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J. S. Conway

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ANTI-IMPERIALISM BEFORE 1914

J. S. CONWAY

University of British Columbia

The evolution of the British Empire into the Commonwealth of Nations is a major political fact of the 20th century. How did it happen that in an age when other Empires, attacked from within and without, crumbled and fell, the British Empire avoided this fate? The British Empire escaped the searing wounds which tore apart the French or the Dutch Empires, and avoided the legacy of bitterness which marked so tragically the disappearance of the Belgian. Britain herself escaped — but only just — from a national fixation upon Empire which would inevitably have led to a succession of national defeats, frustrations and humiliations. This was no predictable process. On the contrary, the particular solution found by Britain would seem to suggest some unique circumstances to account for this unexpectedly fortunate result.

The decline of empire has been ascribed by nationalist historians, particularly of Asia and Africa, wholly to the strength of their indigenous nationalist movements; by Marxist historians to the inherent contradictions in capitalist enterprise and the successful protests of the native proletariat; and by others to the impact of democracy which pandered to the immediate interests of the newly-enfranchised voter, unable and unwilling to realise the grandeur of the imperial idea. All these shared a rather cynical concept of “imperialism” as consisting of the pursuit of interest and power at the expense of the native races of the plundered continents. Such an interpretation, widely accepted as it is, overlooks the breadth of interests and of motives, which, in Britain, encouraged men to concern themselves with the affairs of Empire.

I would like to suggest that the remarkable transformation of the British Empire is in part due to the influence of a group of men in Britain who never shared, and indeed attacked, the views of imperialism which all Britons were frequently assumed to hold and who succeeded in supplying an alternative theory of Empire — the policy of creative abdication. It is thanks to their efforts in preparing public opinion, and their eventual success in providing the imperial policy for one of the major political parties in the country that “after 1945 it was possible for the Attlee government to begin a peaceful and voluntary, instead of a bloody and ruinous, dissolution of empire”.¹

The achievements of this group of men, consisting of politicians, writers, humanitarians and others whose personal or family connections had brought them in touch with the affairs of Britain’s overseas territories,

¹ J. Strachey, *The End of Empire* (London, 1959), p. 216.

have seldom been acknowledged. In the period of which I am speaking, before 1914, it is true that this body of men was never a well-organized party, or even a pressure group. Its supporters were united less by political principles than by assumptions about the nature of political responsibilities. It is also true that such sentiments were never established as a conscious tradition. Too often the attacks upon imperialism made by such men were little more than an automatic reaction to events which they were unable to affect. Nevertheless their influence was sufficient to prevent the wholesale adoption in Britain, in contrast to other countries, of a theory of empire based upon the superiority of a master race and the suppression of the vanquished.

To an outsider, it might have appeared on Mafeking night that the British people had fully succumbed to Jingoism; the white-washing of Rhodes and Jameson seemed to give credence to the view that British imperial policy was dictated by the acquisitive demands of South African plutocrats. But we should not overlook the fact that a significant minority of British informed opinion was never convinced that imperialism and the concept of national advantage by the increase of empire were in the true tradition of British history.

In particular, I should like to draw attention to the opinions of four groups in British public opinion, who were united in believing that moral rather than political considerations should be uppermost in determining the policies of Britain towards her overseas territories. They rejected the avowed aims of the Imperialist party — power, possessions and prestige. They challenged the illusion of some imperialists that “power increases and status is enhanced in proportion to the extent of territory that a nation exclusively commands”.² Their interest arose out of a humanitarian or Christian concern for the welfare of their fellow human beings; a belief that responsibility should take precedence over pride of possession; and a hope that liberty and justice could be extended to all the colonies by raising them to civilization and independence.

The first group were the politicians, mainly to be found in the Liberal Party, who carried into the twentieth century the attitudes towards the Empire which had characterised British policy in the days before the British public had been seduced by the oratory of Palmerston and Disraeli. Their greatest spokesman was, of course, Gladstone. And his following consisted of men who had learned their ideas from Peel and Cobden. “Kings and aristocracies can govern Empire”, said Lord Derby, “but one people cannot govern another people”. The natural destiny of dependencies was to become separate territories, able to determine their own future. It was not in Britain’s interest to seek to intervene in remote lands, still less to seek their subordination to the British crown in the

² A. P. Thornton, *The Imperial Idea and Its Enemies* (London, 1959), p. 19.

pursuit of what Gladstone called "territorial aggrandizement, large establishments, and the accumulation of a multitude of fictitious interests abroad".³ Colonies should naturally be endowed with liberal institutions. Hence the support for the spread of responsible government in Canada in the 1850's, as in South Africa in the 1900's, in order to "rear up free congenital communities".⁴

The illogicality of the profession of such liberal ideals on the one hand, and the maintenance of a vast and populous overseas Empire on the other, did not escape notice. What justification could be found for the governance of India? Liberals readily accepted Burke's view that the political domination of empire was an accountable trust, which applied not merely to the affairs of the East India Company, but could be adopted as a general statement of principle. John Bright, in 1877, could claim that the British had the responsibility of government primarily "to expiate the original crime upon which much of our power in India is founded and the many mistakes which have been made by men whose intentions have been good". But what of the other colonies? Were these — including Ireland — to be regarded as ready for responsible government and liberal institutions? Or were they too to be held in trust so that future generations could complete the work of emancipation? Could moral justification be found for the British government to extend this idea to territories as yet labouring in the darkness of superstition and prejudice? And if such justification could be found, could those crimes be avoided for which the good governing of India was to make amends?

The tentative answers which anti-imperialist Liberals gave to these questions had to be defended in the political arena against opponents on two fronts: first against the advocates of expansion of empire for the sake of power, mainly to be found in the Conservative ranks; but also against Radicals who saw in the colonies an opportunity to put into practice their dogmatic opinions, which they had learnt from Bentham and now sought to impose on every part of the Empire. Sir Charles Dilke may serve as an example of a late-nineteenth century politician who combined social Radicalism with theories of the racial superiority of the British, ably expounded in "Greater Britain".⁵

³ W. E. Gladstone, "England's Mission": *Nineteenth Century*, IV, September, 1878, p. 570.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 571.

⁵ Dilke's views were undoubtedly important in influencing Joseph Chamberlain, and played their part in converting a powerful section of opinion to an imperialist point of view. His inconsistency over Ireland was notable. He was, so his biographer records, "too much of a Radical to put his faith in coercion or to wish to resist Home Rule; but he was too much of an English imperialist, believing in the superiority of his race to have much liking for the Irish nation or sympathy with their problems". R. Jenkins, *Sir Charles Dilke* (London, 1958), p. 152.

Against opponents skilled in spell-binding oratory,⁶ the Liberals who sought for the spread of their ideas of constitutional and personal freedom for the sake of the native peoples themselves, fought a continuing if losing battle in the later years of the century. Following the Indian mutiny and the assumption of government by the Crown in India the onward march of British over-rule seemed irresistible. By 1900 their cause seemed lost. Only a handful of supporters remained. But still Gilbert Murray, joint author with J. L. Hammond of "Liberalism and the Empire" could ask: "is this subjection of the inferior races to be absolute and eternal, or is there any prospect of our educating them up to the point of freedom and self-government? The question is a distasteful one to the modern politician. We used once to vaunt our intention of achieving this end in India, we are bound by solemn and reiterated engagements to strive after it in Egypt. It is, or was, held as a kind of ideal, a shadowy part of our "Imperial Mission" elsewhere. Meantime no political party with any prospect of holding office seems to have the faintest hope of achieving that end, or even much desire of working towards it. We are at present shirking the herculean task, just as Rome shirked it. It seems to demand qualities which are not cultivated by such nations as Rome and England."⁷

It is undeniable that expediency rather than principle came to guide the Liberal party's opinions about the Empire in the last two decades of the century. The imperialists among the Liberal ranks predominated in the ensuing Liberal administrations. Practical, financial or political considerations outweighed the sense of obligation to the native races under British control. Circumstances and popular outcry became the determinant forces. The indignation aroused by the defeat of Majuba hill in 1881 contributed to the reluctant occupation of Egypt in 1882. And the even greater outcry in 1885 following the failure of the ill-planned relief expedition to Khartoum to relieve Gordon, eclipsed for twenty years the doctrine of national freedom and the liberal ideal expressed in the words "Egypt for the Egyptians".⁸ In 1886, when Gladstone took his stand on the principle of self-government for Ireland, to atone, so one writer claims,⁹ for his betrayal of national freedom in Egypt, the only result was to split the Liberal party and to keep it out of office for twenty years.

As anti-Imperialist Liberals began to realize the complexities of the international rivalries aroused by the "scramble for Africa", their attitudes towards imperial questions became less certain. One group, under

⁶ Cf. "Dizzy's suit of imperial spangles": W. S. Blunt, *My Diaries* (London, 1919), II, p. 74.

⁷ G. Murray, J. L. Hammond and F. W. Hirst, *Liberalism and the Empire* (London, 1900), p. 151.

⁸ See the excellent analysis of Gladstone's attitude in Thornton, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

⁹ A. J. P. Taylor, *The Trouble Makers* (London, 1957), p. 87.

Gladstone, still maintained the views they had propounded in earlier days. "Peace, retrenchment, and reform" demanded the curtailment of commitments and the limitation of horizons. An expansionist policy would lead to the antagonism of other states, and hence threatened the peace and order of the world. In opposing the claims of those who spoke of "the white man's burden", or who argued that good government was better than self-government, these Liberals used Cobden's arguments: "If it were the province of Great Britain to administer justice to all the peoples of the earth . . . then should we be called upon in this case to rescue the weak from the hands of their spoilers. But do we possess these favoured endowments? . . . Do we find ourselves to possess the virtue, and the wisdom essential to the possession of supreme power; or, on the other hand, have we not at our side, in the wrongs of a portion of our people, a proof that we can justly lay claim to neither?"¹⁰

Adventurous policies undertaken for expansionist reasons ought to be reversed. As late as 1893, in face of the flowing tide of imperialism, Mr. Gladstone, on the question of Uganda, was still advocating the policy of evacuation, both of military garrisons and practical responsibility, as he had done in Afghanistan, the Transvaal or the Sudan. Colonial politicians and the leaders of native races must be regarded as the best judges of their own interests, even if this led to disastrous misjudgments, like Gladstone's belief that the Mahdi and his conquering dervishes were a people "rightly struggling to be free", or later on Keir Hardie's statement that the Kruger government in Transvaal "had set itself to watch the interests of the working classes and the very poor".¹¹

But already another group of Liberals had compromised sufficiently with the pride of possession to advocate consolidation rather than abdication. When Gladstone wanted to abandon Uganda as a moral expiation for his Egyptian sins, Lord Rosebery, more aware of the post-Khartoum climate of opinion, warned the Cabinet that the evacuation of Uganda would surely lead to the evacuation of Downing Street as well. In the end, only thirty-four Liberals voted against the annexation.

The outbreak of the Boer War revealed these divisions even more clearly. The Liberals were split into three sections. Lord Rosebery led a group of Liberal Imperialists, including Haldane, Asquith and Grey, to support the Chamberlainites in the active prosecution of the Boer War. Campbell-Bannerman, the nominal leader of the Party, adopted a middle position, believing that the war had to be won, but blaming the Government for inciting it through their irresponsible imperialism. He was supported by Herbert Gladstone and by the leader in the Lords, Lord

¹⁰ R. Cobden, *Political Writings* (London, 1903), I, p. 7 for the same argument see W. E. Gladstone, "England's Mission", *op. cit.*, p. 570; and G. Murray, *op. cit.*, p. XIV.

¹¹ *The Independent Labour Party Annual Report for 1901* (London, 1901), p. 35.

Kimberley. The third group were the pro-Boers, Lloyd-George, Morley, Labouchere, Robert Reid (later Lord Loreburn) and Bryce. It was left to John Morley to express the sentiments of the minority who clung to the Gladstonian ideals. "You may carry fire and sword", he said, "into the midst of peace and industry: it will be wrong. A war of the strongest government in the world with untold wealth and inexhaustible reserves against this little republic will bring you no glory: it will be wrong. It may add a new province to your empire: it will still be wrong". But in July 1900, when a pro-Boer amendment was put to the vote in the Commons, the Liberal disunity was only too glaringly revealed. Thirty-one Liberals voted for it, thirty-five abstained with Campbell-Bannerman, and forty voted with the Government.

It was easy to accuse the "Little Englanders", as they were called, not merely of a lack of interest in Empire but of a lack of patriotism. Even Haldane joined in the imperialist attack on Campbell-Bannerman on the occasion of the latter's memorable speech at the Holborn Restaurant. "When is a war not a war?", he had asked. "When it was carried on by methods of barbarism." Yet few today would doubt Botha's statement that it was such courageous statements as these which did most to reconcile the Boers to the prospect of a partnership within a Union of South Africa and within the Empire.

As A. J. P. Taylor has remarked: "The decisive influence of the Boer War was . . . that it turned the tables of morality. Previously the Imperialists had had the best of the moral argument. The Radicals could argue that Imperialism was expensive, arrogant, interfering. The Imperialists answered by pointing to the abolition of slavery, to the creation of schools, railways, health-services — in short 'the British Mission'; and the answer was overwhelming. They tried the same answer during the Boer War when they asserted that it was being fought for the sake of the native peoples in South Africa. It was no good. The Imperialist had the mineowners of the Rand tied securely to their coat-tails. The war appeared 'a reversion to one of the worst phases of barbarism . . . contrary to all our ideals of national political justice'."¹²

In the years which led up to the founding of the South African union, the anti-imperialism policy continued to be a mixture of Consolidationism, attacks upon the autocracy of Lord Milner, and humanitarian watchfulness. The latter was particularly aroused over two "imperialist" ventures. In 1905 the cry of "Chinese slavery" was raised over the introduction, under Milner's auspices, of thousands of Chinese coolies into the Johannesburg mines, where they were immured in compounds without their wives and under severely exploitative terms. A much more disinterested example, where the same combination of anti-

¹² *Resolution of the Labour Party Conference 1901*, quoted in A. J. P. Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 107-8.

imperialist arguments was heard, was in the agitation aroused against the fearful exploitation of the peoples of the Congo. The British Liberal Government can claim a considerable share of credit for bringing to an end the personal rule of King Leopold and the institution of responsible Belgian government in the Congo in 1908.

The Morley-Minto reforms of 1909 were commended to Liberals as being designed to encourage the Indian moderates to look for eventual constitutional development. It was necessary to challenge and to change the imperialist view of India as a conquered land whose principal value lay in its strategic position and its reservoir of military reinforcements. Nevertheless even Morley never foresaw that India would be granted independence within fifty years. And with the constitutional crises of 1909-1911, Home Rule and the much more pressing European situation, the political initiative of the anti-imperialists for reforms in the overseas territories petered out.

The same spectrum of opinion could be found amongst the other anti-imperialist groups in Britain, of whom I can only make brief mention. Possibly of more significance than the achievements of the politicians were the words of the prophets, such as J. A. Hobson, E. D. Morel, Nevins, Massingham or Brailsford. Hobson is generally credited with being the originator of a Marxist analysis of imperialism. But in fact Hobson combined the theories of all the previous groups: the Liberal charge that imperialism meant reckless aggression and foreign entanglements; the Radical charge that it prevented social reform by diverting the resources of the nation to militaristic purposes; the Socialist charge that the empire was maintained solely for the provision of profitable markets of investment; and even the Rationalist charge that imperialism served to inflate national egotism by subtle flattery and a false excess of emotional patriotism. His achievement was to destroy the shallow arguments raised in favour of imperialism, either on political, economic, social, moral or even biological grounds. Nevertheless, in asserting that everyone's motives for supporting imperialism were primarily economic or political, he failed to allow for the human capacity for self-deception. Furthermore, forceful as his analysis was, he took no cognisance of those builders and theorists of empire whose idealism was genuine, whose service gave them little or no financial reward, or who struggled to serve the native races in climates so unhealthy that disease and death frequently and regularly took their toll. To claim that the missionary suffered from "the dupery of imperfectly realised ideas", or from "psychic departmentalism", and that he was merely the forerunner of the Consul, the gunboat and the invading army, was to establish a causal connection between these forces, which did not allow for the variety of motives in mens minds, and attributed too much unity of purpose to imperialistic expansionism. Nevertheless, so thorough was his criticism, so apposite his illustration, and so forceful his arguments, that his work achieved

a great reputation and so effectively presented the anti-imperialist case that there was no need for any further work of demolition. His arguments were to become consciously or unconsciously the stock-in-trade of nationalist politicians whether in Egypt, India, Ghana or Indonesia.

E. D. Morel was a more militant protagonist. His campaign against the mis-rule of the Congo, his book, *Red Rubber*, and his formation of the Congo Reform Association, brought him notoriety, but eventually, too, success. Like Hobson, Morel pointed out the dangers which confronted Africa from the twin evils of European capitalism and militarism. Humanitarian concern for the welfare of the African was being obliterated by the joint pressure of these forces. But it was easier to attack "insane" imperialism than to suggest remedies. The Empire was a *fait accompli*. One could not get up and walk out. Hence the attraction of the Radical programme of taking the subject races by the scruff of the neck and dragging them into the twentieth century. Shaw and the Webbs saw the Empire just as the Utilitarians had seen it sixty years earlier.¹³ But Morel's remedy for the misgovernment of the African was to leave him alone, encourage him to grow his own crops, and to trade with him as an equal partner. This very Cobdenite solution hardly faced the reality of the relative strengths of the partners. Hobson could only tentatively suggest that a distinction could be drawn between different kinds of imperialism: between the "Sane" Imperialism, devoted to the protection, education and self-government of a "lower-race", and 'an "insane" Imperialism which hands over these races to the economic exploitation of white colonists who will use them as "live tools" and their lands as repositories of mining and other profitable treasure'.¹⁴ Morel recognized rightly that it would be necessary to put a check on both the political and the economic motives for Western Imperialism. For the first he suggested "the exclusion of tropical Africa from the area of European conflict by international agreement. Tropical Africa", he said, "must be placed under permanent neutrality".¹⁵ The second was a more complex problem: "To denounce the material factors in Europe's relations with tropical Africa as necessarily evil, because they are material, is futile. The real problem is to ensure that a material relationship, which is inevitable, shall not preclude just, humane, and enlightened government of tropical African peoples by European States."¹⁶

¹³ "What in the name of common sense", asked Sidney Webb, "have we to do with obsolete hypocrisies about 'peoples rightly struggling to be free'?" And he went on to attack Socialist groups for taking just as negative an approach to Imperial problems as did the Liberals. "The majority of the Socialist leaders... out-Morleyed Mr. Morley in their utterances on the burning topic of the day... They proved to be more administrative nihilists—that is to say, ultra-Gladstonian, old-Liberal to the finger-tips." S. Webb, *Nineteenth Century*, September, 1907, p. 371-4.

¹⁴ J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism* (London, 1902), p. 246.

¹⁵ E. D. Morel, *The Black Man's Burden* (Manchester, 1920), p. 229.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

This was the dilemma of Liberals in the decades which saw 4 1/2 million square miles added to the British crown. Immediate evacuation and avoidance of responsibilities could no longer be advocated; eventual abdication necessitated a period of creative trusteeship; but what kind of a relationship could be found to spread enlightened government without using methods that directly contradicted this aim? Assistance in answering this question was sought from two other groups who had long been interested in the amelioration of conditions in the Empire. The missionary societies had an abiding interest in the social as well as the spiritual welfare of the native races. In the mission field, missionaries were constantly attempting to prevent the evil social results which accompanied the irruption of European traders, miners, settlers or concession hunters.¹⁷ The tradition of Wilberforce was kept alive in the Anti-Slavery League and the Aborigines Protection Society. Dr. Livingstone's influence had been exerted to liberate Africans from the horrors of the Arab-organized slave-trade, and his remedies were only one stage removed from those of Morel. Africa was to be a black man's continent.

The same view had long been taken by a substantial group of men amongst those whom Philip Mason so well entitled "The Guardians". Trusteeship they thought was for the benefit of the native. It should encourage neither the exploitative enterprises of the capitalist, nor the reforming zeal of the doctrinaire radical. Was there any proof that the break up of an immemorial system of society and the introduction of innovations and reforms would benefit the Indian or the African?¹⁸ The maintenance of a traditional pattern of society came naturally to men who prided themselves on their benevolent and aristocratic paternalism. But paternalism it was, and the resultant sense of superiority — "the calm assurance of always being in the right" — came to be resented even

¹⁷ Bishop Colenso in Natal, John Mackenzie in Bechuanaland, Robert Moffat in Matabeleland, and Bishop Tucker in Uganda are examples of missionaries who recognized that while material contact with Europeans was unavoidable, this should not lead to the seizure and exploitation of the natives' land, nor the imposition of British rule upon unwilling peoples. The London Missionary Society in 1889 brought over to England three notable chiefs from Bechuanaland, and were successful in thwarting Cecil Rhodes' ambition to transfer the territory to his British South Africa Company. In the same year the Scottish Presbyterians collected eleven thousand signatures successfully protesting against a possible transfer of Southern Nyasaland to Portuguese mis-rule. In all, Sir Harry Johnston himself stated: "Thanks to the British and French Protestant missions in South and Central Africa, there is a Basutoland containing 350,000 negroes and only 900 whites; Bechuanaland is a protected negro territory and not a Dutch state or a province of the Chartered Company of South Africa; Buganda is a protected native kingdom and not a region belonging to white concessionaries wherein natives are worked to death or despair in helping the white capitalist to get rich quickly": H. H. Johnston, *Views and Reviews* (London, 1912), p. 248.

¹⁸ Professor R. Stokes and R. C. Pratt, in their respective studies, have recently outlined the setting of this problem in India and Uganda: see R. Stokes, *The English Utilitarians in India* (Oxford, 1959), and R. C. Pratt and D. A. Low, *Buganda and British Overrule* (Oxford, 1960).

amongst the “do-good” liberals. E. M. Forster was already noting the need for renewing a more sympathetic relationship towards the Indian on the part of the Guardians. As J. S. Mill had wisely remarked “Their danger is of despising the natives; that of the natives is, of disbelieving that anything the strangers do can be intended for their good”. Much was done *for* the Asian and for the African; the era when things would have to be done *with* him was still to come.