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THE END OF EMPIRE

By Fred D. Schneider

Within the space of a generation, the British Empire has disintegrated in a way that appears extraordinary, even in retrospect. "How marvellous it all is," Lord Rosebery exclaimed at the end of the nineteenth century. If marvellous in its growth, the Empire has been no less significant in the manner of its passing.

The decline of great empires exerts a peculiar fascination over the mind of the historian; indeed, more has been written about the fall of Rome than about the death of any other political entity. Diverse and contradictory theories are advanced to explain a complex historical phenomenon, and different dates are assigned for its end. Thus, for some, Rome "fell" in 476; for others, that year saw merely the climax of a process which began long before. Similarly, 1968 marks the end of the British Empire, but the manner of its going was clear long before. The basic difficulty, of course, is twofold: to distinguish long-range causes from proximate causes and to attach precise dates to the start of great and imprecise events. Any assessment of Britain's imperial role involves consideration of both.

The British Empire began in the Tudor age when a brash and self-confident nation gave expression to its aggressive patriotism and youthful exuberance by colonizing Ireland and by sending seamen and merchants beyond the seas to punish the Spaniard and capture his gold. Englishmen organized joint-stock ventures for a variety of purposes, and this led to the beginning of British enterprise on the eastern seaboard of North America and in the sugar islands of the West Indies. This was the "first" British Empire -- an empire of settlement, of colonies of Englishmen overseas. A "second" Empire followed, overlapping the first, founded on the ambitions of Englishmen for increased trade in the eastern seas. The ideal of this Empire was a chain of trading posts protected by naval bases, and its overriding purpose was commercial profit undiminished by the expense and responsibility of colonization. But its actual development turned out differently. The British were unable to avoid collisions with the French. They continued to regard the sugar islands as important; and they maintained their connection with North America in Canada. They also rediscovered and occupied Australia and New Zealand and peopled them with immigrants from the British Isles. In India they filled the political vacuum left by the collapse of the Mogul Empire under whose aegis they had once conducted their business. And, once committed, the state assumed the obligation of protecting these new possessions. In time, other factors prompted further expansion: greed, humanitarianism and missionary zeal, and the fear of foreign intervention combined in varying

proportions to fill Englishmen with an ambition to mark in red a large portion of the map of the world.

Three factors conditioned this expansion. First, it was accomplished, in its initial phases, largely without the direct intervention of the state. Second, with an increase of imperial responsibilities, the British people were forced to recognize that they had acquired an empire, and they began to develop an imperial philosophy in keeping with the prevailing climate of opinion. Third, the new Empire, as it grew, was far from homogeneous. On the one hand were the colonies of European settlement -- Canada, Australia, and New Zealand -- increasingly demanding control of their own affairs; on the other was the "dependent Empire," predominantly non-European, centered at first in Asia but coming to include large tracts of Africa as well. From these factors followed certain policies. In 1846, Parliament repealed the Corn Laws, thus registering the finality of Britain's shift from an agricultural to an industrial economy. By this act, Britain withdrew from its colonies the economic benefits of membership of the Empire, and because she insisted so strenuously upon her own freedom from imperial obligations she could not deny to the colonies freedom from imperial control. By the end of the 1840's she had made the crucial decisions by which the colonies of European settlement completed the framework of self-government in domestic affairs. These two events -- the repeal of the Corn Laws and the concession of "responsible government" -- implied that in case of any conflict between Britain's domestic and imperial interests the former would prevail, and, as a corollary, that the colonies of European settlement had full freedom to manage their own affairs. The great problems which now faced Britain concerned the extension to the "dependent" Empire of the privileges conceded to the colonies of settlement and the guarantee of equal rights and opportunities to all British subjects, regardless of race, creed, or country of origin. In time, the growth of colonial nationalism prompted significant changes both in the structure of the Empire and the attitude of Englishmen towards their imperial responsibilities. The Empire gradually disappeared to be replaced by the more loosely knit Commonwealth. And Britain's attitude towards the Commonwealth was conditioned more and more by a reassessment of its discrete interests and requirements in terms of its position as a European nation.

This is the background for examining the decline and fall of the British Empire. Of course, it began to dwindle and change long before 1968 -- at least a century and a quarter, if the repeal of the Corn Laws and the concession of responsible government is taken to mark the decisive abdication of imperial responsibility. But the announcement by the Labour government of its intention to withdraw

the British military presence east of Suez and to leave Hong Kong, an infinitely vulnerable trading post, and its enactment of legislation to bar the entry of British subjects from East Africa, mark the final slamming of a great door and the throwing away of the key.

On the surface at least, the "legacy" of Empire is scarcely visible: a few solemn banks, the missionary outposts of Threadneedle Street; whitewashed stone barracks; gaunt Government Houses; innumerable statues of Queen Victoria, than whom no mortal, even Caesar, has been so memorialised; deserted clubs and fly-specked hunting prints; bare garrison churches which once shook to the hymnal roar of church parades; policemen in non-military uniforms and judges in wigs. And there is something more: the great armies of unmarked dead, shovelled into the ground and forgotten who died on forced marches or of a skirmish or stray bullet or an epidemic fever or the endless attribution of unsuitable climates resolutely ignored. But the great monuments are few: a decayed Irish castle; the crazed magnificence of Lutyneus' Delhi; the eighteenth century churches of North America; some decent houses recalling England in the Indian sun; and the architecturally splendid ruins of the penal settlement in Tasmania. The Roman Empire left more physical evidence of its existence. But Britain's was a strange empire, with its own built-in political obsolescence.

This brings us to another consideration. The British Empire was haphazard in its beginning and its development, founded, according to one of its architects, in "a fit of absence of mind." It was created of greed and pride, and of a missionary zeal which could be both political and religious. Its people were capable of heroic self-sacrifice, and its rulers displayed a personal honesty almost offensive in its puritan rectitude. It was planned by no man or government, and it spread over the map like a lichen, almost with a life of its own. It could be scraped back and destroyed at any given point. It was at once hated and feared and envied and admired. And it caught Britain largely unawares. In the early nineteenth century many Englishmen found the idea of empire repugnant. As late as 1877 there was solid opposition to the proposal to make Victoria "Empress of India." But the idea of empire, at first barely tolerated, came to be embraced out of the bottomless self-confidence of Victorian England. The classic statement of that idea came at mid-century, when Lord Palmerston enunciated a sort of divine right of Englishmen to interfere. England, he said in a five-hour speech, was the natural guardian of liberty, and liberty was indivisible. She could not remain an island of liberty in a sea of autocracy but must assert her ideas and impose her peace upon the world. And the world must be made safe for Englishmen everywhere.

As the British discovered, the possession of an empire placed the imperial power, though enlightened, in an untenable position. Imperialism is difficult to justify on moral grounds, and British colonial authorities could not interfere with even the most obnoxious local customs without being accused of intolerance or an officious display of self-righteousness. Thus, British actions in India such as the elimination of widow-burning, approved by many Englishmen, were opposed in India. No British government could legislate against "untouchability," though an independent India has been able to do so. Nationalists in all colonies complained of regulations which permitted local authorities to detain persons without normal judicial process, yet on achieving independence the new governments have sometimes resorted to similar devices. British colonial administrators were more often right than wrong and frequently better able to carry out constructive policies than the local populace; but the latter resented paternalism and demanded the right to do for themselves that which was being done on their behalf by rulers of an alien culture.

British imperialism was an historical phenomenon which has now ceased to exist. From a tumult of enterprise and exploitation and high unfashionable ideals repeated endlessly, it left a permanent legacy; ports, railroads, and highways, and a respect for education and an ideal of independent justice. Less tangibly, it bequeathed a dissatisfaction upon which new and better societies might be built. More specifically, it left the apparatus of an independent civil service, albeit in skeletal form. More positively, it created a grudging respect that under appropriate circumstances flowered into the affection of people who shared an important human experience. But if the connection with the imperial past is maintained through the sharing of similar institutions, ideas, and experiences, it also maintains the existence of unresolved problems because the legacy of empire is also one of terrible grievances and the nagging self-doubts of peoples long in tutelage to remote masters. The imperial legacy is compounded also of a deep hatred for those who robbed the ruled not only of their riches but of their heritage, and devalued an alien culture and tradition. Under these circumstances, imperialism leaves a curdling suspicion, and among young men humiliated by memories of bondage it leaves a sense of grievance capable under appropriate circumstances of flowering into bitter hatred and the acceptance of any ideology which expresses that hatred in an effective way.

Today the flags are down. Few in Britain mourn the passing of empire. The exhilaration of the imperial experience is over and the present is drab. Today, Englishmen calculate their interests in national and European rather than imperial terms. The flags came down because of humiliations like the fall of Singapore and because British governments have had to recalculate priorities in terms of

immediate economic necessity. Their lowering was assisted by violence, but more by the patent impossibility of resisting national wills. Most of all, they came down because Britain taught its subject peoples to be dissatisfied and handed over to them as the one permanent legacy of empire the political and social weapons which made its decline as inevitable as the ebbing of the tide.