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The great imperialist

by Deepak Lal

A review of Curzon: Imperial Statesman, by David Gilmour.

This long but splendid biography of George Nathaniel Curzon is worth reading, if for no other reason than that the problems Curzon wrestled with in Asia, at the apogee of the British empire, continue to haunt its successor—the current U.S. imperium. His tempestuous life reads like a Greek tragedy. Along with incomparable gifts of intellect and boundless energy, he inherited an arrogance that ultimately led to both his triumphs and eventual disappointment. Because Curzon was a member of the aristocratic circle providing the leaders of the Tory party during the high noon of the Victorian era, his political life provides a portrait of this age. Its Platonic Guardians—of whom Curzon was the most notable—ruled an empire on which the sun never set. They were trained in the Imperial nurseries of the public schools, mainly Eton, and in the ancient universities of Oxbridge, in particular Balliol College, Oxford. British politics was governed as much by schoolboy relationships as by policy. Curzon's personal life was fueled by a powerful libido and was notable not only for its many adulterous affairs but also for not one but two marriages to American heiresses. Curzon's amorous adventures marked a turning point in the imperial family, with the Old World's landed aristocracy relying increasingly on maintaining its economic predominance through the wealth of the rising mercantile aristocracy of the New.

The eldest son of a landed aristocrat, Lord Scarsdale, and heir to one of the grandest country houses of England—Kedleston Hall—Curzon, born in 1859, was a brilliant student of the classics at Eton and Balliol. By the age of twenty, both his teachers and contemporaries spoke of him as a future Prime Minister. But his boundless self-confidence, bordering on arrogance, hindered his progress. He was lampooned by his Balliol contemporaries in the famous verse:

> My name is George Nathaniel Curzon,
> I am a most superior person,
> My cheek is pink, my hair is sleek,
> I dine at Blenheim once a week.

In his twenties he became a Member of Parliament and also embarked on a remarkable and extensive series of journeys around Asia. Between 1887 and his marriage to the American heiress Mary Leiter in 1895, he traveled to Japan, China, India, Central Asia, Persia, Mesopotamia, and Afghanistan. In the course of his Central Asian travels he discovered the source of the Oxus, and everywhere he went he immersed himself in the history and culture of the peoples he saw. He wrote large books about these journeys, and by the age of thirty-six he was the country's leading authority on Asian affairs. He was the most traveled man in the British Cabinet. But his frequent reference to

his own expertise, and its lack among those expounding on Asian issues, did not endear him to his colleagues. As a result, even when his views were the best considered, he rarely had his way.

At the age of forty, Curzon became Queen Victoria's last Viceroy of India, ruling as the Imperial proconsul over 300 million people. His Viceroyalty ended with a dramatic resignation following the machinations of the Commander-in-Chief of India, Lord Kitchener—the hero of Khartoum who had avenged the murder of General Gordon by the Mahdi. Ten years in the political wilderness followed, until he became Foreign Secretary in the last decades of his life during and after the First World War. But he was thwarted in his ambition to become Prime Minister when King George V, who had developed a personal aversion to him, chose to set aside Curzon's claim to the office by nominating the relatively unknown and unprepossessing Stanley Baldwin instead. His political life ultimately ended in failure.

Nor was his personal life any more satisfying. Afflicted from an early age with neuralgic problems caused by a curvature of the spine, he lived in constant pain—frequently spending days on his back, and often in a steel cage set to straighten his spine. This gave him the stiff and erect posture, combined with his natural arrogance, that became the caricaturists' delight. After a series of tempestuous affairs, where he followed the practice of his class in having adulterous liaisons with friends' wives, but not having affairs with unmarried girls, he married Mary Leiter. She was the daughter of a Chicago millionaire and philanthropist, Levi Zeigler Leiter, and provided Curzon with the financial means to pursue his parliamentary career. The money also allowed him to buy and refurbish many grand houses and live in the style of a magnifico. His marriage was a success, largely because of Mary's enduring and unquestioning love, and despite what modern-day feminists would consider his male chauvinist behavior. After her early death at the age of thirty-six, he continued his adulterous affairs, most notably with the novelist Elinor Glyn. She described the fascination he held for women. "Curzon was 'superbly virile, vital and voluptuous,' a 'most passionate lover' and so 'physically attractive' that he aroused passion even in casual friendships."

In 1917, Curzon married a second American heiress, Grace Duggan, who unlike Mary had nothing in common with him, except an equally powerful libido. She failed after various miscarriages to provide him with the son and heir he craved. His relationships with his children, except with his stepdaughter Marcella, were poisoned by continual disputes about money, and he died at sixty-five a disappointed and lonely man. Successful human relationships seemed to have eluded him for most of his life.

It is the two periods when he was Viceroy of India and later Foreign Secretary during and after the First World War that have contemporary relevance. The major threat to Britain's Indian empire for much of the nineteenth century came from the expanding Russian empire and its desire for a warm-water port for its navy. Curzon, in his travels in Asia, and as Viceroy of India, was a prominent participant in this "Great Game" to check Russia's southward advance. He created a series of buffer states under the British sphere of influence between the Russians and the Indian Empire. One of the most important was Afghanistan, through which the British largely succeeded in containing Russian influence.

But on the borders between India and Afghanistan there were the unruly tribal areas of the Pathans, where the Indian empire was defended by a string of forts. These could, however, be easily overwhelmed. Curzon devised a novel policy for the defense of this area. He withdrew the troops from the advanced positions and concentrated them in the rear.

> His way of managing the Pathan tribesmen. . . was one of getting to understand him, and getting him to understand you; to leave him alone where his country is not wanted for purposes of Indian defense; where it is, to enlist and employ him in looking after his own

> country, and after the roads and passes which it is necessary for us to keep open; to pay him when he behaves, but to lay him out flat when he does not.

In 1901 he thus created the North West Frontier Province which separated the Pathan tribesmen from the inhabitants of the plains.

The successor state to the Indian empire in the west, Pakistan, maintained this policy, until the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, when the Pakistani intelligence services, along with the CIA, co-opted the tribesmen for their "jihad" against the Communist infidels. This area also became the home to the *madrassas*, set up with Saudi money, which created the wild theocrats of the Taliban. Despite the defeat of the Taliban and al Quada, this unruly border region has provided sanctuary for these *jihadis* against the West. The Pakistanis and the Americans face the same problem that Curzon faced, namely how to tame these tribes who have for so long been allowed to go their own way. Another Curzon with the imagination to co-opt these tribes in the "war on terror" is needed before it can be won in the region.

The other area in which Curzon's views were sound but fated to fail was in the reconstruction of the Middle East after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The trouble began with Lord Kitchener of Khartoum, who had become Secretary of War in Asquith's war cabinet at the start of the First World War. Kitchener wanted to seize the Arabic-speaking parts of the Ottoman empire for the British, thereby creating a Middle Eastern empire to link and rival their empire in India. Recognizing the importance but misunderstanding the nature of Islam, he sought to capture the religious leadership in the form of the Caliphate from the Turks for the Arabs, whom he expected to manipulate in the interests of the secular British power. He chose the Hashemite Sheriff of Mecca—a direct descendant of the Prophet Mohammed—for this role. But Kitchener had not understood that in Islam there is no separation between the Church and State. When the Sheriff of Mecca was offered the Caliphate, he naturally assumed he was being offered the kingdom of the Arabic-speaking peoples of the Ottoman empire. This infuriated Ibn Saud, the leader of the rival and fiercely puritanical Wahabbi sect of Islam. He conquered the Hejaz, displacing the Hashemite Sheriff, whose successors were then offered newly created thrones in the British-created states of Trans-Jordan and Iraq as consolation prizes.

Curzon by contrast was "skeptical of proposals for an Arab caliphate and a tribal revolt in Arabia. [H]e deprecated the idea of promising the Arabs an enormous state on former Ottoman territory." He was also against Kitchener's plan to raid Baghdad in 1917 and was proved correct when the expedition ended in disaster. Part of the reason for the failure was the result of his defeat against Kitchener in India, which had led to his resignation as viceroy. Kitchener had in an act of self-aggrandizement wanted the posts of Indian Commander-in-Chief and the bureaucratic office of the Military member of the Viceroy's council to be combined. Curzon opposed this, but Kitchener, as result of various intrigues in London, had his way. It was this turning of the Indian Commander-in-Chief into a bureaucrat who never even went out to the Iraqi front but was holed up in Simla, which in large part led to the disaster in Baghdad. Again, Curzon had been unfortunately vindicated.

Curzon was also against the "commitments made to other peoples [in the region] in the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration." The former sought to divide the Ottoman Empire into French and British spheres of influence. The latter promised the Jews a homeland in the British-mandated territory of Palestine.

> The debate over the Balfour Declaration was one of a series between 1905 and 1923 in which Curzon won the argument and Balfour won the battle. As with India and Mesopotamia, Curzon was familiar with the area and its inhabitants, and this experience

made him doubt that they could absorb a Jewish influx from Europe: indeed he predicted, accurately as it happened, that Zionism could not be established, without the removal of many of the native Arabs.

So why did Balfour and, even more so, Lloyd George press vociferously and successfully for a Jewish homeland? Gilmour's answer that Balfour "was a Zionist because he admired Weizmann and Jewish culture and because he hoped to see in Palestine a sort of modern equivalent of Classical Athens" does not ring true. A more convincing answer is provided by David Fromkin in *A Peace to End All Peace* (1989). Fromkin argues that, despite the endemic anti-Semitism of the British upper classes, various British statesmen, including Lord Palmerston and above all Lloyd George, were influenced by the nonconformist and evangelical tradition. They believed that according to the Scriptures the advent of the Messiah would occur once the people of Judaea were restored to their native land.

The U.S. has seemingly taken on, however unwillingly, the burdens of empire from the British. Its current and future proconsuls dealing with that vast area of Asia, of which Curzon had detailed personal knowledge, could do no better than follow in his footsteps, by combining a detailed and often romantic appreciation of the cultures of the region, with the Platonic ideal to be the Guardians, whose sole purpose was impartially to maintain order and justice in unruly lands.

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