

REITH LECTURES 1961: The Colonial Reckoning

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Lecture 5: The Colonial Account

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I hope that the title of this talk, 'The Colonial Account', did not lead you to expect that I was going to draw up an imperial balance sheet with all our beneficent acts upon one side and all our errors on the other, and then, see if we end up with a moral credit or debit. I can do no more than look back over our record (again mainly in Africa), suggest some of the criteria for judgment, and offer some very personal opinions.

To attempt to judge an empire would be rather like approaching an elephant with a tape-measure: the size and shape of the object baffles us; and, being alive, it will not keep still. And what criteria should we use? Whether the empire benefited the ruler or the ruled? The question sounds absurd today because it is now taken for granted that the only test is the interest of the ruled. Yet it is quite a new test: it would be wholly misleading to apply it to the entire record of the British Empire which, through most of its duration, like all other empires, had been created and conducted in the interests of the ruling power.

Looking back over that record we can identify five main, although not always simultaneous, purposes which led Britain to build up an empire. There was the economic purpose, mainly the expansion of trade. This itself created the further purpose of security, the need to protect our world-wide commerce, an ever increasing need. Lord Salisbury once said that he feared the military would advise him to garrison the moon to protect us from Mars, not quite such a fantastic witticism now as in his day. Emigration provided another purpose; and all these three aims of empire were embodied, in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the earlier part of the twentieth, in what then came to be regarded as the supreme purpose of empire, the attainment and enjoyment of power and prestige. From the eighteenth century there slowly grew a fifth purpose, the challenging ideal of philanthropy, which alone put the interests of the ruled before those of their rulers.

A word about some of these purposes. Our first period of empire, this is, of course, the shorthand of history, was dominated by the mercantile concept. The aim was to obtain a favourable balance of trade by importing raw materials and by exporting manufactures and those in English ships. Colonies were therefore regarded as valuable sources of raw materials and also as markets for our manufactures, in which, incidentally, colonies could be prevented from competing. We must not forget that one of the most profitable the mercantilist period was also the greatest crime of imperialism, the African slave trade. By this Africa, and especially West Africa, was drained of its manpower to provide labour for the plantations of the Americas and the Caribbean. Whatever else in our colonial account is uncertain, we can write on the debit side one unalleviated, unquestionable, widespread, long continuing, and highly

profitable crime. For this the Africans, and still more the West Indians, have a long, ante-dated cheque in hand, which we still ought to try to honour.

And yet, despite its horrors, the crime of slavery, which grew out of what I have called the economic purpose of empire, was to evoke that other purpose I mentioned philanthropy. As the eighteenth century wore on, the British conscience was increasingly aroused against the slave-trade. The attack came from several quarters. To the Christians, first the Quakers and then the new evangelical movement, slavery was sin. To the new romantic movement it was ugly. To the radical philosophers it was unnatural. To the new liberal economists it was uneconomic.

Alas, the humanitarians could not maintain their temporary ascendancy. Yet their standard has persisted. It became part of Britain's public life. Their long propaganda bit deeply into the nation's thought, with its lesson that the white man could not be trusted to deal justly with the black man. And, being practical, the humanitarians ensured that the challenge they had made should not be forgotten. They founded two societies—the Anti-Slavery and the Aborigines Protection Societies, which were later, combined. This organization is still vigorously alive, collecting and communicating information about abuses from all over the world.

I was once staying with a governor in an African territory about which the Society had caused a question to be asked in Parliament on the methods used to recruit labour for work on a new railway. The governor was complaining about this intervention, and I felt obliged to confess that I was at that time on the society's Executive Committee. Without a word he rose from the table, we were at dinner, and went to his office. He came back staggering under a load of files. 'This', he said, 'is what you and your friends have inflicted upon a busy governor who had better things to do!' Even if the Society did sometimes make mistakes, I would still feel that, on balance, it has acted as a continuous and beneficial restraint.

In the mid-nineteenth century the British driving force for empire-building actually went into reverse. Britain swung round from believing that colonial possessions were essential to her trade to the exactly opposite belief, that they were an unnecessary expense and embarrassment. This was partly because this was, in the main, a period of peace and relaxation; but much more because Britain could dispense with controls and tariffs because her great lead in the industrial revolution gave her an unchallengeable export market. Indeed, she was so ready to relax her control of the major white settled colonies that, paradoxically, she won their unforced loyalty and so laid the foundations of the Commonwealth. She thus set a precedent in political, emancipation which other than white subjects would later claim. She even refused some annexations requested by native peoples.

But by the end of the nineteenth century Britain again felt the forward impulse of empire. War had come back to Europe. The international atmosphere was one of assertion and fierce rivalry. Other nations had now acquired Britain's industrial magic, and also her former imperial ambitions. They did not follow her free-trade policy; Britain had therefore to look again to her security. She was afraid of being shut out of many regions where her traders and missionaries had long been quietly at work. And to some extent the philanthropy motive swung round to support colonial annexation. This was partly because of the horrors of the Arab slave trade revealed by

Livingstone, and partly because of the missionaries' fear of French, German, or Portuguese annexation.

A Heady Moment

And so the twentieth century found Britain vigorously pursuing simultaneously all the objectives of Empire-trade, security, philanthropy, emigration, all converging to produce the crowning objective, power and prestige. By her own standards - by all her standards - Britain's imperialism seemed to have justified itself. It was a heady moment. Yet Britain did not altogether lose her head. There were the settled colonies to remind her that greatness consisted in abdicating as well as in exercising power: and there were always critics, irreverent men like Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells. They pricked the balloon of British self-esteem and let out the gas.. There were the liberals who were developing Burke's idea of trusteeship, and the missionaries and philanthropists who were busy reporting imperial wrongs.

The new century was not very old before a jarring note was struck. Britain's coloured subjects began-first in India-to assert their criterion of empire: that it should extend the precedent set by the white dominions and lead all its peoples to greater self-government; the word 'independence' was hardly yet used.

There thus began a period of divided views about the ultimate purpose of empire. For Britain did not at first accept the opinion of her coloured subjects. She did not flatly reject the application of the new criterion to her colonies; but, as regards those in Africa at least, her references to self-government were only in vague or distant terms. For there were serious doubts in the earlier years of this century whether eastern and African races were capable of parliamentary government. This arose, partly of course, from the deep, unexpressed distaste for the idea of abdicating authority: and how many nations have ever willingly given up power? Some of the prominent men who voiced these doubts, Milner, Cromer, Lugard, and Curzon, spoke from the confidence that comes from what is perhaps man's most intoxicating experience, the wielding of great personal authority. Yet, had not the ruler of millions some reasons for hesitating to hand over his authority to the first hundred or so of self-appointed applicants who asked for it? When the intelligentsia of Lagos asked Lugard to recognize them as the leaders and spokesmen of Nigeria, he could answer, quite truly, that most of them had never been more than a few miles inland and that nearly all the hundred or so rulers of the vast hinterland had never even heard of them.

In Africa, the period from the moment in any territory when independence became a possibility, until the moment when it was achieved, was brief indeed. Could it have been even shorter if we had had more foresight? Perhaps only autocratic governments attempt to foresee-and then they often see the wrong things! I think that many of us who were involved in colonial affairs between the wars were taken by surprise at the speed with which African nationalism advanced. But most of the official world seemed even more myopic. I remember, at the end of a conference on West Africa in 1939, a senior man from the Colonial Office concluding his talk with the remark: 'Well at any rate in Africa we can be sure that we have unlimited time in which to work'.

British Blindness

Perhaps the reason for this degree of blindness is that British people do not really understand nationalism; do not recognize it, or at least its strength, in others. Our exceptional unity, our island position, the confidence arising from our former power these may have bred in us an unconscious kind of nationalism that seldom needed to assert or even to know itself. Looking back, I admit my own slowness in realizing why, in spite of all the advantages colonial rule had so manifestly brought to them, Africans seemed so bitterly discontented.

I think it is a fair count against us that, even after recognizing the growing demands for self-government, we did little to prepare for it. Perhaps we had committed ourselves too deeply to indirect rule. Our critics like to ascribe this to a deep-laid scheme to prolong our power by crystallizing tribalism. We had more generous, more scientific, motives. In the 'thirties a school of young anthropologists buried themselves for a year or two on end within a single tribe, emerging finally to report what a wonderfully integrated social mechanism they had been observing. It would surely, we then thought, be ruthless and arrogant roughly to impose upon these societies our own culture, our own forms of government.

There was another surely not unworthy motive against too abrupt a departure from indirect rule. Many Africans now write off chiefs as stooges. But hereditary chiefs took the strain of indirect rule, breaking down, like human transformers, the powerful current from above and distributing it in voltages their people could take. Officials who had learned to trust them hesitated, as times changed, to throw over their friends and fellow-workers. Imperial power tends to lean for support upon such classes as have local power at a given moment, and in Africa that has meant both chiefs and white settlers. As time and change weaken these' supports, the external power shifts its weight almost automatically on to some new solidity. Our history is strewn with the wrecks of such abandoned supports. (Among the most impressive of these ruins are the princely states of India.) For governments, unlike individuals, are not free to support lost causes. It may look noble to put a king upon an ace but it does not take the trick!

But it should surely have been more possible for us to anticipate the coming need for unity and to force the pace in that direction. Yet in Northern Nigeria, for instance, some of our officials became at least as northern as the northerners, fostering the local sense of difference and superiority towards the south. In the Sudan, we accepted, almost intensified, the division between Arab north and pagan south, doing all too little to foster their mutual understanding before we went away and left them in perilous isolation. In Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia, was it wise, almost at the eleventh hour, to try to set chiefs in the forefront of the battle against nationalists who had the future in their hands?

No Essential Élite

Again, self-government would demand not only unity but the service of hundreds of Africans trained for all the technical and other services of a modern state. In east and central Africa above all, this essential elite hardly exists, and politics absorbs all too many of the few educated men. It has even been said that here Africans can rule-but do little else, since all the needed experts have to be imported. Could not more have

been done to provide both education and experience for unready states which needed crash programmes?

No attempt to reckon up the uses and abuses of Britain's colonial rule would be complete which did not try to evaluate the agency through which it was carried out, the Colonial Service. Consider how the colonial chain of command runs: a largely ignorant public as the source of policy; an overloaded Parliament; a Colonial Office for which decentralization was a principle, indeed a necessity; the sundering ocean; and, in the Colonies themselves, governors and their staff with great powers to use or abuse.

What sort of men were these last? In his book *The Guardians*, Philip Woodruff has given us a brilliant account of the Indian Civil Service. Much of what he says would apply to the Colonial Administrative Service at its height; its presiding genius for some thirty years, Sir Ralph Furse, shared Plato's conception of 'the Guardians', men nurtured with the intention that they should be a class pledged to serve the state and their fellows; just, detached, uncorruptible. In Africa they needed to be all this. There were wide varieties in the physical and human conditions in the colonies. Even within one Northern Nigerian district, for instance, there might be the headquarters of a highly organized Muslim state, which needed no more than expert supervision, while not many miles away primitive pagans might shoot poisoned arrows at the young officer who climbed their rocky fastness to persuade them to stop raiding caravans. In 1930 a weighty commission listed the following as desirable qualities for the administrative service: 'Vision, high ideals of service, fearless devotion to duty born of a sense of responsibility, tolerance and, above all, team spirit'. Courage and physical prowess could have been added. Where were these qualities to be found? In the public schools and in Oxford and Cambridge. So, at least, the Commission believed, and acted upon its belief.

I can well imagine some of the repercussions to what I have just said. For there is a fashionable reaction now against the type of man I have mentioned, and the tie which he wears. It seems that to find the impetus to spring from one phase in his development to the next, man often finds it necessary to stamp very heavily upon the phase he is leaving. A Dutch student of British society once argued that the British aristocracy, when faced with the ending of their ascendancy, invented the public schools in order to tame the oncoming bourgeoisie with their traditions of the gentleman. Perhaps for the fallible race of man they might have done worse! There is, or, perhaps, there was in centuries when the speed of change was less vertiginous—some advantage in society evolving smoothly out of its past.

I believe that, for its special task, the Colonial Service achieved as much as could have been expected of any large body of men. More, the office of District Commissioner should stand out in history as one of the supreme types developed by Britain to meet a special demand, like that of the Justice of the Peace in Tudor times. The D.C. was for years the uncrowned king of his district, the would-be father of his people, the jack of all trades; a unit in a service of reliable and interchangeable parts who were not yet robots. He could be relied upon to be humane, uncorrupt, and diligent, even when left alone quite unsupervised in the outer parts of a very testing continent. I admit, looking back, that the Service gained greatly from some able men who were not of the then generally accepted type; outsiders, indeed, who brought new

ideas and methods. Among the dead—for I must not name the living—are Lord Lugard, Sir Donald Cameron, and Sir Gordon Guggisberg. But, surely, a Service entirely staffed by geniuses would be unworkable.

Of course the Service had its faults. Power even over a remote African district, could corrupt, just a little. The administrator could look down on his technical colleagues. He could have too much sense of hierarchy; and his unoccupied wife could have even more. He could become too cut off from the springs of new thought in his own country, though this was hardly his fault, and it was later corrected by various means. I speak here from some knowledge, perhaps from some bias. I have had much to do over many years with the training of these men and I have stayed and trekked with them in many parts of Africa. I have not forgotten the letter I had from one of the first Africans to become an assistant District Commissioner and who was posted to some remote sub-station. 'I marvel', he wrote, 'that an English graduate can endure to live alone in such a place for £400 a year'.

You will hardly have failed to notice that I have said little of the economic aspects of empire in our own day. I have three good reasons. First, I am not an economist. Secondly, this is a subject as vast as and even more technical than the political aspect. Thirdly, economic decisions depend more upon political decisions than vice versa, above all in the context of empire. But I believe that no serious economist would support the view held by the anti-colonialists, and perhaps especially by Africans, that Britain has immensely profited from plundering Africa's riches. Trading companies have doubtless done well at certain times from their two-way handling of the market. But the researches of a specialist in this field, Professor Herbert Frankel, show that the return from minerals has not been unduly high as compared with profits in other parts of the world, when the risks, the cost of prospecting, developing and re-developing, are subtracted. Britain certainly did not build up her latest empire simply as a profitable investment. But she gave the security which allowed the infrastructure of a future development to be laid. And before critics make their easy assertion that Africa has been an El Dorado they should do some hard economic investigation to try to support their statement. I think they would fail.

I come to my final assessment. No record can ever be made of all that was done, good, bad and indifferent, by Britain in her dozen or more African territories during the brief years of her tenure. The mosaic is too vast for its pattern to be seen at one time from any one viewpoint. But a rough and ready picture can be had of the Africa Britain found, and the Africa she is leaving. It is an essential part of the African nationalism I discussed in my second talk that it cannot yet face this old Africa. And yet, if we try to suppress, or to forget, our achievements in Africa, in the hope of placating that nationalism, we are only falsifying our own history, and with it the history of the new African states.

Do not let me be misunderstood. I cannot too often emphasize my belief—one based on the most intimate experience of friendship and of academic teaching—in the inherent equality of Africans. Within the limited but virile setting of tribal life Africans could show nearly all the range of human qualities. I have sat by a camp-fire in what would be regarded as a most primitive part of Africa and seen the twilight play on the faces of old men, finely carved by experience, this one might well have been a judge, that one a bishop, the one beyond quite evidently the local humorist. I

know too that through archaeology and anthropology, through the piecing together of old records by a young and able group of British scholars, a new picture is being built up of the African past. But I must also think of the records of the first travellers in many—not all—parts of the continent, the stories of my old pioneer friends, even my own first contacts thirty years ago. All these combine into a picture. Alongside the joys of the dance, the drum, the hunt, the beer-drink, the picture is dark with poverty, ignorance, hunger, disease, isolation, cruelty, even cannibalism. These evils are not yet wholly conquered. But how much that Africa needed from the world has been given, some of it freely and at great cost, for, as the Congo shows so clearly today, Africa is very hard to serve.

Before we draw up our final account one thing should not be forgotten: once the white man had entered Africa—one might almost say once his modern rifle had reached Africa—the option was no longer between the old freedom and the new colonial rule. It was between that rule and anarchy. Read the ghastly story of the Arab slave-trade on the eve of European annexation, or of the murderous raiding that pierced into the regions of the Upper Nile from Egypt and the Sudan. It was the same tale in Africa as in the first lawless European contacts with the Maoris and the Polynesians. Albert Schweitzer wrote—and he should know: ‘The independence of the primitive is lost at the moment when the first white man’s boat arrives with powder or rum, salt or fabrics’. Government, with all its faults, was a thousand times better than the unregulated contact of men, white, brown, or black, armed with terrible power to destroy and corrupt. Britain’s record is mixed. She could be slow, neglectful, unimaginative. She could, however, have done much more if the sudden growth of African nationalism had not prematurely cut short her slow and steady work on the foundations of the new states. Once that had happened she could only say, as when a father begins to build a model constructional toy with his children, and is suddenly called away: ‘Look—there are the rest of the pieces. I cannot do any more. Build it yourselves in your own way’. The simile has some value, though the Africans, of course, are not-children. They will use the materials of the West, but they will use them their own way and will add more, much more, of their own creation. Above all they alone can provide the dynamo of nationalism, which will make the model work.