seemed poorly recognized'.[1] They wore no robes or wigs, only plain dark suits, and sat at a semicircular table, the barrister addressing them standing at a lectern in the middle. It was only a committee, not officially a court of law. Its duty was to give advice to the sovereign, so that no dissenting judgements were delivered—it would have been improper to offer the Queen conflicting advice—and no verdict was pronounced: the judges merely declared that in their opinion the

[1] Buchan was still at Oxford in 1897, but was already imperially minded—he won the Newdigate Prize with a poem about the Pilgrim Fathers. He was to become, by way of administrative service in South Africa, Governor-General of Canada and a leading exponent, in many popular novels, of the Empire's stiff upper lip. He died as Lord Tweedsmuir in 1940, and is buried outside Oxford with his faithful manservant near by—across a hedge.

appeal should be dismissed or upheld, 'and they will humbly so advise Her Majesty'. Sometimes a judge from Canada, South Africa or Australia attended a hearing: but there was nothing very imperial to the circumstances of the Judicial Committee, and visitors to its meetings were often disappointed.

Yet this was, in the range of its powers and jurisdiction, the most powerful court of the modern world. It might only offer its humble advice to the Sovereign, but the advice was invariably accepted. A quarter of the inhabitants of the earth were ultimately at its mercy, and when the Kols hill tribe in India were once involved in a dispute with the Government about forest rights, their elders were surprised sacrificing a kid to propitiate a distant but omnipotent deity. 'We know nothing of him, but that he is a good god, and that his name is the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council.' Nothing was more properly romantic, in the complex structure of the Pax Britannica, than the existence of this tremendous tribunal, perhaps the one imperial institution that smacked authentically of the Caesars. The laws of half a dozen conquered civilizations were laid before it, and its members must interpret them all both by their own values, and by the values of the imperial British. They might have to declare an opinion, against which there was no further appeal, upon the legal meaning of the Koran, or the Hindu Manu, or a clause of the Napoleonic Code modified by Canadian practice, or even the law of the Kingdom of Kandy, that last stronghold of the Ceylonese monarchs, hidden away in the forested interior of the island. Once an English lawyer had pleaded before them, on behalf of orthodox Hinduism, against the abolition of suttee, the burning of widows alive: more than once the Committee had dealt with cases in which property had been entailed in the person of a temple idol.

Some of the greatest British jurists had presided over the Judicial Committee, and its roll of members included many of the ringing honorifics of the realm—the Lord Chancellor, the Lord Chief Baron, the Lord Chief Justice, the Master of the Rolls, the Vice-Chancellor of England and all the Lords of Appeal in Ordinary. Among them in 1897 were Lord Halsbury, whose *Laws of England* was the standard digest of English law, and Lord Macnaghten, the

most eloquent jurist of his day.[1] There was no sniffing at such a body, at a moment when the prestige of English law, by whose standards all else was ultimately to be judged, stood at its highest. When a Chinese lawyer argued his case from Hong Kong, or a Jamaican litigant appealed to the fair play of the Crown, when an East African Muslim pleaded the legal significance of the Meditations, or the Kols hillmen slit the throat of another kid—as the members of the Committee looked out from their table across their quarter of the world, it must sometimes have seemed that the dream of a universal civilization was half-way to fulfilment.

10

Not the law as such, but the rule of law, was the one convincingly unifying factor in imperial affairs. The British subject, whether he be Kaffir, Maori or French Canadian, automatically acquired those private civil rights which the English had evolved for themselves since the time of Magna Carta. It took the Romans many generations to extend civil rights throughout the Roman Empire, because it was done in stages: the British granted such rights the moment they annexed a territory. One day a tribesman might be absolutely subject to the fickle despotism of his hereditary chieftain, with no personal liberties whatever: the next day he had a constitutional right to take a suit before Lord Halsbury, or stand for the Imperial Parliament. Most people, in most parts of the British Empire, would probably have agreed that on the whole, and certainly by the standards of its predecessors, it offered its subjects justice. Wherever the British went, as they threw down railway lines and erected Anglican churches, so they set up courts: and though the magistrate might only be an anxious youth a year or two down from the university, or a beery old veteran soaked for a quarter of a century in sun and the lesser vices, still the hearing was likely to be fair and the

[1] The best-remembered example of his eloquence was his advice to the shady Mr Gluckstein, defrauded by his own accomplices, in the case *Gluckstein v. Barnes*: 'He can bring an action at law if he likes. If he hesitates to take that course or takes it and fails, then his only remedy lies in an appeal to that sense of honour which is popularly supposed to exist among robbers of a humbler type.'

judgement impartial. To many of the Queen's native subjects this was the first advantage of the Pax—more important than prosperity, efficient government, even better health. Asked in 1896 to name the first benefit of British rule in Egypt, a Cairo newspaper editor replied that now a peasant could not only bring a lawsuit against a pasha, but actually win it.

Simple benevolence was not a general trait of the British imperial system, but its fairness was generally recognized. As Emerson once wrote, 'the English sway of their colonies has no roots of kindness in it. They govern by their arts and ability: they are more just than kind.' If an imperial idealist had to choose a text of Empire, he might have done worse than select the original instructions of the East India Company to its judges in the east. In those days the state of the law in India was fearfully muddled, a welter of religious and customary law only thinly reinforced by English practice, but the Company's justices knew how to behave. When there were no positive or acceptable rules to follow, they were told, they must consult two simple principles: 'Equity or Good Conscience'.[1]

[1] 'Whichever', cynics used to add, 'is the less.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Imperial Complexity

Across the wave, along the wind,
Flutter and plough your way,
But where will you a Sceptre find
To match the English Sway?
Its conscience holds the world in awe
With blessing or with ban;
Its Freedom guards the Reign of Law,
And majesty of Man!

Alfred Austin