

Provis Pax Britannica

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Glory

*England, England, England,
Girdled by ocean and skies,
And the power of a world and the heart of a race
And a hope that never dies.*

Wilfrid Campbell

THE means of profit were for the few, but the hope of glory was almost universal. Empire and Imperialism, wrote the journalist W. F. Monypenny,¹ filled the place in everyday speech once filled by Nation and Nationality—the national ideal had given way to the imperial. The existence of the Empire, and its expansion, seemed to satisfy some national psychological need. In 1878 Lord Carnarvon, then Colonial Secretary, had felt obliged to ask what the word ‘imperialism’ actually meant.² The *Oxford Dictionary* gave an answer: ‘the principle or policy of seeking, or at least not refusing, an extension of the British Empire in directions where trading interests and investments require the protection of the flag, and of so uniting the different parts of the Empire having separate Governments as to secure that for certain purposes, such as warlike defence, internal commerce, copyright and postal communications, they shall be practically a single State.’ By 1897 nobody was likely to need a definition. So cataclysmic had been the explosion of the new ideas, so carried away was the nation, that everybody knew the meaning of imperialism now.

Two very different poets had between them expressed the popular interpretation. The first was the balladeer G. W. Hunt, whose most famous music-hall song had given a word to the language:

*We don't want to fight, but, by Jingo, if we do,
We've got the ships, we've got the men, we've got the money too.* ✓

¹ Himself a working imperialist—editor of the *Johannesburg Star*, soldier in the Boer War, Nile traveller and biographer of Disraeli. He died in 1912.

² Carnarvon (1831–90) was twice Colonial Secretary, and once Lord Lieutenant of Ireland: he introduced the British North America Act which established the Dominion of Canada, was an early proponent of South African federation, and edited Dean Mansel's *Gnostic Heresies of the First and Second Centuries*.

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*We've fought the Bear before,
And while Britons shall be true,
The Russians shall not have Constantinople.¹*

By no means everybody, even in this brash heyday of the creed, found Jingoism tasteful. Chauvinism was an old British trait, but this aggressive conceit was something new. Queen Victoria, contemplating the national vainglory with some disquiet, once observed that she could not quite understand 'why nobody was to have anything anywhere but ourselves'. To most Britons, nevertheless, the spirit of Empire was essentially acquisitive, and Jingoism itself was one of the motives of imperialism.

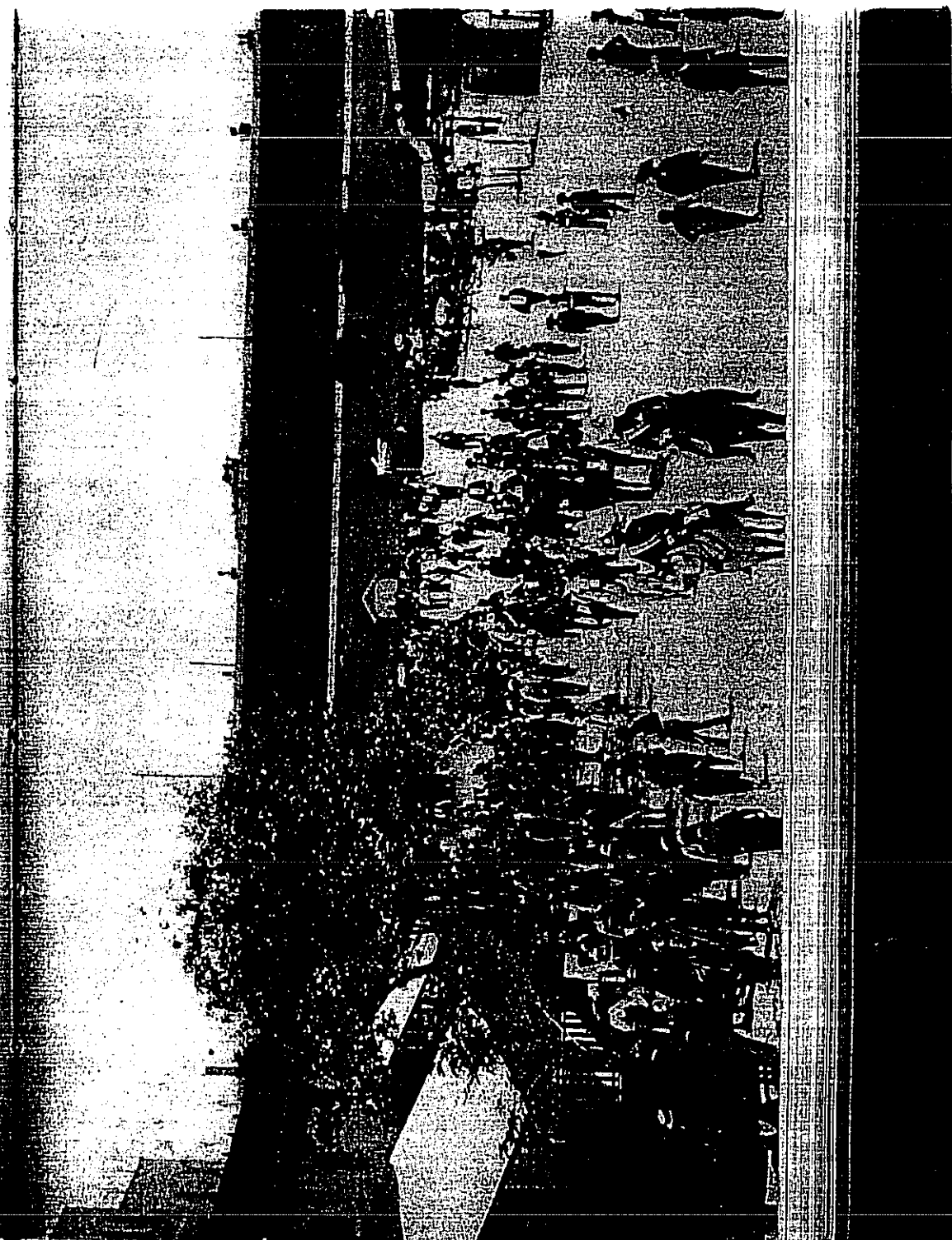
The second poet was Alfred Austin, who apostrophized his country in loftier metre:

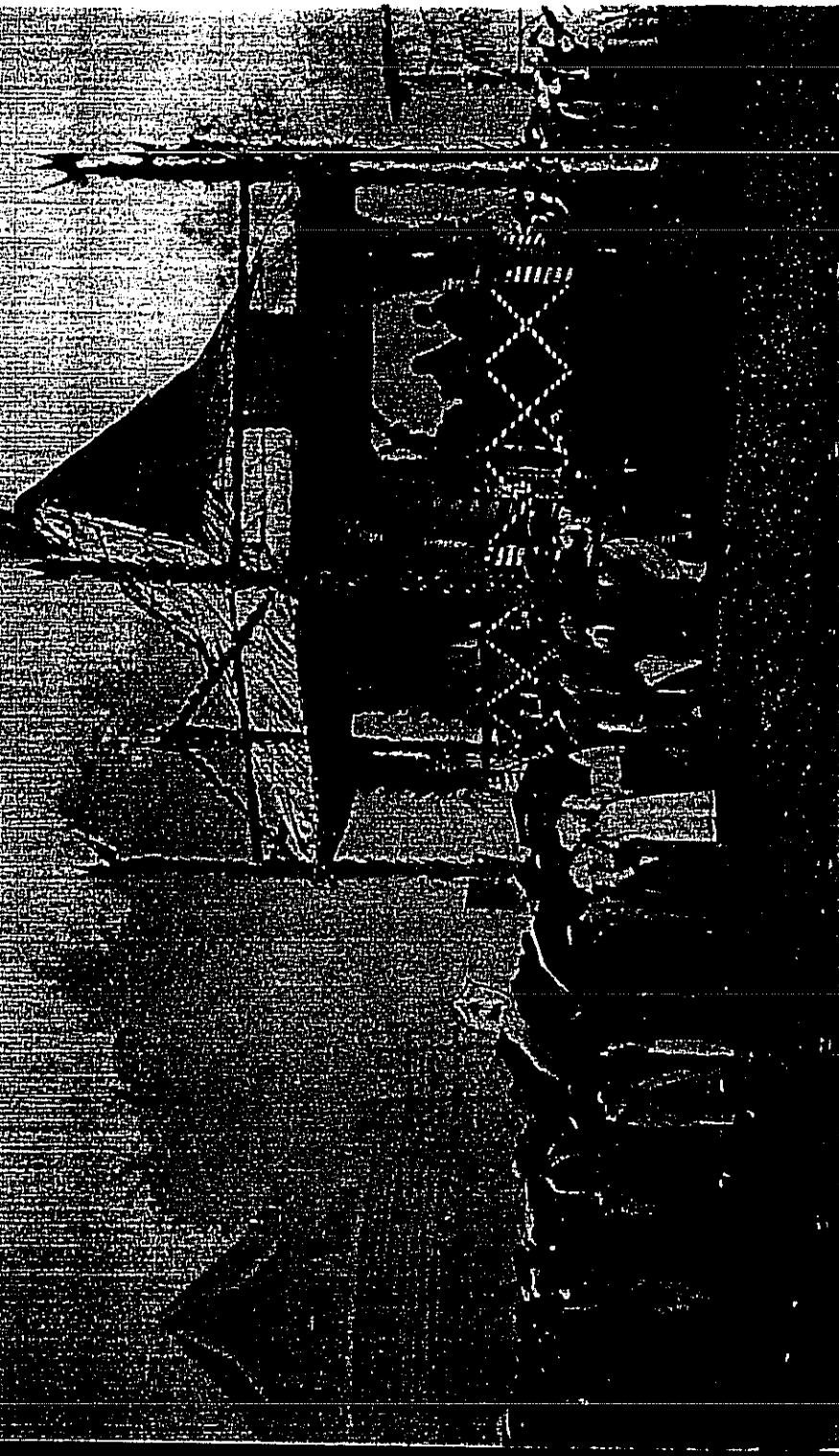
*Thou dost but stand erect, and lo!
The nations cluster round; and while the horde
Of wolfish backs slouch homeward to their snow,
Thou, 'mid thy sheaves in peaceful seasons stored,
Towerest supreme, victor without a blow,
Smilingly leaning on thy undrawn sword!*

Fewer would quarrel with this image of the imperial presence, a magnanimous Galahad of the wheat fields; friend and protector of all. The British saw their country as a special kind of Power, *sui generis*, making rules of its own and legitimately imposing them on others. To the British Empire no conventions applied. Command, authority, privilege were natural rights of the British people. The world measured its longitude from Greenwich, and the postage stamps of Great Britain, alone in the world, did not bother with a national title, but simply bore Victoria's head. Take it, the British seemed to say to the world, or leave it.

To this specialness the Queen herself no doubt subscribed, just as her person summed it up. It was Disraeli, thirty years before, who had made an imperialist of Her Imperial Majesty. He saw the Empire

¹ The song was made famous, at a time of tense Russophobia, by 'The Great Macdermott'—G. H. Macdermott (1845–1901), a former Royal Navy rating who was for twenty years a lion of the London music-halls. Hunt himself, a painter as well as a popular composer and lyric-writer, died in 1904, of softening of the brain, in Essex County Asylum.





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as an Eastern pageantry, a perpetual durbar, summoning the British people away beyond the dour obsessions of Europe to a destiny that was spiced and gilded. Under his seductive influence Victoria, like so many of her subjects, found herself bemused by the exotic allure of Empire. The Queen had a horror of John Bullism, by which she meant arrogance and bullying in diplomacy: but the older she grew, the more she grew accustomed to the imperial stance, until by the time of her Diamond Jubilee her very appearance among her satraps, mercenaries and imperial commanders seemed to give sanction to the idea of the British Empire as a divinely sponsored phenomenon—By Appointment to God. ✓

2

The Empire was at its zenith, the Crown glittered as never before, magnificently in the centre of the world lay England, home and glory. With such a background of national self-esteem, it was difficult not to be pugnacious. The late Victorians were plumper and more complacent than their fathers had been, but they still had plenty of *élan*, and the history of the past century had inspired them with a happy contempt for all adversaries. Their society was stable. Their inventive genius was everywhere acknowledged. The superiority of their arms seemed to have been permanently established by the twin victories of Trafalgar and Waterloo. There had been setbacks, of course, generally when a gallant company of cruelly outnumbered Britons had been caught unfairly by surprise: but even the blunders of the Crimea had been redeemed by the effortless conquest of Egypt, and by a score of successful small colonial wars. Nowadays, when a British soldier marched into some unknown and potentially hostile territory, he marched in the almost certain conviction that he was going to win. The British armies of the day fought ferociously, matching barbarism with brutality, and seldom hesitating to employ the most terrible of weapons, the Maxim gun or the expanding Dum-Dum bullet, against the most primitive of enemies—'Butcher and Bolt' was the army's own nickname for punitive expeditions. But it was all in a good cause. As Austin exclaimed in another irresistible poem:

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Who would not die for England! And for Her
He dies, who, whether in the fateful fight,
Or in the marish jungle, where She bids,
Far from encircling fondness, far from kiss
Of clinging babes, busbes his human heart,
And, stern to every voice but Hers, obeys
Duty and Death that evermore were twin.

So the taste for power inflamed the imperial violence. It must have seemed so easy. In India the Forward School of strategists constantly pressed for the extension of frontiers northward and eastward through the passes—to confront the enemy, Russian, French or Chinese, muzzle to muzzle on ground of British choosing. In the Pacific the virile Australians wanted to create a *Mare Nostrum*, excluding other European Powers and keeping the Asiatics where they belonged. In Africa the British seemed to be storming belligerently everywhere, seizing territories or abasing chieftains for reasons that were basically economic or strategic, but were often sublimated on the spot into the sheer love of a scrap. Austin was once asked to define his idea of Heaven. It was, he said, to be sitting in a garden receiving news by alternate messengers of British victories at sea and British victories on land. The British were not really a belligerent people—few nations were more *civilian* than Victorian Britain—and they had not been engaged in a life-and-death struggle since the defeat of Napoleon. But a generation of easy victories had gone to their heads, and they were drunk with glory. Sometimes they yielded to surges of vindictive anger. Gladstone himself had ordered the bombardment of Alexandria, after the revolt of Arabi Pasha the nationalist in 1882, confounding those who forecast that he would only intervene with the Salvation Army. The boys at Eton unanimously voted that Arabi ought to be hanged for his patriotism, and Queen Victoria agreed with them.

3

Dreams of private glory, too, forced the imperial play close up to the net, and helped to keep the pugnacity aboil. J. S. Mill once

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called the British Empire 'a vast system of outdoor relief for the British upper classes', and certainly the native energy of the British needed outlets.¹ With 40 million people in their islands, a countryside tamed by railways and roads, and a newly educated generation reaching maturity, the more adventurous of the British felt cramped. They pined for more elemental environments, where climate, terrain, opportunity and the pitch of everyday life could all be more extreme. Most Britons emigrated, as we have seen, because they needed to, but many more were just in search of space, danger and responsibility and open air—and some, so sophisticated commentators suggest, were obeying a kind of sexual compulsion, a reaction to the celibate frustrations of the British public schools. Fame and fortune could be made out of imperial adventure. *Punch* once suggested a coat of arms for the reporter-explorer Henry Stanley, Livingstone's putative rescuer, containing in one quarter 'two dwarfs of the forest of perpetual night proper, journalistically exploited to the nines, with the motto *Eminent Travellers Rescued While You Wait*'.

For others the inducements were less immediately romantic. There were jobs to be found in the Empire less prosaic than their equivalents at home. The clerk could aspire to a merchant's desk in Barbados or Singapore. The journalist could follow Kipling to the *Pioneer* at Allahabad, or write off *on spec* to the *Toronto Globe*, the *Melbourne Age* or the *Cape Times*—all sound imperialist organs which welcomed able Englishmen. Doctors, lawyers, accountants, even the occasional artist, could pursue their professions less conventionally and often more profitably in colonial cities, while for working men, Lord Rosebery once assured the Trades Union Congress, the Empire provided 'a variety of guarantees and opportunities . . . which can be offered by no other country in the world'. Standards of living were often much higher than at home. In the tropics especially servants were cheap and plentiful—even sergeants' wives had maids and houseboys, while private soldiers in India invariably employed Indians to clean their buttons and boots.

¹ Like his father James, the historian of India, the philosopher-politician John Stuart Mill was an employee in London of the East India Company, and it was he who, in 1856, drew up the Company's petition to Parliament protesting against its own dissolution. The petition failed, and Mill accordingly retired in 1858 with an annual pension of £1,500.

To a really ambitious man, the highest posts of Empire could bring most of the satisfactions of politics without the degradations of hustings or debate. Great splendours of position attended the successful imperial administrator. The chance of a truly regal status in life, such as a Colonial Governor enjoyed, with his own court and etiquette, his palace on the hill, a subject people at his feet and the Union Jack at his flagstaff—the mere possibility of such an elevation was enough to make a susceptible bureaucrat imperialist to the last gunboat. In the old days the Marquis Wellesley, though voted a grant of £20,000 for his services in India, died embittered because the Government refused to create him Duke of Hindustan. By the 1890s ambitions were less gorgeous, but were still compelling enough to create an interested lobby for the extension of Empire. Sir George Campbell, one of the most liberal of late Victorian imperialists, and himself a former Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, thought the existence of a large and increasing class of people wanting to fulfil themselves abroad 'reason and justification for foreign extensions where they can legitimately be made'.

4

What incentives they were! The smell of the veldt, the illicit delight of a sabre-slash in the sunshine; a drum-beat out of the forested hills; the first sod turned on your own homestead, with a million acres to come; the wheezing breath of your dear old bearer, as he lit the jumper fire in the morning, and brought the teapot steaming to your bed; the never-sated excitement of tigers, the pride of red furs and swagger stick in the bazaars; the thump of the band behind you as you clattered, the Colonel's lady, in your spanking tonga through the cantonment, or the dull gleam of a nugget in the clay. Twelve Below Discovery on Bonanza Creek: gracious acceptance of curtsies, on the lawn for the Queen's Birthday—sparkle of brass polished thin, as your carriage braked precariously down the tree-shaded road from the Peak—sudden tap of Morse in the silence of the Outback—first place for the Royal Mail on the convoy through Suez—unexpected promotion to be officer in charge of the Ex-Amir of Kabul—*the Ship cannot dock at Addab owing to the surf, but*

Mr Micab our Agent will be on the beach to welcome you from the Surfboat, and I remain, Dear Sir, Your Faithful Servant, p.p. F. and A. Swanzy'. The cloud of dust and jingle of accoutrement, as the dispatch rider swept in with an ultimatum for the paramount chief; the gleaming plates of the entrepreneurs on the waterfront at Singapore; flowers and brown arms in the Pacific evening; flash, and fire, and black men all around you, and great ships steaming, and curry on the train at Sher Shah junction, and the Admiral's pinnace chugging across Esquimalt Bay, and the surreptitious glance at the *Gazette*, over the breakfast table before morning inspection, on the day they announced the Birthday Honours. All these fortified the pugnacity of Empire: and filtered back along the trade routes, distilled in the heady patriotism of home, they laced the policies of State.

5

Many years before Dr Livingstone had laid another trail of glory. When he first penetrated the interior of Central Africa he set a standard for his compatriots. He was the best of men. He was very brave. He was contributing to human knowledge. He was opening the way for trade and probably dominion. Above all he was serving God, and revealing the Christian truth to people miserably denied it.¹ Christian philanthropy was seldom altogether absent from the imperial enterprises of the Victorians. The one universally admired achievement of Empire was the abolition of the West African slave trade. The ideal imperial general was Gordon, England's pattern of a Christian hero. Even Rhodes was a clergyman's son, one was relieved to remember, and scrutinizing every imperial policy, sometimes censorious, sometimes eagerly in support, stood the watchdogs of humanitarianism—the Anti-Slavery Society, the Aborigines Protection Society, and many another staunch old institution. Ruskin once spoke of the colonies as 'motionless navies', but he

¹ The incomparable David Livingstone (1813-73) had in fact broken with his original African sponsors, the London Missionary Society, because they thought he spent too much time exploring. By the 1890s most of the country he explored had been annexed by the British Empire. Chitambo, where he died, was now in Rhodesia, and he was buried in the nave of Westminster Abbey.

corrected his metaphor—'or rather, in the true and mightiest sense, motionless churches, ruled by pilots of the Galilean lake of all the world'. In that last heyday of Christian power the British had no doubts about the superiority of their civilization and its faith. They believed it to be their duty, however arduous or expensive, to distribute it among the heathen and the ignorant. Time and again the spokesmen of imperialism appealed to Providence, as the ultimate source of British power: they had been chosen for this task, and were in a kind of ecstasy.

Bigness, Seeley had preached, was not necessarily greatness. 'If by remaining in the second rank of magnitude we can hold the first rank morally and intellectually, let us sacrifice mere material magnitude.' By the nineties the British generally believed they could occupy both ranks, but they did not abandon the claim that their principal aim was the dispersion of Christian morality. The best of them saw the profit and power of Empire only as appendages to this high purpose. 'In the Empire we have found,' George Curzon once magnificently announced, 'not merely the key to glory and wealth, but the call to duty, and the means of service to mankind.'¹ Even Joseph Chamberlain, who saw the Empire primarily as a profitable estate, declared that British imperial rule could be justified only if it added to the happiness, prosperity, security and peace of the subject peoples—'in carrying out this work of civilization we are fulfilling what I believe to be our national mission'. 'Take up the White Man's Burden!' cried Kipling, when the Americans were debating whether or not to acquire the Philippines:

Take up the White Man's Burden—
In patience to abide,
To veil the threat of terror
And check the show of pride;

¹ At 38. Curzon had already travelled widely, written three important books about Eastern affairs, married the daughter of an American millionaire and served as Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the India and Foreign Offices. In the following year he became the most dazzling of India's Viceroy's, only to resign in 1905 after bitter differences with the India Office at home. He returned to public life in the First World War, became Foreign Secretary in 1919, and died in 1925 after a career full of irony and vicissitude.

By open speech and simple,
An hundred times made plain,
To seek another's profit,
And work another's gain.

To much of the world this was fearful hypocrisy. Not to the British, even at their brashest heights of jingo. They saw themselves sometimes as masters of the world, but sometimes as servants—public servants, like policemen or schoolmasters. When the young Thomas Russell went out to join the Egyptian police he thought of himself as standing towards the Egyptian people 'as an old-fashioned headmaster of an approved school stood in relation to those whose criminal tendencies he must correct'.¹ Queen Victoria's own definition of the imperial mission was 'to protect the poor natives and advance civilization'.

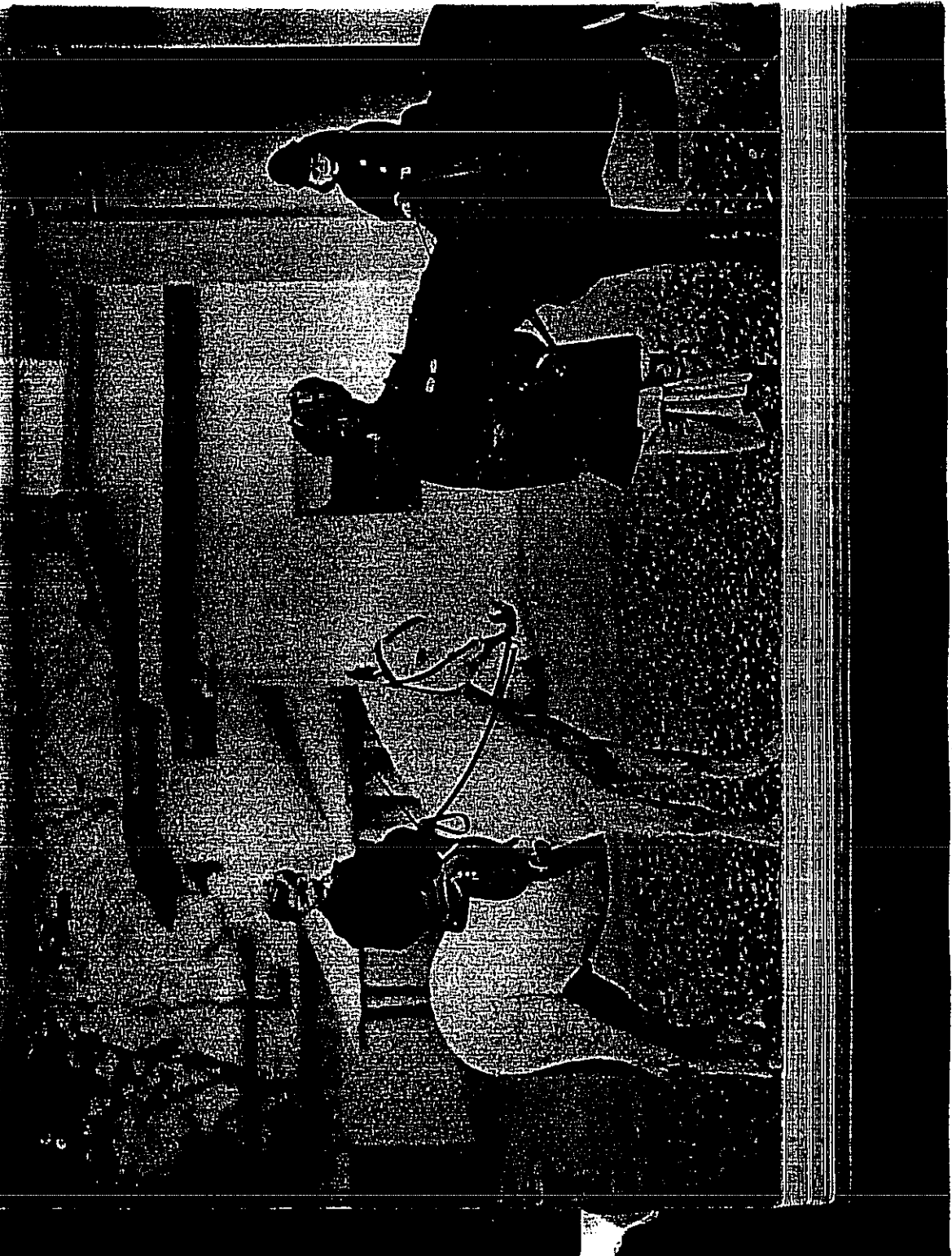
The missionary urge in its most basic sense—the conversion of heathens to Christianity—had acquired several new possessions for the Empire. The missionaries were seldom consciously colonizers, but their old ideas of establishing independent native theocracies had withered in the face of Africa's pagan awfulness, and now they were generally for the expansion of British rule as the best available medium for the reclamation of savages. And it was a true Christian zeal that still inspired the British in their campaigns against slavery—by no means ended yet, for the Royal Navy was still chasing slave-runners in the Red Sea, slave-columns were still travelling out of Africa to the coast, and often escaped slaves would stumble into the courtyard of the British Consulate at Muscat to throw their arms around the flagstaff and claim their freedom. That very year the Sultan of Zanzibar, whose country had been a British protectorate since 1890, was induced to abolish the legal status of slavery; in Livingstone's day this island had been the chief clearing-house of African slaves, destined for the markets of the whole Muslim world, and its streets swarmed with captive humans, painted and paraded. He became, as Russell Pasha, perhaps the most successful of Anglo-Egyptians, and sixty years later his structure of internal security was still the basis of Gamal Abdel Nasser's régime. Russell's last task in Egypt was to prepare, from his hospital bed, a report on the burning of Cairo in 1952, and he died in London two years later.

around the town for the inspection of buyers, slumped hopelessly in stables, or packed by night below decks on the dhows, to run the gauntlet of the Royal Navy offshore. Now it was all ended, and the foundation stone of the Anglican Cathedral of Zanzibar was laid upon the site of the last slave-post in the market.

Of course, the imperialists were thinking partly of their own salvation. Empire was a means of moral self-elevation, too. As capital punishment had a brutalizing effect on the hangman, and should therefore be abolished, so helping the heathen had an inspiring effect on the imperialists, and should therefore be encouraged. Disraeli claimed that he had developed the Empire 'believing that the combination of achievement and responsibility elevates the character and condition of a people'. Dilke maintained that the British were chiefly interested in Africa 'through their traditional desire to suppress the evils of the slave trade, and to pay conscience money in these days for the sins, in connection with slavery, of their predecessors'. To some idealists this was a back-handed way of attaining perpetual glory—there were evangelists who considered the Indian Mutiny a divine punishment for the failure to make the Bible compulsory reading in Indian schools. To others the scouring or purifying effect of the imperial mission was more straightforward, and might be summed up in the motto of the Rand Pioneers' Association: 'They Did Their Level Best'.

6

The evangelical mood was now past its prime, and agnostics were asking if it was really proper to chivy natives out of their own certainties of fetish and taboo into Christianity's dim sanctuary. A less debatable moral impulse was the urge to spread good government throughout the world. The British were convinced, not without reason, that they had developed a unique mastery of the art of Government—towering supreme among scenes of peace and plenty. 'We happen to be the best people in the world,' Rhodes once roundly declared, 'with the highest ideals of decency and justice and liberty and peace, and the more of the world we inhabit, the better it is for humanity.' Chamberlain, too, once publicly expressed



his belief that the British was the greatest governing race the world had ever seen. These gifts, the imperialists felt, they had a mission to employ. They knew best, and if other peoples resented the imposition of British standards, they would learn later in life that it had all been for their own good. Monypenny thought that in the end the Empire, properly unified, might become 'the central or regulating State' of the entire world.

To men of this persuasion the Pax Britannica was like a great surgical clamp, an elaborate device of joints and fittings which, adjusted properly on its straps and trolleys, kept any dislocated limb stoutly on the mend. It had cured many of the evils of India, where peace really had been universal since the end of the Mutiny forty years before, and where the ferocious old antagonisms between caste and race, creed and creed, rajah and mogul, were now only colourful sagas in the folk-memory. It had apparently healed the breaches between the British and the French in Canada, where the new Confederation was a delicate equilibrium between the two. It had brought order to the quarrelsome sultans of the Malay Peninsula, ended the piracy of the Persian Gulf, reduced the cannibals of Australia to shirts and wage-rates, and for eight hundred years kept the unruly Irish under control. This was the British speciality: like doctors under the spell of some incantatory oath, the imperialists felt mystically impelled to find new patients.

It was odd that the longer the British stayed in a country the more likely it seemed that order would collapse the moment they left. In the early years of the century the most eminent administrators of the East India Company, then the sovereign power in British India, had openly declared that in a century or so they would be able to hand over an orderly, peaceful, modern nation to the Indians. By the end of the century most people assumed, not least the public and the policy-makers at home, that an India without the British would fall apart in communal violence, and relapse into the chaos from which the Empire was supposed to have rescued it. It was the same in Egypt. When the British occupied that country in 1882, leaders of both political parties said they would withdraw again when a stable local Government had been established, to protect the interests of foreign investors, and ensure the security of the Suez Canal.

They meant it: but as the years passed, as the British dug themselves deeper and deeper into the Egyptian sands, as the Thomas Russells of the day matured from aloof supervision to fascinated involvement, so it seemed ever more reprehensible to leave a job half done, until by 1897 the British presence in Egypt seemed permanent, and the more imaginative of the British administrators already saw themselves in the historic line of the Pharaohs.

But in theory self-government was seen as the end of good government. Ancient British principles demanded it. It must have seemed remote indeed, in the swamps of the Sudanese sudd, or among the naked Indians of the Guiana jungles; but there were many imperialists who carried Darwin's ideas yet a stage farther, and saw the whole grand progress of the Empire in evolutionary terms. Britain was, of course, the fulfilment, *populus sapiens*. The self-governing colonies were great apes among the species. Many lesser colonies, mostly with a white settler class, had achieved some representative institutions and were thus learning the way out of the ooze. And down at the bottom, inchoate and utterly dependent, lay the primitive territories of Africa and Asia, dressed in scales. Teaching nations how to live had been a British vocation for centuries. One of the grand visions of imperialism presented the Pax Britannica as a stupendous progress towards universal democratic liberalism—God making man in his own image, or enabling the world, as Younghusband thought, 'to become all that heart and mind know there is in it to be'. It was unfortunate but inevitable that the first step in the process should so often be one of conquest. At this cathartic moment of their history, the British seers were thinking in terms of generations, centuries even, and the absorption of an African tribe, or the humiliation of an Asian culture, was no more than a chip in the slate.

7

On a governmental level the New Imperialism was largely defensive, and the glory came extra. There had been a time when Britain's material strength was more or less equal with that of her principal rivals—first the Dutch, then the French. A brilliant period of

scientific discovery and energy had, in the earlier years of Victoria's reign, given the British their commanding lead. Supreme in technology, and spared the fearful expense of great standing armies, Britain was not only able to enrich herself as workshop of the world, but by building the biggest of navies, and thus gaining complete security at home and unique advantages abroad, to feel herself a citadel, unassailable.

Times were now changing. Britain's technical lead was shortening. Her economic progress was slowing down. Her rivals were building great navies of their own, and hungering for empires, too. When Kipling travelled for the first time outside the British Empire he was astonished first to discover the vigorous maturity of Japan, so breezily different from India after two centuries of British rule, and then to find, in the United States, the nucleus of a nation which would one day far overshadow the power of Britain—the 'biggest, finest and best people', he foresaw, on the face of the earth. Such premonitions forced the British into expansion, and especially into the scramble for Africa. On the surface all was bombast, beneath there was much anxiety. The British saw their markets, their communications, even the security of their own islands, threatened for the first time since the Napoleonic Wars. The voluminous literature of the New Imperialism was full of warnings about Britain as a second-rate Power.

For Britain was the most envied and disliked of the great states. Her competitors were all too eager to abase her. To some perceptive observers there was to the gathering of foreign notables in London that summer the faint first suggestion of jackals assembling. The Jubilee celebrations were specifically designed to keep them at bay, or send them 'slouching homeward to their snow'. Britain was not finished yet, ran the message, and imperialism, properly exploited, could keep her indefinitely supreme. The British nations scattered around the globe, supported by all the manpower and minerals of the tropical Empire, would one day constitute a super-Power to dwarf all opposition. Before the end of the twentieth century, the economist David A. Wells forecast, the population of Australia alone would number about 190 million, if the present rate of increase were maintained. In the meantime vigorous expansion would be the rule.

If there were territories waiting to be annexed, Britain must annex them, or other nations would. Glory was more than a luxury, or even a satisfaction. It was a national need.

8

And there was one more stimulus to splendour: patriotism, kind and guileless—not arrogant, vicious or greedy, not jingoism, but simply love of country, like love of family, or love of home, in an age when soldiers unquestioningly fought for their country right or wrong, because they did not think it could be wrong, and there breathed few men who ne'er had said this was their own, their native land. The British were among the most patriotic people of all. They were immensely proud of their country, trusted it, and believed it to be a force for good in the world. The stronger England was, the safer and sounder the world would be. If there were peoples who opposed her dominion, they were probably led by wicked men, or knew no better.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Caste

*It is with nations as with men—
One must be first, we are the mightiest,
The heirs of Rome.*

John Davidson

