

A RETIRING FAITH: THE IDEOLOGY OF EMPIRE, REVISED

Prologue: Durbar Hall, 1931

New Delhi began as an imperial dream, before the Great War.

It would stand on a hill beyond the gates of the Delhi of the Moguls.

Here, if anywhere, would be the shrine to an India forever British, and an empire that found civilizations of mud and left them marble.

The “Rome of Asia,” as one guidebook called it.

The greatest architectural achievement was that of Edwin Lutyens.

Lutyens had married a Viceroy’s daughter.

But beyond the round of imperial parties, he didn’t spend much time in India.

Six weeks a year were enough.

Indian workers could do the building.
Sikhs could handle the contracting.

English stone-masons could supervise the whole.

One Indian asked him to design a house for him.

Lutyens: “I don’t build houses. I build palaces.”

As he did. And his New Delhi is all palace.¹

Lutyen's masterwork was the Viceroy's palace, on the hilltop.

the Acropolis of empire.

But we associate the Acropolis with Greece, when it was a democracy.

This really was a regal palace.

You had to go up the Kingway to get to it, a broad road running straight from the ruined citadel of the Purana Qila two miles away past the figure of George V, in his cupola under the Arch of India, where the names of the war dead were inscribed.

You went through great wrought-iron gates, through a courtyard with statues of viceroys.

Then up ceremonial steps, large and imposing.

And into the throne room of the Viceroy.

No Moghul would have been ashamed to live here.

Louis XIV might not have complained.
It outdid Versailles in size.

Six hundred feet square

12 enclosed courtyards.
4 ½ acres of land covered in stone pile.

¹ Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 375.

And atop it all was a shallow dome, looking a tad Byzantine, but modeled on the Buddhist temple in Bhopal.

Marble arches, marble floors, and office on office for the government of India. Wings, courtyards, corridors.

Gardens of roses and ponds and pools and clipped trees and fountains in the courtyards.

For the Viceroy's private comfort, rooms that none but the best English country-house could outdo.

For the baths, broad pools that a Roman emperor would have envied.

For the library, everything a squire would want to read... or have read to him.

It took 6000 servants to take care of the Viceroy's wants in a palace this size. So Lutyens built them more than quarters. He built them a town all their own, beyond the gardens.

... gardens tended by 400 gardeners

... including 50 boys whose one task was to scare birds out of the vegetables.

The stables had room for a regiment of cavalry.

The garage had plenty of room for the three Rolls Royces a Viceroy required.

Game Room...

Tinman's Shop ...

A tent store...

A printing press for the Viceroy to issue circulars, announcements
and menus...

The tailor's shop ...

Plus electric ovens and flush toilets –

What Emperor could have asked for more?²

And the Palace stood among the closed-off palaces of other Indian princes.

There was a Secretariat and a legislative assembly hall.

Columns on columns held up long halls.

Arches could be seen through arches.

There were parks and a palace for the Commander in Chief.

All of it seemed to cry, "I am Ozymandias, king of kings.
Look upon my works, ye mighty, and despair!"

² Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 376-79.

“I remember how as a boy I stood in front of a world map, and gloated over the immense areas painted in British imperial red; it seemed to me just too bad that areas hardly less immense were painted in Russian imperial green.... Or was it yellow? Anyway, I can’t imagine any small boy doing the same thing to-day. The idea of ‘dominion over palm and pine’ seemed grand in those days. Nowadays it gives many British people quite a guilty feeling. They feel they ought to apologize for having made an empire. “In the bad old times,” they say, “we grabbed all we could. But that was long ago. We’ve changed since then. We wouldn’t do it now....”³

But WHY wouldn’t they, in 1943?

And WHY did they feel like that?

Where did the change come from?

And why did English people lose the hunger for empire as a form of dominion?

Has it something to do with war?

Can you only feel good about dominion – a democratic people – if you won it as a prize, after a fight, after real resistance?

Can you feel that it’s something that has to be earned?

What happens if you DON’T earn it? What happens when there is no heroism – just double-entry bookkeeping and filling out permits?

³ W. K. Hancock, **Empire in the Changing World** (New York: Penguin, 1943), 69.

We can carry that loss of faith too far. We probably do.

In the 1920s and 1930s, it's certainly true that the British empire was working towards liquidating direct rule of its subjects, one place and then another.

Yet there was a deep loyalty to the notion of empire, and, if it didn't have romance glued all over it, it was still something to hold onto.

Remove the formal elements of colonial subordination? Sure! – in the Dominions.

Concede that there was no legal or constitutional requirement that they hold onto their imperial connection?

Certainly! Everything should be based on the consent of the electorates in the Dominions.

That was the whole point of the Balfour doctrine, in 1926.,

... the constitutional equality of the dominions

... their complete internal and external autonomy

... their right to come and go from the Empire as they pleased.

Now, this certainly changed the FORM of the Empire.

But did it change the substance?

The people who ran the Empire didn't think so.

The Balfour Doctrine wasn't meant as a surrender –

– nor as a graceful way of opening the exit, so countries could leave.

It was meant to bind the empire closer together.

And those who put it through were sure that the Empire **WOULD** stay together – that the states had more in common, and more mutual interest, == than they had different.

... a community of interests!

... a community of sentiments!

... a community of ideals!

Nobody's going to leave!

Nobody's going to look for some other world Power to be their patron!

In fact, the best way to keep the empire together is to tell people, you can leave when you want.

There's nothing that makes people want to get out of a room more than somebody locking the door, y'know!

Britain didn't devolve the empire because they KNEW it would break up sooner or later, and were trying to make the crash into a soft landing.

They devolved it because they KNEW it WOULDN'T.

They were tremendously confident that the Empire was going to last.⁴

⁴ John Darwin, "Imperialism in Decline? Tendencies in British Imperial Policy between the Wars," Historical Journal, 23 (1980): 678-79.

It was sure to last.

There was NO real danger of it falling.

You can afford to let a dog off the leash, for instance, if you
know he's so well trained that he won't run away.

It's dogs you don't think you can control that you have to keep
close and tight.

But how COULD Britain have been so overconfident?

Weren't the Dominions getting more and more distinctive?

... less British?

Ah – but people from the British Isles would keep on emigrating there.

There'd still be the Old Stock.

It'd been that way in the 1800s.

It'd be that way in the 1920s.⁵

The Mother Country really IS a Mother to countrymen, who
find somewhere else to live.

And who would let their mother down?

⁵ Darwin, "Imperialism in Decline?" Historical Journal, 23 (1980): 662-663.

Now, this notion held true till the 1930s.

The slump changed it.

British people didn't go abroad.

In fact, many more came TO England.

So the hope of Empire fell, before a falling birthrate.

All of this, though, only made English planners talk about encouraging emigration

to keep the Empire full of "Britishness."

There was another assumption in the 1920s...

– the colonies, economically, are going to stay as they are.

They make raw materials

They import our finished goods.

So they can't do without England.⁶

– the assumption, of course, missed that they were having an Industrial Revolution all their own.

⁶ Darwin, "Imperialism in Decline?" Historical Journal, 23 (1980): 663.

– but it was easy to miss. Look at the big picture of Australia in the 1920s – what do you see?

Agricultural expansion, and lots of it.

Opening of new grain regions in Canada.

A New Zealand just as dependent on selling food to Britain as it ever was. Can't get along without it.⁷

– and even where industrialism changed how people made a living, it didn't seem to be changing the picture of the future of Empire.

Now, you take Ireland. It's getting a more modern economy.

But is it less dependent on British markets?

No! It gets more dependent every year.

In fact, it's never needed British markets more.

By 1924, a good 98% of all Irish exports go to the UK.⁸

When De Valera snarled that Ireland had become England's "Kitchen garden," he was onto something serious.

⁷ Darwin, "Imperialism in Decline?" **Historical Journal**, 23 (1980): 663-664; A. Ross, "Reluctant Dominion or Dutiful Daughter," **Journal of Commonwealth Political Studies**, 10 (1972): 41.

⁸ J. Meenan, **The Irish Economy Since 1922** (Liverpool, 1970), 76; D. O'Sullivan, **The Irish Free State and Its Senate** (London, 1940), 327.

– or look at South Africa. Its big industry is extractive, and it needs the world market desperately. Between 1922 and 1929, just 50% of all its exports are gold. In the mid-1930s, it's 70%.⁹

There were other sure bonds of empire, and one was loans and investments.

It kept flowing into the Dominions.

British firms were eager to lend money there.

But of course, if the colonies are their debtors, the creditor calls the tune.

It holds the whip hand, when it comes to economic policy.

And in every Dominion city, there's businessmen, powerful ones, who have a vested interest in seeing that the empire and the imperial connection survives.

... if they want their banks to profit

... if they want a good market for their exports

... if they want their railway systems invested in

⁹ Darwin, "Imperialism in Decline?" Historical Journal, 664.

... if they want to see their public finances stable.¹⁰

Well, what about the Balfour report's giving the Dominions the right to run foreign policies as they saw fit?

That gave a lot of freedom, all right.

But in the 1920s, it was easy to figure, they wouldn't use it.

Australia and New Zealand have never needed His Majesty's
Ships and army more...

Japan isn't a pest any more.
It's a standing menace.

¹⁰ Darwin, "Imperialism in Decline?" **Historical Journal**, 664-665.

They can't protect themselves.¹¹

Canada wasn't about to tell the British navy: git outta Halifax.

The navy protected THEM.

And what kind of navy did Canada have?

Would Canada or South Africa go its own way?

Well, naturally. Britain could see that.

They'd seen it already – in the Chanak crisis.

It was a reality. Where Britain's interests were in danger, there would be no automatic commitment from everywhere.

But where the EMPIRE'S interests were in danger...
that was another matter.

So if there was a major war, British planners never doubted –
The dominions would be present and accounted for.

And Britain WOULDN'T GO TO WAR unless the empire
was in danger.

The only REAL crisis, then, the Empire would stand together as
one. And the REAL crises are the only ones that count.¹²

¹¹ Darwin, "Imperialism in Decline?" Historical Journal, 23 (1980): 666.

¹² Darwin, "Imperialism in Decline?" Historical Journal, 666.

Imperial voices

The imperial voices never stilled through the 1920s.

Books appeared every year, defending the Empire and hailing the dominions.

They spoke in terms of the heroics of empire-building –
and in terms of race.

They pointed out what mineral wealth underlay the colonies, with lovely maps.

And the pictures kept appearing, of Gordon facing black spearmen on the palace
Steps.

School children got a half holiday on Empire Day.¹³

Boy Scouts continued to wear those wide-brimmed hats from Boer War days.

And there still were Rhodes Scholars every year, supposedly to bind the Anglo-Saxons
of the world together and teach the right values to young men.

¹³ Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 313.

You could be American and get one.

Or German, for that matter.

The institutions that pushed the ideology of imperialism still survived...

The Royal Empire society with its vast club rooms and library of imperial books and bedrooms decorated by colonels from the colonies, and club rooms of exhibits from Africa and Asia

The British Empire League

The Victoria League

The British Empire Union

The Patriotic League of Britons Overseas

The Empire Day Movement

And you could rely on the Tory popular press...

The DAILY EXPRESS of Lord Beaverbrook especially

Beaverbrook, born Max Aitken, in Canada, was a true believer in Empire

His Empire Crusade was behind all his editorials – and he carried it on against Prime Ministers in the the Tory party, with visions that Joe Chamberlain

would have appreciated –

Empire Free Trade

a common-market within the Empire and walling
out imports from outside of it

... a throwback to the mercantilism of the 1730s

What could give the colonies more prosperity?

What could bind the constituent parts of Empire closer?

Wembley

But the biggest, most palpable example of Selling Empire to the Masses was paid for
by 10 million pounds of businessmen's money.

In the spring of 1924, the Empire put on a show – greatest since the Crystal Palace in
1851 – an exhibition in Wembley, a suburb on the north end of London

220 acres

Big concrete and steel pavilions

and all to show what the Dominions, colonies, and England could do.

Strong, powerful, but with a neo-classic look

and gardens landscaped around artificial streams, in a tasteful

Japanese or Ceylonese way.¹⁴

The roads (15 miles of them) were laid out with imperial names attached –

(Rudyard Kipling chose them)

Drake's Way

Dominion Way

Commonwealth Way

Empire Way – which went straight through the center and up to the
Empire Stadium, 6 ½ times the size of Trafalgar Square

Anson's Way

Not to mention a Coliseum, a la Rome – a stadium just made for football
or gladiatorial games.

For this celebration of empire, all had been prepared.

Through the neighborhood, roads had been widened.

There needed to be room for a host of cars and busses.

The pavilions alone took 2000 workers to put up.

And the buildings seemed made to last.

¹⁴ Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 301.

None of your Plaster of Paris palaces, like the Chicago world's fair!

Concrete – 25,000 tons of it in the stadium alone, plus a half million rivets and 500 tons of steel.¹⁵

And the exhibition buildings were concrete, too.

Everything was on a grand scale....

Palace of Art

Palace of Engineering, the largest concrete building in the world

Palace of Industry

Government Building

Union Jacks flew everywhere, and by night, the sights were floodlit.

The King opened Wembley with a speech, broadcast into a million homes by radio (BBC) that anyone could get on a gramophone record that very afternoon

(Though why they would want to is anybody's guess; compared to George V, even Warren G. Harding sounded profound)

Sir Edward Elgar conducted the 3000-person choir for the

¹⁵ Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 300.

opening ceremonies

and they sang “Land of Hope and Glory,” his great patriotic
hymn¹⁶

The man who designed the Viceroy’s palace in New Delhi designed
the Queen’s Doll House.

The sights were endless...

A reproduction of Niagara Falls

A reconstruction of the tomb of Tutankhamen

(After all, who really owned Egypt?

And his discoverer was Lord Carnarvon)

A host of trumpeters from Tibet

A model of the Prince of Wales, made from butter...
but it was imperial butter, from Canada

¹⁶ Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 300-01; Kenneth Walthew, “The British Empire Exhibition of 1924,” *History Today*, 31 (August 1981): 38-39.

the Burmese children's ballet

a life-sized replica of the tomb of King Tut!

a waterfall made of chocolate!¹⁷

Fruits from Australia, in tremendous array

Displays on Hong Kong and Fiji and West Africa

Re-enactments of big battles from the Great War

Battle of Ypres
the storming of Zeebrugge

A rodeo

Plenty of fireworks

An Imperial Scout Jamboree

And two exhibits – one showing West Africa natives weaving
their simple crafts –

and another titled, “What the Gold Coast African Wants”

(noooo, not liberty.

Lace parasols –
Breakfast hams –

¹⁷ “Britain's Empire Packed into One Big Show,” *Literary Digest* (June 14, 1924): 44.

Steel animal traps –

Perfume –
Peppermint bulls' eyes)¹⁸

And, the heart and soul of it all, the Pageant of Empire.

With tableaux showing...

George III Bidding Farewell to Captain Cook

Imperial Sylvan Scenes

Admiral Blake and the Barbary Pirates

Great events in Australia

New Zealand

South Africa

Canada¹⁹

300 horses!

500 donkeys!

1,000 doves!

72 monkeys

730 camels

3 bears

and a macaw!

They picked an Admiral to play Sir Francis Drake.

Mrs. Asquith, the ex-PM's wife got to be Queen Elizabeth.²⁰

¹⁸ "Britain's Empire Packed into One Big Show," *Literary Digest* (June 14, 1924): 44.

¹⁹ Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 300.

²⁰ Kenneth Walthew, "The British Empire Exhibition of 1924," *History Today*, 31 (August 1981): 39.

If it took you a week, you couldn't possibly see everything on display.

And a day ... out of the question.

What more do you one for one shilling sixpence?

Four times as many people went to it as to the Great Exhibition in 1851, and, when it came to cost, it was a whole lot more to put on a show like this.

But the part of the Exhibition people liked the most had nothing to do with Empire.

It was an amusement park, 47 acres of it

A scenic railway

A toboggan ice-slide

A giant switchback²¹

A Mountain water-chute

And the "Crazy Kitchen" where you got 9 balls and for a shilling could smash all the crockery you wanted.²²

As the unhappy father in Noel Coward's *The Happy Breed* complains to his children,

"I've brought you here to see the wonders of the Empire, and all you want to do is go to the dodgems."²³

²¹ Which at least felt life-threatening.

Joke: Old lady, about to ride it, to the guard: What would happen if the car went off the track?

Guard: "That, madam, would depend on the life you have led.

From "Britain's Empire Packed into One Big Show," *Literary Digest* (June 14, 1924): 42.

²² "Britain's Empire Packed into One Big Show," *Literary Digest* (June 14, 1924): 44.

²³ Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 302.

And though 27 million visitors came – and many visited more than once –
the Wembley Exhibition lost money.

The fact that Britain put on an Exhibition like that, though, may have been more
ominous than the matter of pounds and pence.

Till the Great War, the Empire was something people took for granted.

It was something they seemed to value.

Now the imperialists weren't so sure.

They needed to put on a show to remind people of what
the Empire meant for England.

It was like an advertisement to go with the twelve- volume
Survey of the British Empire, issued to go with the
event.

And what did the show remind them?

Not of the Romance, the heroism of Empire.

Its value was cash, produce, and products.

Wembley preached to the converted.

The Bright Young Things just looked on and laughed.

Some even found a society, WGTW – Won't Go To Wembley.²⁴

Bertie Wooster, P. G. Wodehouse's chappie:

“I mean to say, millions of people, no doubt, are so constituted that they scream with joy and excitement at the spectacle of a stuffed porcupine fish or a glass jar of seeds from Western Australia – but not Bertram... By the time we had tottered out of the Gold Coast village and were looking towards the Palace of Machinery, everything pointed to my shortly executing a quiet sneak in the direction of that rather jolly Planters' Bar in the West Indies

²⁴ Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*,

section...²⁵

Of the Wembley Exhibition, nothing remains.

The lonely 'burbs stretch wide and far away.

The palaces turned into warehouses and offices.

The Never-Stop Railway terminal became an electrical repair shop.

Empire Way, for the last half-century, has been called Olympic Way

(The 1948 Olympics were held there).

There's just one exception: the Stadium.

But then, football outlasts empires.²⁶

²⁵ Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 302.

²⁶ Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 302n.

Yet the skepticism was there, and it got stronger.
 The day of St. George is a musty affair
 Which Russians and Greeks are permitted to share;
 The day of Trafalgar is Spanish in name
 And the Spaniards refuse to pronounce it the same;
 But the day of the Empire from Canada came
 With Morden and Borden and Beaverbrook's fame
 And saintly seraphical souls such as they:
 And that is the meaning of Empire Day.

– G. K. Chesterton

The uncertainty about what Empire was all about went to the heart of the system.

It had an evangelical basis, certainly. The Empire was carried on for the good of its subjects.

The Empire as, in one commissioner's words, "a house of peace, justice, and liberty."

That meant that Empire wasn't meant first and foremost to serve Britain's own interests.

No one would ask: is it worth the cost?

Are we making the most money out of it that we could?

Is it making us fitter to fight a war against some other Great Power?

Perish such base considerations in so holy a cause!

One disgusted historian would write later: “The colonies were not so much an empire as the field for an overseas Toynbee Hall mission.”

French, Dutch, and Belgian empires made no secret that the one purpose colonies had was to make the mother country rich and strong.

Say what you will, it was a clear and fixed purpose.

But as even some colonial officers admitted, they often weren't sure WHAT their policies were driving at, nor did anyone else.

So instead of the Colonial Office telling the local officers what to do, most policy came from the colonies themselves.

They made policy to fit local circumstances, and expected the Government back home to back them up.

That way of thinking typified the greatest of the Colonial Office's civil servants, Sir Ralph Furse.

Furse, for thirty years, handled the recruitment of the colonial service.

He was a Victorian country gentleman in a postwar age –

humane, optimistic, and above all, moral.

His career started at Balliol, where he had come into contact with Lord Milner.

For him, imperialism wasn't a matter of dollars and cents – pounds and pence.

It was trusteeship

And the men he hired were high-minded men from the best schools

men of vision with high ideals of service devoted to duty.

What he wanted – what he got – was men who knew the country that they were posted to inside out.

It became their second home.

And when they planned out policy, they put that country first in view.

They had no broad conception of what colonial policy ought to be doing.

They didn't look down the line.

Their daily chores were their whole life.

The problem with this is, an imperial program can't be the sum of its parts.

Somebody needs to be planning at the top.

Or else the Colonial Office ends up like a cork, swept this way and that
by the latest small wave that rushes over it.

What's more, the big planners found themselves getting nowhere.

Look to one Colonial Secretary in the 1920s, L. S. Amery.

A boy at Harrow in the 1880s
Deep-imbued with the romance of Empire
War correspondent in the Boer War

A champion of army reform and conscription

A brave sub-altern in the Great War.

A short, stocky, terrier of a man

If anyone could turn drift into direction, Amery seemed the very man.

The Colonial Office had no expert staff. Amery started building
one with economic and financial advisers...

advisers on medicine
education
agriculture
fisheries
veterinary science

Surely it was time for a coordinated effort, empire-wide, to look
into tropic diseases and their cure.

Amery set up a Colonial Medical Research Committee to do it.

He could go that far. But no further. In 1927, he called a Conference of Colonial officers, to work out a central research organization and staff, to coordinate and make policy, especially involving agriculture and land policy, trade and transport and marketing.

All these things needed to be handled globally.

Unilever could do it.

Shell Oil could do it.

U. S. Steel could do it.

Why couldn't the Colonial Office?

But even Amery wasn't willing to order it done.

The old cure: let's hold conferences every so often and come up with agreements about what we'll all cooperate in doing.

It never worked, and it didn't work now.

The colonial governments thought the idea of a central research organization was a good one – in principle.

But in practice?

Just try something like an Empire Marketing Board, to

finance a stronger agricultural service.

That would take money from the colonies – 1/4 of 1%
of their revenues.

Would they cough up? Nary a cough.

It wouldn't be till the 1930s that the Gold Coast got a Department of
Animal Health – with a staff of only eight people.

No country in West Africa was more valuable to England than Nigeria.

But as of 1940, it had a Department of Geological Survey
that wasn't much better than a title over a door.