

Chapter Sixty-Three

PAX BRITANNICA

IN 1890 Queen Victoria reigned over four hundred million people inhabiting a fifth of the surface of the globe. Indeed Britain ruled over so vast a domain that virtually nothing could arise in any part of the world that would not affect her. The British Empire, then seemingly at its apogee, exerted a strong hold on the contemporary imagination, one which cast Britain with a world-wide mission as an agent, it was believed, of good. This surge of patriotic pride was still a relatively new phenomenon. Up until the 1870s the Empire had been an administrative mechanism in the interests of commerce. Colonies were looked upon as expensive and burdensome necessities best dealt with by allowing them self-government, which was cheaper. Such a policy was summed up in 1867 when the Confederation of Canada was created. But after that date the atmosphere began to change as the age of the superpower arrived, an age in which virtually every European nation attempted to carve out a colonial empire. In the case of Britain that renewed expansion was triggered by Disraeli's purchase in 1875 of the controlling shares in the Suez Canal, vital as the lifeline to India. This was to have the effect of involving Britain first in the fate of Egypt, and gradually more and more in that of the whole of Africa. Not that there was any planned programme of British acquisition, for it was piecemeal and pragmatic. But once it began all kinds of motives were to drive the bandwagon of territorial annexation relentlessly onwards: prestige, patriotism, missionary zeal, and the need for new markets and trade routes being just some of them.

Disraeli began to extol the virtues of Empire and the queen was proclaimed Empress of India in 1876. That was followed by the great Golden and Diamond Jubilees of her reign in 1887 and 1897 when the British populace witnessed imperial cavalcades through London which made visible to them the reality of the many peoples over whom they now held sway. Such pageantry was to have an intoxicating effect in the new era of mass circulation newspapers.

The Empire was firmly linked to the economy, offering new markets and a source for raw materials to the most highly industrialised country in the world. That industrial supremacy came under threat in the last thirty years of the century during



In the 1920s a solution to Britain's post-war economic depression was seen to lie in the Empire, then at its greatest extent, with one quarter of the world's population as a potential market. The role of the Empire

Marketing Board was to promote the sale of Empire goods in Britain with the belief that members of the Empire in their turn would buy British. In 1926 Empire imports only made up 30% of the total.

what was called the Great Depression. The name is a misleading one for exports were actually still rising. What it reflected was something else, the fact that other countries were becoming highly industrialised. In the 1870s Britain was overtaken by the United States and then, after 1900, by Germany. Britain's share of the world's trade dropped from 25% to 14% between 1870 and 1910. All kinds of reasons were suggested for this onset of atrophy, from the inadequacy of the British education system to the attitude of society towards those engaged in trade as somehow being inferior to the professions. Nonetheless, the Empire remained the country's market cornerstone.

The links which bound the colonies to the mother country could be very personal ones. Between 1861 and 1900 seven-and-a-half million people emigrated to Australia and New Zealand and 800,000 to Canada. These, along with Africa, were referred to as 'vacant territories', as though their indigenous population did not exist. Australia,



The Australian painter R. Godfrey Rivers' *Under the Jacaranda* captures the export of English living style across the Empire. But for the exotic tree the picture could pass as an English country house tea party.

claimed for Britain in 1770 by Captain Cook, had been used from the close of the eighteenth century as a dumping ground for convicts. By the 1850s it was regarded in a far different light, when first wool and then gold made it important to the British economy. Connections with Britain on the other side of the globe were to remain strong, children being sent back to be educated, the Anglican church establishing itself in the colony, and a government structure modelled on that of the homeland evolving. Such countries were self-governing and usually developed enough to send their own 'ambassador', designated High Commissioner, to London, where they established national headquarters, such as Canada House or Australia House.

India was very different and was always to form a special case. Over three-quarters of the inhabitants of the Empire lived there and it was to have a greater impact on Britain during the Victorian age than any other country, despite the Indian Mutiny (1857) when a combination of motives had led to a revolt by the native population,

including a large part of the army, and the committing of appalling atrocities on both sides. The resulting reappraisal of the government of the country brought an end to the political role of the East India Company. Henceforth India had a viceroy answerable to the India Office and the British government. Indians were allowed for the first time into the administration of justice and into the civil service. But the British continued firmly to believe that they were destined to rule the country in perpetuity. Without them, the British believed India would fall apart in the face of the enormous divergences of its peoples, languages and religions. Nothing seemed to shake the hold of British rule, although as education and literacy spread it began to dawn on intelligent Indians that they were being denied their political rights.

Between 1870 and 1900 sixty million people and forty-five million square miles were added to the British Empire. Most of these can be accounted for by Africa, which began to be opened up to Europeans during the 1850s and 60s through the work of explorers like David Livingstone. Colonisation occurred in a haphazard way, beginning with coastal trading bases and then gradually spreading inland. Boundaries to such new territories were only drawn when one empire-building country came up against another. The Suez Canal signalled annexation in the north. Egypt had been temporarily occupied but that became permanent in 1882. In order to protect Egypt, neighbouring Sudan had to be conquered. Although in 1885 the British relief force failed to reach Khartoum in time to save General Charles Gordon, beleaguered there by the revolt of the Mahdi, the Sudan was eventually taken over by an army headed by General Kitchener. During the 1890s came Zanzibar, Nigeria, Gold Coast (Ghana), Gambia and Sierra Leone. The biggest problem, however, lay in the south of the continent, where the two British colonies, Cape Colony and Natal, were adjacent to two Afrikaner Boer states, Orange Free State and Transvaal, settled long before by the Dutch. These the British annexed in 1877, two years later defeating the hostile natives, the Zulus. In 1880-81 the Boers revolted, and were granted independence only a few years before gold and diamonds were discovered in the Transvaal, a discovery which changed everything. Both British and foreigners, designated by the Boers as the 'uitlanders', poured into the Transvaal, and Johannesburg sprang up almost overnight. All of this could not fail to excite the predatory Prime Minister of the British colonies, Cecil Rhodes, whose vision was of a British African Empire. Under his aegis in 1895 there took place a disgraceful attempt at a coup, an invasion of the Transvaal led by Jameson timed to coincide with an uprising by the 'uitlanders'. It was a fiasco, and any involvement by the British Colonial Office was tactfully glossed over. Inevitably it ruined the possibility of a peaceful relationship with the Boers whose two states came together under President Kruger.

War indeed finally erupted over the Boer treatment of these 'uitlanders' among whom many were British. The Boer War was to last three years (1899-1902), cost £300 million and thirty thousand men were to be killed. It began disastrously and only gradually moved towards victory with the taking of Pretoria in June 1900, but two more years of guerrilla warfare followed until peace was finally made at Vereeniging. The Boers were duly subjugated and their two states annexed to form the Union of South Africa. But the war had been a shock to the British government. It had taken half-a-million men to crush an enemy with only sixty thousand. It was an appalling indictment of the state of the British army.

After the war it became clear that some mechanism of consultation was needed to hold together the sprawling cumbrous mass which made up the Empire. Despite the fact that Empire Day was instituted in 1904 as an annual celebration, imperial authority was already on the wane and enthusiasm diminishing. The British had never quite shed their attitude that an empire was an unnecessary burden and expense. Only in the case of India was there a spectacular reassertion of the imperial role when the great Durbar of 1911 was staged in which the new king, George V, received the homage of the princes in his role as King-Emperor. Colonial and then Imperial Conferences began to be held in which the 'self-governing colonies' were referred to as 'dominions' and in which the Empire itself became interchangeable with the word Commonwealth. Increasingly these dominions began to seek for equality of status with the mother-country. As Britain paid for their defence they had no control over their foreign policy, and it was in this way the Empire entered the First World War. But after this the demand for equality accelerated. At the 1926 Imperial Conference a formula was reached which was later enshrined in the 1931 Statute of Westminster. It defined those countries as 'autonomous communities within the British Empire, equal in status . . . though united by a common allegiance to the Crown.' But this new definition took as its focus an institution which had been stripped of any political power and which relied for its potency on deference and the magic of pageantry, attributes which were gradually to cease to exert their spell.



King George V and Queen Mary setting sail for India for the Durbar in 1911, the highest point of imperial splendour.