

The Ends Of Empire

by David Gilmour

Until the last quarter of the 19th century, the ruler of the world's largest empire possessed no imperial title. Russia and Austria-Hungary had been ruled by emperors for centuries; Germany, recently united under Prussia, had just acquired its first, while France had just discarded its second. But Queen Victoria remained merely a queen until in 1876 her prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli, persuaded Parliament to make her empress of India.

The title was of purely symbolic significance: it did not apply to other parts of the empire and it did not even affect India, which continued to be administered by a viceroy responsible to the cabinet in London. But it reflected an increased sense of imperial purpose, a strong and growing belief in the permanence of British rule overseas. The empire still had a long way to expand: large territories in Africa and Asia had to be added before it could be claimed that a quarter of the globe was painted red. But 1876 may be seen as the apogee of imperial self-confidence. The 1857 Indian Mutiny, which briefly threatened British rule in the north, was almost a generation in the past; the "scramble for Africa" had not begun; and Britain's economic predominance was as yet unchallenged by Germany and the United States. Lord Mayo's belief that Britain should hold India "as long as the sun shines in heaven" was widely shared.

The Victorian sense of empire was concentrated on India partly because of the subcontinent's strategic importance. As Lord Curzon, the queen's last viceroy, observed, the loss of India would reduce Britain to the status of a third-rate power. But India also provided the Victorians with an imperial calling which they could not pursue in other parts of the empire. Canada, Australia, and New Zealand were settler societies responsible for their own government and without large native populations to administer. The South Africans had problems peculiar to themselves, but they too were white colonists with a hunger for land. When





At the 1903 Delhi durbar (assembly), Indian notables parade past Lord Curzon, the last viceroy appointed under Queen Victoria.

the writer John Buchan remarked that the empire was about “a sense of space in the blood,” he was talking about the great and sparsely inhabited tracts of the white colonies. But in India, the Victorians were not colonists. They saw themselves as people with a mission, administrators entrusted by Providence to rule India for the sake of the Indians and to implant British ideas of justice, law, and humanity.

It had not always been so. Since the 17th century, Britons had been sailing to India to enrich themselves. Many had been adventurers who risked the ravages of climate and disease to bring back large fortunes from Bengal. Some had liked India for itself, immersing themselves in native culture and adopting local styles of living. Both types became

almost extinct in the Victorian period, victims alike of a high-minded and intolerant zeal for Westernization.

Victorian attitudes toward empire were shaped by the Evangelical and Utilitarian movements in Britain, neither of which had sympathy for Indian customs or religion. Many people dreamed fantastically of a mass conversion of Hindus to Christianity. William Wilberforce, who was largely responsible for the abolition of the slave trade, regarded the conversion of India as even more important, “the greatest of all causes.” And even though the number of converts from Hinduism turned out to be very small, the last Victorian bishop of Calcutta believed as late as 1915 that an Indian “Constantine” would emerge and bring his followers into the Christian fold.

Few of the administrators shared this aspiration. Curzon regarded missionaries as a nuisance and believed that conversion was both improbable and undesirable. But members of the Indian Civil Service (ICS), that elite body of 1,100 men that administered the Indian Empire, were heavily influenced by the idea of secular Westernization explicit in the writings of the Utilitarians. The crucial figure was the philosopher James Mill, who in 1806 began writing a six-volume history of British India, a study regarded by Thomas Babington Macaulay as “the greatest historical work” in English since Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Mill, who had never been to India and knew no Indian language, argued that Indian society was so barbarous and decadent that it could be redeemed only by a system of government and law based on Utilitarian principles. A number of British officials, such as Mountstuart Elphinstone, the governor of Bombay, were repelled by Mill’s sarcasm, but they never refuted him in print. Mill’s volumes became a textbook at Hailybury, the college established for entrants to the civil service, and were largely unchallenged for half a century.

“Westernization” of course had its positive side: the practice of *suttee* or widow burning, was abolished, female infanticide was slowly reduced, and *thuggee*—the ritual murder of travelers carried out by thugs devoted to the goddess Kali—was suppressed. India also benefited from judicial and administrative reforms as well as from the great surge of Victorian engineering, particularly the building of railways and canals for irrigation. But an inevitable result of Mill’s thought was a deterioration in relations between British and Indians. Once it had been accepted that Indian society was barbarous and needed British help to reform itself, it was natural for the British to regard themselves as a superior race appointed to assist in the redemption of the barbarians. The consequent racial segregation—Indians in the bazaars and Britons in neat Civil Lines and army cantonments—is usually blamed on the racism and snobbery of Victorian ladies. But this is not fair. Many Victorian memsahibs no doubt were racist and snobbish, yet nobody has explained how they could have integrated into native society while

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Indian women, Hindus as well as Muslims, remained in purdah. The real villains were Mill's presumption and ignorance. Indian society was poorer and more backward than it had been in the 16th century, but solutions to its problems required both a sympathy and an understanding that a pseudo-historian in London simply did not possess.

Macaulay denigrated the East and extolled British virtues even more eloquently than Mill. His essays on Robert Clive and Warren Hastings, the two preeminent figures in the making of the 18th-century empire, encouraged the view that the acquisition of India had been an essentially heroic enterprise, a theater for the display of true British character. Just as Sir Francis Drake's plundering was played down in the making of the Elizabethan hero, so Clive's rapaciousness during his first Bengal governorship was brushed aside by the need to provide an exemplar of British virtues. Victorians were taught that their Indian Empire had been won against enormous odds by qualities familiar since the days of Agincourt: courage, self-sacrifice, duty, iron will. And if such qualities had been the formula for India's acquisition, it was logical to assume that these qualities could also be deployed for its retention. Sir James Stephen, a redoubtable administrator, defined English virtues as "the masterful will, the stout heart, the active brain, the calm nerves, the strong body."

Young district officers of the ICS were taught to believe that the future was in their hands. If they behaved as England expected, the Indians would accept them and the empire would be safe. So they dedicated their lives to the pursuit of justice, confident in their belief that all that these teeming districts needed was a solitary Englishman, straightforward and incorruptible, riding from village to village, setting up his table under a banyan tree and settling their disputes. It was an exhilarating experience, especially for young men fresh

from Oxford University sent out to govern half a million people in areas the size of a large English county. What joy, one of them recalled, "feeling that one is working and ruling and making oneself useful in God's world."

Based though they may have been on bad history and false premises, Victorian beliefs contained much that was true. Clive may not have been a spotless hero, but his military and administrative records are remarkable. The ICS officers may have believed that they belonged to a superior race, but their administration was regarded by most Indians as just; villagers divided by religion, caste, and class were happy to accept judgments handed out



Lord Curzon (1859–1925)

by a pink-faced, unbribable young man who belonged to none of their subdivisions. The statistics demonstrate how broad that acceptance was and also indicate how Western views of Indian inferiority had permeated the Indians themselves. Even after the horrors of the 1857 mutiny, Britain kept only 65,000 white soldiers in an area populated by 300 million people that now includes not only India but Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Burma. In one district of Lower Bengal, 20 Britons lived among 2.5 million natives. As late as 1939, about 28 million Punjabis—people not renowned for their docility—were governed by 60 British civil servants. No wonder Stalin grumbled that it was absurd for India to be ruled by a few hundred Englishmen.

Nearly a century after the death of Queen Victoria, we can appreciate how precariously her Indian Empire rested on the self-confidence of its administrators. But this fragility was clear neither to most of them nor to foreign observers at the time. There seemed to be a solidity about the empire that enabled Theodore Roosevelt to compare its “admirable achievements” with those of the Romans. Bismarck, the German chancellor, once declared that “were the British Empire to disappear, its work in India would remain one of its lasting monuments,” and even Gandhi was inspired to say that “the British Empire existed for the welfare of the world.” All of them could see that the government of India was a despotism, yet all believed that it was a stable and enlightened one. India helped to illustrate the boast that at home Britain was “Greek” while abroad it was “Roman.”

At the height of the Victorian empire, few people foresaw the day when India would no longer need Britain. The peoples of the two countries, believed Curzon, were tillers in the same field, jointly concerned with the harvest and ordained to walk along the same path for many years to come. Like others, he believed in the emergence of a new patriotism, common to both British and Indians, that would bind the two races forever. As he once told members of the Bengali Chamber of Commerce,

If I thought it were all for nothing, and that you or I . . . were simply writing inscriptions on the sand to be washed out by the next tide, if I felt that we were not working here for the good of India in obedience to a higher law and a nobler aim, then I would see the link that holds England and India together severed without a sigh. But it is because I believe in the future of this country, and in the capacity of our race to guide it to goals that it has never hitherto attained, that I keep courage and press forward.

British imperialists had a special feeling for India, the oldest part of the empire, but the civilizing mission was directed also to Africa. Writing in the 1890s, the young Winston Churchill asked,

What enterprise is more noble and more profitable than the reclamation from barbarism of fertile regions and large populations? To give peace to warring tribes, to administer justice where all was violence, to strike the chains from the slave, to draw the richness from the soil, to plant the earliest seeds of commerce and learning, to increase in whole peoples their capacities for pleasure and diminish their chances of pain—what more beautiful ideal or more valuable reward can inspire human effort?

Neither Curzon nor Churchill could envisage Britain without an empire. “We have to answer our helm,” declared the former, “and it is an imperial helm, down all the tides of Time.” Wherever peoples were living in backwardness or barbarism, “wherever ignorance or superstition is rampant, wherever enlightenment or progress [is] possible, wherever duty and self-sacrifice call—there is, as there has been for hundreds of years, the true summons of the Anglo-Saxon race.” And if the race did not answer that summons, if Britain became a country with “no aspiration but a narrow and selfish materialism,” it would end up merely “a sort of glorified Belgium.”

Although the empire continued to expand into the 1920s, the tide had begun to turn against the modern Rome at least a generation earlier. Toward the end of the 19th century, a growing number of ICS officers were beginning to feel that their duty should be not to preserve British India “as long as the sun shines in heaven” but to prepare the country for their eventual departure. Simultaneously, the Indian National Congress, founded in 1885 by a new breed of Indian nationalists, coupled protestations of loyalty and even gratitude to the empire with demands for greater Indian involvement in the administration. Like their sympathizers in the ICS, they understood the fundamental contradiction of the Victorian empire: that it was impossible to reconcile the imperial mission abroad with the liberal tradition at home. While in Africa the colonists were under no pressure to attempt that reconciliation, in India the issue was impossible to avoid. How, for example, could it be explained to Jawaharlal Nehru, who was educated at Harrow and Cambridge, that the British liberal tradition could be applied to him in England but not in India? How could it be argued that such a man was unfit to govern his own people?

Goaded by the Russian Revolution, the pressures of World War I, and the increasing talk of self-determination, the British government declared in 1917 that its goal—the same as Gandhi’s later on—was self-rule for India within the British Empire. Much of course had to be resolved before self-rule became a reality, and an extra delay was caused by another world war. But, in 1947, the British finally let their liberalism triumph over their imperialism and withdrew peacefully from the subcontinent. The amicability of the withdrawal and the subsequent friendliness between the two peoples surprised observers such as Eleanor Roosevelt who were determined to see British India as a typical instance of colonial occupation. But there were few parallels with the situations in Algeria, Indochina, or anywhere else. Cheered by the populace, the last British regiment marched through Bombay’s Gateway of India and sailed home. Despite differences over international issues, the respect and the affection remained: in 1979, when Lord Mountbatten was killed by an IRA bomb, the Indian Parliament went into recess to mourn the last British viceroy of their country. India’s leaders still remembered that in 1947 the British had kept their promise and departed; they had not been ejected. At the time of independence, Rajendra Prasad, who became India’s first president,

sent a message to King George VI that helps explain Indian feelings toward their recent rulers:

While our achievement is in no small measure due to our sufferings and sacrifices, it is also the result of world forces and events; and last, but not least, it is the consummation and fulfillment of the historic traditions and democratic ideals of the British race.

Within 20 years of its departure from India, Britain had withdrawn from nearly all the rest of its empire. Soon the great swathes of red paint were reduced to a handful of dots such as Hong Kong, Gibraltar, and the Falkland Islands. The center of the world's greatest empire was transformed into a modest European state. Dean Acheson famously observed that Britain had lost an empire and not found a role, but most Britons were in fact not looking for a role. They wanted to jettison the remaining parts of their empire as soon as possible and forget all about their imperial past. Politicians of the 1960s were concerned about joining the Common Market and making Britain a more civilized society by measures such as decriminalizing homosexuality and abolishing capital punishment. Historians sought to write India out of their island story or, where this was not possible, to disparage the achievements of the ICS and overestimate the importance of the Indian National Congress. Clive was reduced from the status of schoolboy hero to that of a worthy soldier who owed his success to the wealth of Bengal and the strength of the British navy.

Exhilarated by the radical spirit and hedonism of the 1960s, people in Britain looked back at the empire with a mixture of guilt and embarrassment. The change in national status was so overwhelming that it could be managed only by rejecting or belittling the past. Even the adjective *Victorian*, referring as it does to the greatest period of national consequence, became a term of mockery and abuse, aimed at the reactionary, the prudish, and the old-fashioned. Britons congratulated themselves on having shed every remnant of that age. They visited India for its gurus and its mysticism, not because their grandparents had lived there or because the subcontinent was so bound up with their history that it contained two million British graves. All they needed from the imperial past was E. M. Forster's *Passage to India*—and later the film David Lean made of it—to convince them that the Raj was both stupid and morally wrong. They were much comforted too by Richard Attenborough's film *Gandhi*, which pandered to anti-Raj feeling, not least by having Lord Irwin, the benign young viceroy who was trusted and admired by Gandhi, played by Sir John Gielgud in his late seventies as a cantankerous martinet always itching to throw Gandhi in jail.

In the 1980s, the emergence of a tepid Raj nostalgia (illustrated by the growth of Indian restaurants in Britain with names such as “Lancers” and “The Indian Cavalry Club”) coincided with Margaret Thatcher's call for a return to “Victorian values” at home. Unfortunately, this term was exploited by both the prime minister and her crit-

ics for purposes of propaganda. To Thatcher, “Victorian values” primarily meant enterprise and self-reliance, while her left-wing critics talked about Victorian hypocrisy and reminded the nation of child chimney sweeps and Dickensian slums. Both sides regarded “Victorian values” as part of a remote past; neither saw nor attempted to see how many of the true Victorian values had survived in Britain and even abroad. Most of the ideals of William Gladstone, who symbolizes the Victorian age much better than its queen, are still among the ideals of British parliamentarians: liberty, free trade, international co-operation, representative government, and a foreign policy based on moral considerations as well as national interest. British political leaders often fail lamentably to uphold them, but they remain the ideals. Britons may have consigned the empire to remote and inaccurate history, but many of its values are still with them.

Ironically, the Victorian empire is remembered more clearly in India than in Britain. Indeed, the Indian people are more aware of the whole Indo-British connection than the British are. Although some of them might like to expunge the Raj from their past, too much of its legacy remains in their institutions and on their ground. The British can distance themselves from their imperial past in a way which the Indians are denied. Arriving in the colorful anarchy of modern India, visitors might feel initially that the country has cut all links with the colonial epoch. But awareness of how much of the connection still survives will soon follow, not just among the great Victorian buildings of Bombay or in the imperial capital of New Delhi but among the people and their institutions. The civil service and the judiciary system are both descendants of the Victorian era, while parliamentary government is a legacy of later British rule. Democracy is far from perfect in India as elsewhere, but it is infinitely preferable to the regimes offered by its neighbors, China and Pakistan, over the last 50 years. And at a cultural level, English is now more widely spoken in India than ever and remains the only means of communication between an educated Hindi speaker in the north and an educated Tamil from the south.

But the most vibrant Victorian legacy, one that would have astonished the Victorians themselves, is the game of cricket. This sedate sport, designed for English afternoons on village greens and school playing fields, remains almost incomprehensible outside the boundaries of the former British Empire. Yet in India, as in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the West Indies, it is played with a kind of baseball vigor and enthusiasm quite alien to England. The visitor to an Indian city on a Sunday will witness an extraordinary sight: crowded into every square yard of parks, gardens, alleys, and even cemeteries, thousands of Indian boys will be playing cricket, hitting and running and all the time shouting in antiquated English jargon. In India, cricket is truly what it never became in England—the national sport.