EDWARDIAN ENGLAND

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8 THE EDWARDIANS AND THEIR EMPIRE

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At first glance the Edwardian period in British imperial history may seem a dull one, compared with the period immediately before. The last twenty years of Victoria's reign had been the empire's hectic, heroic age, when everything was happening – battles fought, frontiers pushed forward, millions of colonial acres accumulated – to the huzzas of the crowd at home. Then as soon as Edward came to the throne a sudden hush descended, as if a fever had reached its climax and passed. The following ten years were very different years, when the Empire, as it seemed, marked time.

Of course it was not marking time really; it was just that its progress was quieter now. All kinds of developments took place in Britain's relations with her colonies after 1901 which were no less significant for not being accompanied by bugles and bunting and bloodied bayonets. The best-known were the granting of self-government to the Transvaal and Orange River Colonies within a new Union of South Africa, and the reforms which John Morley announced for India in 1909. The history of the British Empire did not stop merely because its expansion came to a halt for a while. Nevertheless the fact that it did come to a halt is significant; for it reflected a new imperial mood which was quite distinctive from what had gone before. The point to note is that no-one seems seriously to have advocated that the British Empire should grow any bigger after 1901; unless it was Major Francis Edward Younghusband, who thought he had conquered Tibet for Britain in 1904, only to be told by the Government to unconquer it again. Remember that the Government at that time was still a Tory-imperialist and not a Liberal one. The halt in the territorial expansion of the Empire took place some time before 1905 when the Liberals got in, and was accepted as a necessity by imperialists and non-imperialists alike. The 'epic of centuries' which had created the British Empire, wrote one imperialist in 1909, had come to an end at the beginning of that century. 'The present generation is the first of a new order, and looks forward upon a prospect in which the ideas of conquest and expansion find no place.' [1]

This new attitude had a great deal to do with the Boer War, which

was a profoundly disturbing experience for most Britons who lived through it. In January 1901, when Edward began his reign, they were well on their way to winning it, but that hardly seemed to matter any more. What did matter were the appalling deficiencies in Britain's military capacities which the war had shown up, and the dangers it was supposed to have revealed to her situation world-wide. If it took her so long to beat a tiny rabble of untrained peasants (the description was misleading, but was widely believed), what chance would Britain have against any of the more efficient rivals who were threatening her then? When the war was finally won, in May 1902, it was difficult to regard the achievement as anything to be proud of, for the Boer seemed to be, as one commentator put it, 'a preposterously little fellow', whose defeat 'was not in itself an essentially pleasant or heroic thing to carry through'. [2] It had been a chastening experience, the lessons of which were to be reiterated persistently during the course of Edward's reign.

By 1901, therefore, the Empire was no longer – if it ever had been – a source simply of pride and pleasure for people at home. Many of course were happy with it, as was natural. It was after all the largest empire, in terms both of territory and population, that the world had ever seen. It covered nearly twelve million square miles, out of a habitable land surface of about sixty millions, and embraced 400 million people, more or less. (The exact figure arrived at by an imperial census carried out in 1901 was 398,401,404; but as many heads of households in some colonies apparently assumed that women were not important enough to count, the real total was probably a good deal more.) [3] There was therefore much to be proud of; and yet there were many Britons for whom it was more a cause of worry than of satisfaction. These included, natuarally, people who were opposed to the Empire on moral grounds, of whom there were a sizeable number at that time. But it also included some of the most enthusiastic imperialists of the day, whose attitude towards their Empire was one of foreboding and fear. This foreboding and fear were, in fact, characteristic Edwardian imperial attitudes, much more important for example than the mindless jingoism of 'Mafeking night' (17 May 1900), which most imperialists themselves had soon come to deplore. It did not embrace everyone, or not everyone to the same degree. It did not embrace for example the uninterested and ignorant, or those who would be described as 'moderates' in the journalistic shorthand of today. The 'moderates' tended then, as they have tended at other times since, to differ more from the 'extremists' to either side of them than either extreme differed from the other. They also turned out to be more

wrong. They believed, or at least behaved as if they believed, that really there was nothing much to give cause for concern in the empire, no problem that could not be overcome in time-honoured ways. The 'extremists' on the other hand – ultra imperialists and anti-imperialists alike – believed that it was too late for time-honoured ways. Whatever they thought of the merits of the empire they broadly agreed about its prospects: that it was likely to collapse, if certain very drastic measures were not taken soon. This was a strong thread running through the debate about the empire in the 1900s, and it symptomatised – as we can see easily with hindsight now – the very real problems with which the Edwardian empire was faced. Hence the emphasis here upon sections of opinion which were not typical, or even particularly influential, but which may tell us more about Britain's imperial situation than those that were.

This alarmism, or pessimism, took many forms. It was not merely confined to what we would characterise today as imperial or colonial affairs, for imperialists and anti-imperialists in the 1900s very rarely isolated imperial policy in the way historians are sometimes apt to do now. The 'heart of the empire' – the phrase was a common one at the time – was Britain; and her strength and welfare and prosperity were as intimately connected with her capacity to maintain her empire, both as cause and effect, as anything that came under the more direct purview of the Colonial and Foreign and India Offices. So it was natural that in their deliberations about the empire matters like physical fitness and the labour question and education loomed large, for if it was true that the empire was to slip from Britain's grasp soon, as seemed possible, at least part of the reason was likely to be that her grip had grown too feeble to hold on.

The social question, therefore, was an imperial question too; and especially the phenomenon of 'physical deterioration', which was supposed to have been revealed by the Inter-Departmental Committee set up to examine the poor standard of army recruits for the Boer war in 1903-4: for 'the Empire will not be maintained by a nation of outpatients', as the social imperialist Arnold White neatly put it at the time.[4] White's solution was the fashionable 'eugenic' one – to prevent the unfit from multiplying themselves; but there was an alternative, which was to make them fitter than they were. One way to do this was to teach working-class mothers how to look after their offspring better. 'The root of the evil', wrote one of their middle-class sisters, 'lies almost solely in the fact that our women know nothing about the duties which Nature intends them to perform.' Another way, for bolder

imperialists, was through energetic programmes of social reform; which one of the bold ones admitted sounded 'terribly like rank Socialism', but which he could live with because he knew it to be 'first-class Imperialism' too.[5] That this provided some of the impetus for the reformism of the 1905 Liberal government is well known.[6] No doubt many imperialists, as well as the more genuine advocates of reform, were highly delighted by it.

On the other hand this was one issue about which imperialists found it difficult to agree. For every one who believed that 'socialism' was necessary to save the Empire, there could be found another who held that it would be the cause of the Empire's fall. One such was John St Loe Strachey, editor of the *Spectator*, who believed that what had ruined the *Roman* Empire had been its welfare state, whose 'insidious action' 'ate out its vitals' long before the barbarian armies came. Welfarism encouraged idleness, and idleness weakened a nation in its struggle for survival with others. Already at the beginning of this century the British working man had a reputation for working less hard than he ought, because of his trade unions, and the policy of protecting 'idle scoundrels' from the consequences of their sloth. 'No other nation', claimed Lord Meath, 'maintains an army of paupers out of the enforced taxation of the industrious. No other State provides hotel accommodation' – he meant workhouses – 'gratis for those of its citizens who dislike work.' This was why Britain was falling behind industrially at that time. So what *was* the best thing for the Empire? If the state fed the poor it ran the risk of a feckless proletariat. If it refused to feed them it ran the risk of an 'undersized, underformed, undeveloped, degenerate and diseased' one.[7]

The problem did not stop there. Britain's moral and spiritual life too was far from perfect. 'The ideals of society are rotten,' wrote a visiting Australian politician in 1907, 'and the rottenness is spreading like a cancer through every fibre of the social organism.' The symptoms were legion. Insanity had doubled over the past 25 years. alcoholism doubled, and suicides increased by 50 per cent. The world of commerce had less probity than it used to have, with 'deceit and trickery' now being essential skills in many trades.[8] Fashionable society was on the decline, infiltrated now by 'Jews, solicitors, American millionaires of the humblest birth and the crudest behaviour, stock-jobbers, Afrikanders [and] Company promoters . . . with a rapidity which would have amazed and horrified the élite of an earlier generation'. Upper-class women had 'almost gone back to the indecencies of the Stuart period' in their dress; 'no woman need be ashamed to display her neck and shoulders

in moderation,' wrote one critic, 'but every modest one should know instinctively where to draw the line'.[9] At a lower social level there was the alarming influx of 'riff-raff' from abroad, corrupting 'public morals, hygiene and culture' with their foreign ways.[10] Then there were the 'degraded tastes of the music-hall', and of the 'base sensational press', which had already in the 1900s begun its long twentieth-century decline.[11]

Beyond this there were the deeper moral evils of the time, the scarcely speakable ones. The Bishop of Ely in 1909 was much exercised over the sin of 'impurity', which he prophesied 'would result in racial suicide, degradation, and ultimate ruin' if it was 'persisted in'. 'Another growing evil,' proclaimed Mrs Priscilla E. Moulder in 1905, was 'the facility with which boys get possession of indecent pictures and photographs', and 'the depravity of morals that fosters such obscene expressions as one is constantly hearing from childish lips' – encouraged, of course, by lax discipline in the home. 'The boys who are now growing up around us,' Mrs Moulder pointed out, 'will be the future men of the Empire, and who will be bold enough to prophesy the fate of this country if the evils here depicted are not checked?' Tied up with this was the growing practice of birth control: which could perhaps have been tolerated if it had been used to keep the proliferation of the 'unfit' within bounds, but which in fact was having the contrary effect, by encouraging 'the selfish and deliberate sterilisation of marriage' among the fitter middle classes, and so further tipping the racial balance the degenerates' way. All this was aggravated by the 'woman movement', which in the view of many imperialists was threatening the foundations of Britain's security by distracting women away from their natural duty – to procreate. 'We know,' wrote Lord Meath, 'that the birth-rate is diminishing year by year. Does not this mean that women are showing the white feather, and shirking one of the principal duties of their sex?' 'Woman's true place,' wrote another imperialist – a woman herself – is in the background', breeding new little patriots and fuelling the patriotism of the men.[12]

And that patriotism, apparently, needed fuelling. One imperialist, slumming it on the terraces at a football match in 1909, was shocked to hear the 'scorn' the working men he met there showed for the military. Others despaired at the reluctance of their middle-class betters to prove their practical patriotism by volunteering themselves. One even hinted – though he didn't like to 'dwell on this subject, as it may seem to cast a slur' – that those who did enlist were not as courageous as they might have been: for was it not a fact, he asked,

'that surrenders to the enemy without serious loss of life took place during the Boer War more frequently than it is agreeable to the patriot to hear about?' Most who felt in this way attributed the evil to a 'love of luxury', born of Britain's astounding prosperity over the years, which produced 'a state of mind opposed to any idea of self-sacrifice'. For empire-watchers, especially the classically-trained ones, these were all typical 'features of a decaying civilisation, as shown on the later frescoes at Mycenae and notorious' – again – 'in Imperial Rome'.[13]

Every age, of course, has its grumblers, but in very few periods of British history can there have been quite so much talk of national decadence, or so many trivial and seemingly harmless little facets of national life regarded, not just for what they were on their own, but taken all together as auguries of some 'cataclysmic change'. Some people mocked this, the 'tendency to-day', as one put it, '. . . to decry the Englishman and to lament with sorrowful headshakings and dread prognostications the decadence of the British race'. But by far the loudest voices in the 1900s were the gloomy ones, the warning ones; and the most pervasive message was the writer Walter Meakin's: that 'an Imperial race which is degenerating is doomed to extinction', and that Britain – especially urban Britain – looked to be degenerating then.[14]

Of course the British imperial race would not extinguish *itself*, just like that. This would be left to an external power, when Britain had grown at last too weak to resist. Who that power would be depended on how long one's view was, and how long one thought Britain could resist. The immediate threat, of course, right through this period, was believed to come from Germany. Germany was bigger than Britain, better organised, and almost bound to want to expand at Britain's expense for exactly the same reasons – capitalist pressures – that had forced Britain to expand a generation before. Germany consequently was the leading contender for Britain's imperial title in the 1900s; but some observers, looking beyond the immediate future, saw another challenger looming larger still. The population of the United States of America in 1906 was 84 million compared with Britain's 42 million. One American estimated that by 1950 it would have risen to 204 million (he was, as it happened, about 50 million over). Her steel production was already nearly five times as great as Britain's in 1906. She had all the advantages – population, resources, security, energy; for those who saw international relations in terms of competition, therefore, 'America is undoubtedly in the best position to win in the long run.' She was already in the process of wresting the north Atlantic carrying

trade from Britain, which hit the Empire – which was a maritime empire or nothing – in a very tender spot; and threatened soon to suck both the West Indies and Canada into her sphere. America could 'hardly help growing into the greatest power of the world' eventually; and when she did there could be no guarantee that she would let Britain keep her empire on sufferance; or would not even snaffle up Britain herself.[15]

Many observers in fact thought that Britain's best hope in the future was to co-operate in her own snaffling, and persuade the United States to take her on as a kind of junior partner in whatever world scheme the latter might have in mind. This, for example, was one of H.G. Wells's predictions, in a series of *Anticipations* of the future published in 1901;[16] and in one form or another it was a widely-canvassed idea on both sides of the Atlantic then. An Anglo-American federation would be able to resist all comers; the Germans, who by this scenario were to be allowed to dominate the continent of Europe: the Russians, who were in a similar position to America with regard to natural and human resources, and were a much more direct threat to Britain's imperial interests; and beyond all these – a somewhat hazy threat yet, but the most nightmarish of all for the many people in the 1900s who were afflicted with nightmares like this – the coloured races of the world, especially the yellow ones, who, if only *they* could learn to organise themselves, threatened a retribution that sent icy shivers up more than one Edwardian spine.

The Japanese, by defeating Russia in 1905, had shown that it could be done. Most Britons were delighted by this result – Japan after all was their ally and Russia seen as an enemy – but not those who had their ears closest to the colonial ground. 'The news of the Japanese success,' wrote the Africanist Sir Harry Johnston, 'was discussed in the souks of Morocco, the mosques of Egypt and the coffee-houses of Turkey, in Indian bazaars and African mud-houses. It was the first set-back of the Caucasian since the Neolithic period'. Put like this it didn't appear quite so jolly. It was bound to stimulate non-whites all over the world, not only in Asia but also in Africa, where there were already 'pan-Ethiopian' stirrings, and right across the middle of the Eurasian and African land-mass, where a new 'wave of Mahommedan fanaticism' was threatening a race war 'compared to which all previous wars with black races will be the merest child's play'. The implications of this for the British Empire, with 344 millions of its subjects coloured compared with 54 million whites, and 94 millions of Moslems, did not need to be spelled out. If it did need to be, then there was,

predictably, another classical scholar on hand to prove that this, too, was how the Roman Empire had gone down: under pressure from the Chinese, who were behind the Teutons and pushing them towards Rome. It could happen again. 'Viator' warned in the *Fortnightly Review*:

> Let the sense of common grievance rise steadily and dominate; . . . let the conception of *Asia contra mundum* gradually arouse all its races for a colossal crusade; let Japan be invoked by China as a leader and by India as a liberator; and let the black races feel that the white man is like to be swept back at last; and then indeed the strangest dreams of the eclipse and extinction of Western civilisation might come true.[17]

So: there was the German threat, and behind that the American threat, and behind that the Russian threat, and then the yellow peril; and beyond *that*, no doubt, H.G. Wells's Martians, who (it will be recalled) first began *their* invasion of England 'on the common between Horsell, Ottershaw and Woking' sometime after 1898; though the Martians do not appear very prominently in the debate over the Empire just yet. It may all seem rather neurotic, and even possibly paranoid; until we reflect that, in one way or another, most of these fears and predictions have been amply justified by events – the German challenge, America's absorption of Britain, the growth of Russian hegemony, the rise of Islam; and those that are left – the threat from China and the chances of a 'race war' – have not come to look any less likely as the years have gone by. 'The secrets of the twentieth century lie hid,' wrote one commentator right at its beginning; but those Edwardians who bothered to try and divine them in fact did uncannily well.[18]

They did better, in fact, than they would have liked; for the purpose behind most of these prognostications was to warn Britons of what *might* happen, if they did not pull their imperial socks up. Chiefly they were concerned to impress upon them the value of their Empire, which, in what Winston Churchill described as the 'Titanic world' of 'strange methods, huge forces, large combinations' that was coming, was the only thing standing between them and a terrible fate. For what would happen if they lost it – if, as was depicted by one of those fictional accounts of future wars that were so fashionable at the time, the British fleet were smashed by German airships, Hong Kong were taken over by Japan, a new mutiny broke out in India with the Cossacks

coming in to restore order, Italy marched into Egypt, the third Boer war broke out, America 'liberated' Canada, and Ireland broke free? 'Six weeks after that event,' wrote J.L. Garvin, 'food would be at starvation prices, the factories would begin to close for want of supplies, the State would have to suspend or cut down its Old Age Pensions, and the wild mob's million feet would begin to kick.' Britain then would sink into 'a pleasant playground for the rich, a hell for the poor . . . a polity like (let us say) Belgium'. Lord Curzon painted a picture of a country full of hungry unemployed, overrun with more prosperous foreign tourists who would 'come to see us just as they climb the Acropolis at Athens,' and 'with no aspiration but a narrow and selfish materialism, and, above all, with no training for its manhood'. The Empire was essential to Britain, whether she liked it or not; long ago, when she had been self-sufficient, she might have done without it, but not now. 'Right or wrong,' said Garvin, again, 'the process has gone too far to be reversed . . . You cannot get away from the Empire. You are caught in the machine. The thing is your fate.' Even some anti-imperialists accepted this, and that if Britain got rid of her Empire she would 'pass through a period of great distress and suffering' on her way to 'a higher and better life'.[19] Imperialists felt that if they could only persuade the working man, especially, of the distress and suffering, he might prefer to let the prospect of the higher and better life go by.

The trouble was that it was no longer just a question of conservation. Things had gone beyond that. The Empire had been accumulated, most of it, in an easier age, when Britain could afford to be lax. Consequently it had always been a rather ramshackle affair: not a proper empire at all, in the eyes of many imperialists, but merely the materials for one. That would not do any longer. Now that Germany and America were beginning to exert their real strength, the British Empire had to brace itself properly to meet them. It was Britain's good fortune that she possessed in her Empire the resources that could enable her to survive in competition with the new great powers of the world, but that Empire had certain inherent weaknesses, which her rivals did not have. The main weakness was its heterogeneity. America and Russia were smaller and less populous than Britain and her colonies together, but they were 'one State, geographically, commercially, politically', with frontiers a fraction the length of Britain's, and with relatively easy control over all the inhabitants that made them up. 'It is not enough,' wrote Leopold Amery in 1908, 'merely to count numbers: we must also weigh them'; and if the British Empire's 400 millions were weighed it would be found that only some fifty millions of them, at most, could

be depended on. The rest were subject races, 'dark and patient people, but with many tongues and with dreams of their own'; good enough fellows, no doubt, in the normal course of things, but not to be relied upon at the crunch. Even some of the whites were not altogether trustworthy – French Canadians, South African Dutch, Irish, English Liberals. Nearly every year there was a rebellion or a revolt or a political assassination somewhere in the colonies, which, together with plagues and famines in India, for example, and all the other normal and often quite gigantic problems of colonial rule, tied up much of the energy of the local minority, which otherwise could have been employed defending the Empire's frontiers against external attack. Those frontiers were longer than any of her rivals: not only the coasts, which it was assumed the navy could take care of, but also the Empire's land frontiers, which were four times as long as Russia's, and, of course, without the advantage of interior lines. One writer found that mere words were 'helpless to bring home to the British mind . . . the stupendous disproportion between its moral and mental energies and the political task it has undertaken'.[20] And yet it had to be brought home to it; because if the loyal minority of the Empire did not organise itself more efficiently than it was organised then, it soon would not have an empire to be loyal to.

This, then, was the imperialists' prescription for the illness they diagnosed in the Empire: greater efficiency and discipline, the maximum exploitation of all the extensive natural and human resources it could command, in the interests of the polity as a whole. There could be no shirking, no waste. There was a great deal of waste as things were then. Millions of solid Anglo-Saxons, for example, were wasted struggling to make a living in an already overcrowded Britain, when they would be of much more use to the Empire and to themselves in Canada helping to maintain the racial stock against 'alien' immigrants from the south, in South Africa helping to increase it against the more numerous Boers, and in Australia helping to fill up its vast acres and so leave less room for the Chinese when they flooded down. (South Africa apparently was in special need of young British women, both to mate with the men and so secure their children to the flag, and also to become domestic servants to the 'hundreds of married women . . . of gentle nurture' there, who were 'breaking down with the work of their homes' and quite unable to 'take the position in society' to which their husbands' ranks entitled them.) Then, with the Empire's loyal population more effectively deployed, you could train them all to take a full part in its military defence, through some scheme of compulsory drill or

conscription or rifle instruction, which would have the further advantage of instilling better social habits into the people – make them more disciplined workers, for example (remember that the first Boy Scouts were enjoined by their founder to be loyal to their *employers* as well as to God and the king);[21] and also by encouraging the dominions to take a full part in, and pay their fair share towards, Britain's military and naval defence. Then, of course, something had to be done about Parliament, or more specifically about the party system, which was dangerously divisive; the formation of a new patriotic centre party, for example, which would unite behind a national government all of what was supposed to be the solid and sensible middle ground. Some advocated taking essential national decisions out of the hands of the House of Commons altogether, and putting them under the control of a higher body – a federal imperial parliament, perhaps, or a new House of Lords leavened with Canadian and Australian imperialists and even possibly an Indian prince or two. The seal would be set to all this when the Empire came to be united economically, functioning as a single commercial unit as it had done in the old days, before the hated Cobdenites had got their hands on it, and in deference to an idealistic theory had punched holes in the imperial fabric out of which its wealth and security now seeped. This was what was required if the Empire was to be saved – no less.

Some imperialists put it quite apocalyptically, especially towards the end of the 1900s. 'The final rejection of the policy of preference,' said L.J. Maxse's *National Review* in 1907, '. . . would . . . be the beginning of the end of the British Empire'; 'The fight for Tariff Reform is the fight for Imperialism'; 'the alternative is union or death.' Maybe in order to shock people into supporting them, but more likely because they believed it, imperialists staked more and more money, and eventually their shirts, on these special solutions of theirs; and this despite the knowledge, as the historian Walter Frewen Lord put it in 1909, that their chances were no brighter than 'even betting', and lengthening against them every day.[22] Some gave up entirely, and reconciled themselves to what they saw as an inevitable fate. J.L. Garvin, for example, thought that it was pointless trying to keep up any more with America, and that what Britain should concentrate on now was the 'struggle with Germany for the second place'. Another imperialist wrote that 'Nothing short of a miracle can enable the British empire, even as it stands, to tide over the first half of the new century'. This kind of defeatism was common. Anti-imperialists shared it too, sometimes exultantly. 'To a few thinkers,' wrote one of them, 'this would seem a not altogether unwelcome catastrophe, believing, as they do, that the car of Western civilisation has got shunted on to a wrong line.' Besides, it served them right. The danger that loomed over the Empire, wrote the Irish MP William Corbet, 'is distinctly traceable to – nay, is the actual outcome of – England's own crimes.' Imperialists, on the other hand, took comfort in the thought, as G.F. Watts (the painter?) put it, that 'even with all our faults we may look forward to the judgment of the future without fear. Ill-mannered and wanting in foresight, our aspirations have never been ignoble, nor have we been cruel in carrying them out. We have been in the van of the army of progress and freedom . . . and if we fall, it must be with the dignity of Caesar arranging his robes.'[23] This may have been the happiest approach, in the circumstances: to lie back calmly, and wait for the grim reaper to come. The ones to feel sorry for are those who refused to accept that the process was irreversible, and continued to struggle, against all the odds.

The task was probably hopeless, because it would have required a revolution for which Britain was not yet ready. Imperialists thought she might be won over by persuasion and education and, above all, by leadership of the kind which they were unlucky to have snatched from them when Joseph Chamberlain went down with his stroke in 1906. Hence the quite heroic efforts which they put into their propaganda for tariff reform, national service and the rest. They had some successes. Balfour's Imperial Defence Committee was promising, for example, as were some of the things the Colonial Office managed to do in the way of colonial development, within rigid bounds. Outside the area of policy they were cheered by Curzon's election to the Chancellorship of Oxford University, and the new Beit Chair of Imperial History there, and Kipling's Nobel Prize, and the great Delhi Durbar, and the enormous growth of empire youth movements, and the establishment of an 'Empire Day'. But these were minor, mainly nominal successes, which left untouched the broad current of national and imperial life. The big ones eluded them, the ones that their increasingly strident propaganda insisted were vital to the cause. The Liberals' imperial policy remained tentative, small-minded, *ad hoc*, unimaginative; a policy which, where it was not actively destructive of the Empire, as in South Africa, did nothing to keep the Empire alive. By 1910 the Empire was still unchanged in essentials; had failed to adapt, therefore, to the changing needs of the times.

Imperialists put this down to narrowness of vision, which was fair. 'The simple-minded working man or farm labourer,' wrote one of them, 'cannot, of course, picture to himself the complex and delicate

organisation and the solidarity of a world-Empire.' He was too stupid, and his nose too close to the dirt. 'Their most conspicuous failure.' wrote L.J. Maxse of his fellow-Britons, 'is a total lack of imagination and an abysmal ignorance of everything outside these islands.' But that was not the whole of it. Even if they had been less ignorant, and had known the full consequences of their reluctance to serve their country and re-align their trade and all the rest, it was likely that they might still have chosen to risk those consequences, in view of the costs involved. 'Army, navy, education,' wrote Garvin, '– must all cost money, and upon such a scale as to make the groaning taxpayer' – he was paying a shilling in the pound income tax at that time, compared with sixpence in 1890 and only twopence in 1875 – 'feel that when the alternative of reorganisation or ruin is presented to him it will be difficult to say which is the worse.'[24] 'Reorganisation' was, or could be seen to be, as ruinous as ruin itself; which was the paradox at the very heart of Britain's situation then.

Hence the imperialists' failure to bring the people round to the light. The problem was that from where most Edwardians were sitting the light felt as if it might be just a little *hot*, and not necessarily more comfortable to be in than the fat that was sizzling underneath them. One obstacle was the dominions themselves, who may have been less infused with 'imperial sentiment' than the imperialists liked to think. But there were domestic drawbacks too. The first was that, if one thought carefully about it, expenditure on maintaining the Empire might be self-defeating. The Empire was mainly valued for the prosperity which it brought Britain. The more Britain was taxed to pay for the Empire, however, the less prosperous she became. It was like selling off bits of the firm in order to pay Securicor's escalating bills. This made little economic sense: and it was economic sense to which the Edwardians were devoted most of all. In the second place it was arguable that, so far as national defence was concerned, the Empire brought at least as much danger to Britain as it brought security. Imperialists themselves were always pointing out that the reason why Britain was hated and envied so much abroad was because she was the plumpest pig. It followed that if she slimmed down a little, the threat to her would diminish. This, wrote Sir Harry Johnston in 1902, was what in a way justified the 'Little Englanders': no nation would attack the British Isles for what it could get there, but only 'because of some question connected with her outlying Empire'. Giving up the Empire, therefore, would render her safe. 'Such a poor ending to all our hopes,' he went on,

> . . . would, I admit, be a bitter disappointment; but perhaps to those who live in these two islands it would be preferable to the growth of a taxation which must become eventually intolerable, and to the constant monthly risk of some accident arising in the Pacific or western Atlantic which might launch us on a world-wide struggle and lead to the invasion of these happy islands by a foreign foe.

Some Liberals, like the politician Augustine Birrell, preferred almost anything to the prospect the imperialists held out to them: of 'half-a-dozen sullen empires . . . shut up behind high tariff walls . . . maintaining millions of men under arms and spending billions of pounds in armaments, and all the time waiting, waiting, waiting for an affrighted sun to rise upon the day of Armageddon'. If this *were* to be the destiny of the human race, Birrell went on, 'far better would it be if the planet could be spun off its axis and allowed to disappear into the "illimitable inane".' Thirdly, there were the civil liberties that would have to go. Imperialists made no bones about this: individual freedoms were now an expensive luxury, which could no longer be put before 'the freedom of the State'.[25] Anti-imperialists had been warning that this was likely to be an effect of empire since Disraeli's time: it was one more topic on which the two 'extremes' agreed. But people were not prepared to let go of their 'freedoms' just yet; not at any rate suddenly, all in one go.

British society, in other words, was not ripe for the transformation it would have to undergo if the Empire was to be saved. It was not really that it had 'degenerated' (though it may have done), but that it had not changed enough, in any direction, to be ready for the revolution that Britain's new international situation, her ailing position in the world, required of it. When the Empire had been originally acquired it had come cheap, and partly *because* it was cheap; otherwise it might not have been acquired at all. Whatever its needs might be now, they were needs which Britain had reckoned without before, and needs that were scarcely more compatible with the nature of Britain's economy and society now than they had been then. People were still attached, by and large, to their old ways, their old illusions, what one critic called their 'exaggerated ideal of moderation';[26] and with good reason. Free trade still seemed to be working fairly well, despite the panic-mongers; Britain was not bankrupt yet, and no-one could be shown to be starving because she refused to put up tariff barriers against the world. She was still an island, and no-one had yet proved that any Continental army could get past the Channel squadrons in sufficient strength to cause

any great trouble to the platoons of volunteer rifle men on bicycles (for greater manoeuvrability) and hiding behind hedgerows, that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, for one, thought would be more than a match for the Hun when he came. [27] The colonies were still attached to Britain, even the most recently-conquered colonies of the Transvaal and the Orange River; and they remained the *more* attached to her, as it seemed to everyone except the ultra-imperialists, because she did not try to force them into a great imperial union, but instead let them – even her erstwhile enemies – go their own ways. In this situation how could it be expected that any democracy would agree to abandon free trade, pay more for its bread, restrict its markets, pay more taxes, submit to military discipline for a month or more a year, see its parliamentary liberties whittled away, and run the risk of alienating its colonial fellow-subjects: all to inoculate itself against a disease that had shown no painful symptoms yet, and could surely be no more uncomfortable than the cure?

So the 'extremists' ' psychology was wrong, and yet their diagnosis was broadly right; and also their prognosis, for the British Empire did fall eventually, and very largely for the reasons they gave. The Edwardian age was many things: possibly an 'age of crisis'; certainly an age when there was an acute consciousness of crisis in many fields. In the field of empire it was the time, between two periods of comparative blindness, the late-Victorian and the early post-war, when the curtain of illusion was briefly pulled aside, and the Empire's limited prospects, and in fact the whole depressing future of the world, became clear: to the imperialists and their enemies at least, if not – perhaps mercifully – to all.

Notes

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3. *Census of the British Empire, 1901*, PP (1905), vol. CII, pp. 1, xxv.
4. White quoted by R. J. Sturdee, 'The Ethics of Football', *Westminster Review*, vol. 159 (1903), p. 181.
5. Clara Jackson, 'Housekeeping and National Well-Being', *Nineteenth Century*, vol. 58 (1905), p. 298; T. J. Macnamara, 'In Corpore Sano', *Contemporary Review*, vol. 87 (1905), p. 248. Cf. Anna Davin, 'Imperialism and Motherhood', *History Workshop*, no. 5 (1978), pp. 9-65; Bernard Semmel, *Imperialism and Social Reform* (George Allen and Unwin, London, 1960); G. R. Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1971).

6. B. B. Gilbert, *The Evolution of National Insurance in Great Britain* (Michael Joseph, London, 1966).
7. J. St Loe Strachey, 'The Problems and Perils of Socialism', *National Review*, vol. 49 (1907), p. 960; Lord Meath, 'Have we the "Grit" of our Forefathers?', *Nineteenth Century*, vol. 64 (1908), p. 425; R. J. Sturdee, 'The Ethics of Football', p. 181.
8. W. M. Hughes, 'Universal Compulsory Training for Home Defence', *National Review*, vol. 49 (1907), p. 733; insanity etc. figures from H. Giffard-Ruffe, 'A Plea for Posterity', *Westminster Review*, vol. 156 (1901), p. 26; Harry Hodgson, 'A National Crisis', *Westminster Review*, vol. 157 (1902), p. 406.
9. A Cuthbert Medd, 'The Judgment of Posterity', *National Review*, vol. 40 (1903), p. 1004; H. W. Massingham, 'The Materialism of English Life', *Contemporary Review*, vol. 85 (1904), pp. 844-5; George Trobridge, 'The Decay of Morals', *Westminster Review*, vol. 163 (1905), p. 612, and 'The Nude in Art', ibid., vol. 164 (1905), p. 309.
10. W. Barry, 'Forecasts of Tomorrow', *Quarterly Review*, vol. 209 (1908), p. 6.
11. A. Cuthbert Medd, 'The Judgment of Posterity', p. 1003; Harry Hodgson, 'A National Crisis', p. 405 (and on the press, see G. M. Trevelyan, 'The White Peril', *Nineteenth Century*, vol. 50 (1901), pp. 1043-55).
12. Bishop of Ely quoted by G. B. Lissenden, 'Racial Suicide. The Reply of the Masses', *Westminster Review*, vol. 172 (1909), p. 267; Priscilla E. Moulder, 'The Coming Race and Moral Depravity', *Westminster Review*, vol. 163 (1905), pp. 678, 681-2; Anon., 'Sport and Decadence', *Quarterly Review*, vol. 211 (1909), p. 487; Lord Meath, 'Do we have the "Grit" of our Forefathers?', p. 422; Madge Barry, 'Women and Patriotism', *National Review*, vol. 53 (1909), p. 303.
13. Austin Harrison, 'The Cult of the "Teddy Bear" ', *Nineteenth Century*, vol. 66 (1909), p. 58; Lord Meath, 'Have we the "Grit" of our Forefathers?', p. 423; Lord Errol, 'The Nation and the Army', *Nineteenth Century*, vol. 59 (1906), p. 430; William Barry, 'Forecasts of Tomorrow', p. 7.
14. Sidney Whitman, 'The Metamorphosis of England', *Fortnightly Review*, o.s. vol. 88 (1907), p. 206; M. F. Johnston, 'Englishmen in Foreign Service', *Fortnightly Review*, o.s. vol. 86 (1906), p. 902; Meakin quoted in Books section of *Westminster Review*, vol. 167 (1907), p. 593.
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26. Anon., 'The Cry for New Men', *Fortnightly Review*, o.s. vol 76 (1901), p. 201.

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9 THE EDWARDIAN ARMS RACE

Michael Howard

> The moral is obvious; it is that great armaments lead inevitably to war . . . . The increase of armaments that is intended in each nation to produce consciousness of strength, and a sense of security, does not produce these effects. On the contrary, it produces a consciousness of the strength of other nations and a sense of fear . . . The enormous growth of armaments in Europe, the sense of insecurity and fear caused by them – it was these that made war inevitable.

In this much-quoted passage of his memoirs Lord Grey of Falloden reflected with understandable bitterness on the failure of his life's work. [1] It is indeed one of the great ironies of British history that a Parliament which could with some reason claim to be the first fully to represent the new mass electorate, and a Government which, far more even than the Governments of Mr Gladstone, embodied all the irenical aspirations of Cobden and Bright, should not only have taken Britain into the most terrible war in its history but should have presided over the greatest peace-time increase in armaments expenditure that the country had ever witnessed.

In his eve-of-poll speech in the Albert Hall on December 21, 1905, the incoming Prime Minister, Sir Henry Campbell Bannerman, pledged himself to control arms expenditure. 'A policy of huge armaments keeps alive and stimulates and feeds the belief that force is the best if not the only solution of international differences.' Such a programme, he pointed out, swallowed up resources needed for the policy of social reform to which his party had pledged itself. So 'what nobler role,' demanded Campbell Bannerman in words to be enthusiastically welcomed by the radical press, 'could this great country assume than at the fitting moment to place itself at the head of a League of Peace through whose instrumentality the great work of peaceful arbitration is to be effected?' [2]

A few weeks later the electorate returned a House of Commons whose support for such proposals was overwhelming. 450 Liberal and Labour members crowded the Government benches. Conservatives, Liberal Unionists, and Irish Nationalists mustered only 240 votes