ENVOI: ONE WITH NINEVEH AND TYRE

Prologue: Gordon Who?

When Sudan became free, it had no need for statues of empire-builders.

The statue of General Gordon, riding on a camel, was shipped off to a boy’s school in England – the Gordon Boys School in Woking, Surrey -- and there it is today.

There’s a revealing story – not true, most likely.

Place: the imperial Sudan.
Man goes every Sunday with his little boy on a walk to pay his respects at the statue
The boy is entranced.

And then came the day of heartbreak. Family leaving the Sudan.
The little boy is crushed. He can’t stand to leave Gordon behind.

They take one last stroll. Boy in tears: “Good-bye, Gordon.”
Truly a sprig of empire, that lad!

Except that on the way home he says: “Daddy, who is that man riding on Gordon?”

Memory of Empire faded so fast that by the 1980s, General Gordon meant as much to English schoolkids as Red Grange would to ours.

By 1968 there was very little empire left.
14 British colonies, most of them quite small.

In population, they made up less than one percent of the old British Empire.

The Pacific islands were run by a Colonial office hardly visible in size or scope.

January 19, 1968 seems a fitting farewell to empire.

On that afternoon, the Prime Minister announced the last of the legions was coming home.

Aden had been abandoned already.

Plans had been made to take the forces out of Singapore.

Of 100,000 men who had been there in the mid-1960s, just about half were gone already.

The original plan had been to have them begone by the mid-1970s.

Now they were called home forthwith.

The British budget couldn’t afford to do anything else.

All that would be left now in the Far East would be a small garrison in Hong Kong.

In the Middle East, the 8,400 men in the Persian Gulf were brought home too.
For the first time in three centuries, Britain was solely a European power.

We can see, if we want to, how America inherited much of the English-speaking empire, culturally.

In the early 1980s, you still could only get Oreos in gourmet food stores in Australia.

By the 1990s, Aussies joked that they were the 51st state.

One critic complained that America had become Australians’ biggest excuse.

– if there was a medical problem to solve they would ask, what do the americans think?

If Americans thought it was terrific, Australians would say, “Well, there wouldn’t be any point in us trying to get involved, too.”

If Americans weren’t interested, Australians would say, “Oh, the idea can’t be any bloody good. Why bother if the Americans don’t want to
But Australia and New Zealand spun off in other directions, too.

Over the last twenty years, they have become more a part of the Pacific rim.

It’s Japanese money that is opening their iron mines in the north and West.

It’s Chinese and Singapore trade that Australia is courting.

Australia kept some English, and changed some of it for American.

If it has to do with railroads, it’s English

railway, not railroad

goods train, not freight train

guard’s van, not caboose

But the word lorry has vanished; they’re trucks now.
And they ride in station wagons, not estate cars.

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They get water out of a tap, not a faucet.

But they ride in elevators, and in lifts.

Their cars don’t run on gas, they run on petrol.

But they go down freeways, not motorways.

And, hard as it may be to believe, the term kangaroo court isn’t Australian at all.

They got it from America.

The “Detritus of Empire”

A.k.a. leftovers.

There was another straw in the wind. It came over events in Kenya.

Kenya was never a matter of black and white.

Long before the first British officer set foot in East Africa, there were Asians there.

But it was with the Empire that the numbers leaped up.

When the Kenyan railway was built, it was Indian labour that did it.
They were brought to camps along the line.

Most of them went back to India, but some didn’t.

Others came to engage in trade.

Most of them were from India, and not all India.

Gujerat (western India, north of Bombay)
Punjab (northwestern India)

The Chinese came from the tiny cluster of villages around Canton in southern China.²

By 1945, you could find Asians in everything...

Business
The police force
The bureaucracy
The professions

They had the commercial skills that Kenya needed to prosper.

In fact, throughout all East Africa, they were the financiers and go-getters.

Go to Kampala or Dar es Salaam, and you find that 75% of the buildings and real estate were Asian.

75% of the investments were Asian.

Go to Nairobi, and walk down Kenyatta Avenue, named for the revolutionary founder.

The first African owned shop didn’t open till 1966!

Every other shop was Asian.

Go to the movie houses in the big cities.

Most of them are Hindi films, and the audience all came from India, and the topics are things that deal with Indian culture.3

In every town, they were likely to be the merchants...

and probably the money-lenders.

The “Jews of Africa,” they were called by European settlers – and it was not meant kindly.

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3 Bharati, Asians in East Africa, 150.
When Kenya became independent, it changed the definition of citizenship.

You had to be African descent to be a citizen –

or have a family that had lived in Kenya a long time.

Asians got two years to apply for citizenship — and to get it they would
have to renounce any other citizenship they had, including the
British citizenship that everybody in the Commonwealth was
entitled to.

Most Asians didn’t... maybe 20,000 non-Africans out of 225,000 Asians
and white Europeans.

The Asians who stayed in Kenya kept on working, but they were hated,
despised, the target for every cheap political attack.

Africans insisted: when we fought for independence, where were they?

In the counting house, counting their money!

Certainly not on the barricades!

You ever see an Indian Mau Mau?

The fact that the Asians didn’t apply for Kenyan citizenship only proved
that they weren’t good Kenyans and never would be.

But of course, those that DID apply obviously must have some
really wicked motive.
And those that did found a logjam of red tape and excuses to keep them from getting it.

By 1967, anyone who wasn’t a citizen of Kenya had to get a work permit to work.

That year, a Trade Licensing Act shut off big parts of the country to them for doing any kind of trade.

Now, Kenya’s government embarked on ethnic cleansing to drive out the Asians.
Their work permits were no longer renewable.
They were driven out of certain sectors of the economy.
They were fired from the civil service.

If there was a time to leave, the time was now.
But leave to where?

Fortunately, the Asians did have one thing to fall back on: that token of Commonwealth membership.
They had a British passport.
Legally, that gave them the right to come into the United Kingdom, as many as they pleased, no strings attached.

Oh, it’s true the immigration act of 1962 put limits on who could come into England from the Commonwealth.
But Asians living in Africa were special, and the ones in Kenya specially special.

They had been given that promise when Kenya became independent in 1963.

Or so they thought. But in February 1968, the Labour government announced that Asian passports would no longer be honored.

A week later, it became law.

Planefuls of Asians were turned away.

That meant the shutting out of some 200,000 people, all of whom now had no country to go to.

Many of them would remain without a country in the year 2000.

A 1981 law did give them British Overseas Membership.

Nice title; but it didn’t give them a right to come into England.

What had been happening, in fact, was a shutting of the doors, step by step....

Quotas had been set up by law in 1962.
Three years later, a new law cut the quotas in half.

And in 1968 the Commonwealth Immigrants Act went furthest of all.

It was like a death-certificate on the whole idea of the Commonwealth as We-band-of-brothers.4

The vestiges of Empire diminish, year on year. But we can’t really escape them, if only in the language.

A good 900 words in the Oxford English Dictionary came from India.

Some of them were invented by Englishmen, to fit conditions.

civil servant – that was a name the East India Company created

Blighty – for old England; it comes from bilayati, a Hindu word meaning “foreign” or “European.”

Soldiers picked it up and took it.

Juggernaut – the Hindu god Jagannath, has a great festival, where there’s a 16 wheeled wooden carriage rolled out along the streets from the shrine down to the sea.

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4 On all this turning point and a strong case that implicit promises had been betrayed, see Randall Hansen, “The Kenyan Asians, British Politics, and the Commonwealth Immigrants Act, 1968,” Historical Journal, 42 (September 1999): 809-834.
The wheels are immense – seven feet in diameter.

Pilgrims come, and throw themselves in front of it, to get crushed. A very holy thing to do.

*Pariah* – the Tamil name for one of the lower castes in southern India

Or how about...

- bandanna
- bangle
- Brahmin
- bungalow
- calico
- cheroot
- chintz
- chit
- chukker
- chutney
- cot
- cummerbund
- cushy
- dinghy
- dungaree
- gymkhana
- gunny
- guru
- jodhpurs
- jungle
- jute
- khaki
- lascar
- loot
- musk
- punch (*meaning the drink*)
- pundit
- pajamas
- Sandal
- seersucker
- shawl
India will never be completely Indian, really.

Calcutta still has its English classical style buildings –

Bombay its Gothic Revival

You can go to Madras and find a firm of printers called Higginbotham.

They are all Indian. But they kept the old name.

All over India, they play cricket –

just as the English play that sport they got from India, polo.

There’s no city of any size that doesn’t have its big stadium for crowds
to watch the cricket matches – the five day Test Match.

Even Republic Day, every January, is a reminder of where India’s republic
came from.

In the procession, the president of the Republic rides up the old
King’s Way in New Delhi, in a carriage built specially
for the old Viceroyds.

That evening at the Great Place, the soldiers carry out the ritual,
Beating the Retreat.
They end just at sunset, when the flag is brought down the staff by two troopers in immaculate white gloves.

And, to honor it, the military bands play the Christian song the British gave them eons ago:

“Abide with me.”

And still, the binding force of language of India remains what it was in British times: English.

For without the English language, there would BE no India.

There would be areas talking Hindi...

and Tamil

and Malayam

They still do; and they don’t understand each other at all.

And because they don’t, English is the one language they have in common.

Today, you can find about 3000 newspapers in English in India. Out of 16,000, it seems like not much.

But only Hindi has more.

There are just seven daily papers.
Four of them are in English.\textsuperscript{5}

In several states, English is the official language.

In every state, it is the second language, and gets taught at every stage of the school system.\textsuperscript{6}

India remains as England made it, under the rule of law.

It has a constitution.

.... large parts of which are word for word from the 1935 Government of India Act.

It has a Bill of Rights.

And it sticks to the British legal system that Lord Macauley drew up nearly two hundred years ago.

India kept a parliament and a prime minister.

Tea planting stayed in British hands for generations.

\textsuperscript{5} The Calcutta Telegraph, the Bombay Times of India, the Lucknow Pioneer, and the Madras Mail.

So did a lot of the electrical utility companies.

As I was crossing Trafalgar Square
Whose but the Admiral’s shadow hand
Should tap my shoulder. At my ear:
‘You, sir, stay-at-home citizen
Poet, here’s more use for your pen
Than picking scabs. Tell them in England
This: when first I stuck my head in the air,

Winched from a cockpit’s tar and blood
To my crow’s nest over London, I
Looked down on a singular crowd
Moving with the confident swell
Of the sea. As it rose and fell
Every pulse in the estuary
Carried them quayward, carried them seaward.

Box-wallah, missionary, clerk,
Lancer, planter, I saw them all
Linked like the waves on the waves embark.
Their eyes looked out – as yours look in –
To harbor names on the cabin-
Trunks carrying topees to Bengal,
Maxims or gospels to lighten a dark

Continent. Blatant as the flag
They went out under, were the bright
Abstractions nailed to every mast.
Sharpshooters since have riddled most
and buried an empire in their rags –
Scrivener, do you dare to write
A little ‘e’ in the epilogue

To an empire that spread its wings
Wider than Rome? They are folded,
You say, with the maps and flags; awnings
And verandas overrun
By impis of the ant; sun-
Downers sunk, and the planters’ blood
Turned tea or siphoned into rubber saplings.

My one eye reports that their roads
Remain, their laws, their language
Seeding all winds. They were no gods
From harnessed clouds, as the islanders
Thought them, nor were they monsters
But men, as you stooped over your page
And you and you and these wind-driven crowds

Are and are not. For you have lost
Their rhythm, the pulse of the sea
In their salt blood. Your heart has missed
The beat of centuries, its channels
Silted to their source. The muscles
Of the will stricken by dystrophy
Dishonor those that bareback rode the crest

Of untamed seas. Acknowledge
Their energy. If you condemn
Their violence in a violent age
Speak of their courage. Mock their pride
When, having built as well, in as wide
A compass, you have none. Tell them in
England this.”

And a pigeon sealed the page.

– John Stallworthy