

**The Decline of Dominance: India and the Careers of
Lionel Curtis, Philip Kerr, and Reginald Coupland**

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INTRODUCTION

When A.F. Thornton observed, more than twenty years ago, that "imperialism is more a thought than a fact,"¹ he recognized that compromise is the essence of imperial relationships. True, it must necessarily be a compromise based on dominance – the projection of it, on the one hand, by the imperial power, and the acceptance of it, on the other, by the subordinate population – but its concrete reality is the result of subtle negotiations between the parties. Within the equation of power, there are an almost infinite number of variations, which explains why the very concept of "imperialism" has been such an extraordinarily resilient phenomenon. The relationship which it describes can be altered not only by economic and military forces but also, and perhaps most profoundly, by political and psychological ones as well. The matrix of domination which is imperialism's central characteristic is, despite the best efforts of its proponents, inherently unstable and, hence, must constantly be renegotiated.

In the case of nineteenth and twentieth century Anglo-Indian relations, however, political domination was projected through the prism of liberalism. From the 1830s, when Utilitarians held sway, through the post-Mutiny decades, when Liberal Authoritarians prevailed, until the great upheavals of the twentieth century, India was viewed as a laboratory by political theorists eager to construct a rational, ordered, benign framework for society. Although Liberals were overwhelmed in Britain after 1918 by the

growing strength of the Labor and Conservative parties, India appeared to be one arena where their philosophical idealism might still triumph.²

In this last phase of liberal imperialism three men took up the challenge: Lionel Curtis, Philip Kerr (Lord Lothian), and Reginald Coupland. One after another, in each of the three periods of Indian agitation – 1916-1918, 1928-1935, and 1941-1942 – Curtis, Lothian, and Coupland attempted to create and "sell" a new vision of Britain's imperial mission to British politicians and administrators as well as to Indian nationalists. Each man used the term "Commonwealth of Nations" to describe that mission, but each man's conception of that ideal was unique. Each one attempted to re-cast the entire basis of the Anglo-Indian relationship. Intellectually, they were the final links in a chain of imperial defenders which stretched all the way back to Edmund Burke.

On the other hand, these three men shared a perspective which sets them apart from their predecessors. Their outlook had been shaped, to a greater or lesser degree, by their contacts with Alfred Milner, both in South Africa and in The Round Table organization. Operating in the non-partisan (but not non-ideological) Milnerite tradition as advocates of political rationality, they occupied ambiguous positions as "outside advisors" to the British Government, the Government of India, and to Indian nationalists. Mediators as well as theorists, each man tried to build an informal consensus between Anglo-Indian official and non-official principals based on their own conceptions of a British Commonwealth of Nations.

They failed. Just as liberalism in Britain became irrelevant to contemporary political debate, so, too, did the perspective of liberalism become irrelevant in an increasing polarized Indian society. The inability of Curtis, Lothian, and Coupland to

affect the trajectory of Anglo-Indian relations was mirrored by the waning fortunes of the Indian Liberal Party. In both cases, individuals were forced to compete with mass organizations in a political marketplace more attuned to the slogans of democracy than the elitism of liberalism.

It is because of this great ferment of cultures, values, and ideologies that twentieth century Anglo-Indian relations has been – and continues to be – a fertile subject for scholarly investigation. Nicholas Mansergh, D.A. Low, S.R.Mehrotra, Hugh Tinker, and Robin Moore have provided detailed examinations of many of the critical equations inherent in imperialism's delicate balance, covering the transition of the Empire to the Commonwealth, the rise of the Congress Party, the influence of racial prejudice, and the impact of British party politics on Indian affairs. In addition, numerous personal accounts supplied by those people directly involved in the struggle for independence (or their biographers) have proven to be invaluable historical resources, especially since personal rather than institutional interaction was the predominant form of contact between Britain and India. Recent regional studies and monographs by South Asian historians have additional perspectives.³ All of this research, in turn, forms a chapter of the broader studies by Thornton, Corelli Barnett, D.C. Watt, Paul Kennedy and others, who have attempted to draw up a balance sheet for the imperial experience as a whole.

There has been relatively little examination, however, (and the little that has been done has been largely uncritical⁴), of the nature and impact of imperial ideology on twentieth century Anglo-Indian relations. This is odd because topics such as trusteeship, westernization and race relations were such prominent features of the nineteenth century imperial rhetoric and have been extensively explored both by contemporary observers

and by historians. Yet the ideology of empire evolved into philosophies of commonwealth, articulated by Curtis, Lothian, and Coupland.

It is not enough, however, to base an analysis of these men's roles in Anglo-Indian affairs solely on their political writings. Consideration must also be given to their actions as imperial agents, and when this is done – when rhetoric is compared to action – a more rounded picture of the decline of the ideology of dominance occurs. When their Indian careers are considered chronologically and in the context of specific historical circumstances, it becomes evident that the gradual disappearance of ideology as a source of imperial energy must be included in any evaluation of Anglo-Indian relations.

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Although the struggle between Britain and India ended more than forty years ago, its protracted nature continues to provide an illustrative case study of cross-cultural political interaction. The problems of racism and the division of power among nations which Curtis, Lothian, and Coupland tackled remain the core issues of international dialogue. Their initiatives and their frustrations continue to be relevant to the politics of global harmony.

¹ A.P. Thornton, Doctrines of Imperialism, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1965) 2.

² For the most recent views see Ainslie T. Embree, "Pledged to India: The Liberal Experiment, 1885-1909," and Hugh Tinker, "British Liberalism and India, 1917-1945," both in J.M.W. Bean, ed., The Political Culture of Modern Britain, Studies in Memory of Stephen Koss, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987) 32-55; 178-208.

³ Three collections of essays have been especially valuable to me: The Partition of India, Policies and Perspectives, 1933-1947, C.M.Philips and Mary Doreen Wainwright, eds., (Cambridge: MIT P, 1970); Congress and the Raj, Facets of the Indian Struggle, 1917-1947, D.A. Low, ed., (London: Arnold-

Heineman, 1977); Congress and Indian Nationalism, the Pre-Independence Movement, Richard Sisson and Stanley Wolpert, eds., (Berkeley: U of Calif P, 1988).

⁴ See, for example, Richard Danzig, "The Many-Layered Cake: A Case Study in the Reform of the Indian Empire," Modern Asian Studies, 3.1 (1969) 57-74; and, by the same author, "The Announcement of August 20th, 1917," J. of Asian Studies, 28.1 (1968) 19-37; D.C. Ellinwood, Jr., "The Round Table Movement and India," J. of Commonwealth Political Studies, 50.1 (1971) 183-209; S.R. Mehrotra, The Commonwealth and the Nation, (New Delhi: Vikas, 1978) 59-61; A.F. Madden, "The Commonwealth, Commonwealth History and Oxford, 1905-1971," Ronald Robinson, "Oxford in Imperial Historiography," and Deborah Lavin, "Lionel Curtis and the Idea of Commonwealth," all in Oxford and the Idea of Commonwealth, Essays presented to Sir Edgar Williams, A.F. Madden and D.K. Fieldhouse, eds., (London: Croom Helm, 1982) 7-29; 30-48; 97-121; Deborah Lavin, "History, Morals and the Politics of Empire," in Essays presented to Michael Roberts, John Bossey and Peter Judd, eds., (Belfast: Blackstaff P, 1977). Richard Symonds, Oxford and Empire: The Last Lost Cause?, (New York: St. Martin's, 1986) has a different tone.