

THE BRITISH EMPIRE

WE shall all be taking homœopathic doses of allied geography and ethnology soon. Wembley will be open and Mr. Thomas's Empire will reveal its multiform excellence to the awed beholder. In an atmosphere of oranges and ice-cream, of snack teas and string-quartettes, we shall learn to our private amazement how great and glorious are "our" possessions and how limitless "our" heritage. It seems brutal to spoil the harmony of a pleasant excursion and perhaps churlish to "mark the pitch" for a first-class advertising stunt. None the less and even from no better motive than pure spleen it is worth while telling a few truths about the "British Empire" if only to keep in countenance the few millions of workers who will be unable to scrape up enough to pass the turnstiles at the GREAT Exhibition.

The British Empire consists of territories in all quarters of the globe and although it can be spoken of as a unity since for certain purposes the authority of the British Crown extends over the whole—it is a unit in nothing else. Geographically it is an arbitrary aggregation of discordant units; politically it is a bewilderment of self-governing Dominions (which are all but independent republics) crown-territories, protectorates, dependencies, and mandated areas.

Technologically it includes examples of every stage of development, from primitive mattock-and-hoe cultivation up to mass-production under scientific management; and economically it is a chaos of divergencies and antagonism. Racially it includes representatives of all the principal sub-divisions of the human race; culturally all stages in between the Neolithic type (of the Andaman Islands, the Veddas of Ceylon, and the Australian Aborigines—if there are any of these left) and Bernard Shaw. Spiritually it comprises every creed from primitive magic to ultra-Communism; every known religion and anti-religion can be found in the Empire. It has a dozen systems of coinage and half-a-hundred fiscal systems. Its legal systems would fill an encyclopædia and then need an appendix for martial law and the E.P.A. Those who set out to glorify the "Empire" and predict "its" future are either imbued with a magical faith in the transfusion of irreconcilabilities or—what is more likely—know nothing of what they are rhapsodising about.

For instance. It is customary to speak of Britain as a "democracy" and to suppose that the fact of inclusion in the Empire confers "democratic" status upon all—black, yellow, red, or white—born subject to its sway. Yet even the form of "self-government" is conceded only to a fractional part of its population. The population of the Empire is approximately 500 millions. Of these only one fifth are white and these alone have voting power to anything like a "democratic" extent. Moreover as these whites are chiefly congregated in a few centres—Britain and the Self-Governing Dominions of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Newfoundland (and Ireland?)—the vast numbers of "coloured" races are for the most part ruled without any pretence of asking their consent.

True, the apologist of Empire will argue that Britain's rule is wholly for the good of these "benighted" heathen, and that the cause of civilisation and morality is advanced by the extension of the British Empire. In its day the Spanish Empire thought the same thing about itself and went to a great deal of expense to attempt the "civilisation" of the "barbarous and ungodly" islanders of Britain. That their efforts failed because of the violent resistance of the objects of their benevolence forms a theme for rejoicing in our elementary schools to this day. Should however any Indian, African, Asiatic, or Polynesian be inspired by the fate of the Armada to resist the process of his emendation at our hands he will learn abruptly that we are not Spaniards and 1924 is not 1588. Truth to tell they were blunter and honest men in those days. When old William Hawkins and his son John sold kidnapped blacks to the Spaniards in America—or sacked and burned their towns if they wouldn't buy as it was "against the law"—they made no pretence

of democracy or equality. They thought the nigger was black because God had cursed the sons of Ham, and that therefore he had none of the rights of a human being, and no claim upon a Christian's sympathy. When Drake and the other gentlemen adventurers raided the Spanish Main and plundered all through the South Seas they had but one thought—to "despoil the Egyptians"; to wrest by the strong arm from the plunderer all that his sword had won him. True even then they salved their consciences (or side-tracked their critics) by tales of the "cruelty" of the Spaniards to the "poor Indians," but none of these "pioneers of Empire" pretended to any object beyond acquiring treasure of gold and silver for the greater prosperity of the adventurers and their friends and countrymen at home.

Even later, when the great objective of Trade succeeded to that of Treasure, the merchant-mariners who extended the Empire abroad made no humanitarian pretences. They fought the Dutch for possession of the Spice Islands because they wanted the spices and the profits of their sale. They claimed possession of Australia and New Zealand (as soon as the Dutch had discovered them) because they expected more spices or more trade from them—and left them alone and derelict (except as a dump for convicts) when neither was to be had. The old East India Company would have gone on for ever satisfied with swindling the Indians in the ordinary ways of Trade if the French had not forced them to fight and taught them to use native Indian troops for purposes of conquest.

It was left to the pious 19th century, to the Bible-worshipping age of Victoria, to discover simultaneously the need for territorially secured markets for manufactures abroad, in areas from which cheap raw materials could be drawn, and the art of camouflaging their acquirement under a cloak of pure godliness.

"The missionary," said a Maori chief, "comes to us and says 'Look up!' And we look up. When we look down again the land's gone!"*

We do not now plead God and Christianity or the injunction to "go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" as a reason for annexing every available inch of the globe regardless of the feelings of its population. The process has become much more complex: the camouflage is perforce more subtle. Nowadays we "have a genius" for bringing to backward races the advantages of law, order, and Western Civilisation and leading them upward to the point at which they are "fit for self-government."

"Our" earliest experiment in this direction began in Ireland as far back as 1185; after seven hundred years of experiment involving

* See also "Marked Passages," p. 181.

the usual processes of famine, revolt, reconquest and extirpation the Irish have become so "fit" for self-government that we can leave them divided territorially between two mutually hostile self-governments and torn by passionate hatreds to shoot each other in peace while we make a profit on the weapons.

Another classic instance of our genius for colonial administration was in the American colonies, which became so "ripe" for self-government that they revolted and founded the United States of America. If you look up the amount the British Government is paying to the U.S.A. annually on account of War Debt you will find the current market price of *our* genius for colonial administration.

A third instance is developing in India. Here the "civilising mission" illusion was never very plausible since its chief cities were ancient when London was a cluster of wattle-huts enclosed within a mud-wall. Still, to "free the land from the 'invader'" (nobody knew quite where from, unless it was Thibet!) "we" extended our sway. Now the Indian people have reached the point at which the "educated section" (educated according to Western standards into Western ways and culture) are clamouring for a share in the ruling of India, and they in their turn are pressed upon by growing clamour for National Independence from a wider circle. The demand for "Dominion Status for India" grows irresistible just at the time when it is obvious that its concession will pacify only a relatively tiny fraction of the wealthier and westernised Indians.

There is still trouble in South Africa between the Nationalists, Dutch and the British. Canada is rapidly becoming an "economic colony" of the United States. Australia is distracted between the clamour of its capitalist fruit-growers and manufacturers for protection against competition (from America) and the clamour on its wage-workers for protection against British sweated labour and the wholesale importation of British unemployed.

The Empire in fact is caught in the coils of its own system. The commercial exploitation of non-capitalist areas brings always the same result. First the home-country imported raw-materials and food-stuffs from the exploited area and gave manufactured articles in exchange. Then it exported machinery and means of production. Finally it exports capital and the exploited area starts on its career as an exploiter on its own account. In every part of the Empire the native capitalist is appearing. Everywhere he is only to be bought off from leading a Nationalist fight for independence by being admitted to virtual partnership in the rule of the whole exploiting system.

It grows less true every year that the ruling class in Britain itself has a monopoly of the ruling and administrative posts within the Empire. The Colonial bourgeoisie (in whose ranks must now be

included the Anglicised section of the Egyptian and Indian bourgeoisie) gain ground every year. But much as this makes for the existence of a composite Imperial ruling class the unity is "bought with a price." The more a central Imperial authority is established the less grows (relatively and absolutely) the power of the popular Legislatures in each part. The British House of Commons, for instance, steadily loses its power to control the Dominions, and loses it not to the gain of any popular assembly but to a vague and intangible Imperial Conference of Premiers.

In India any concession of self-government to the privileged section of the Indian Bourgeoisie cannot fail to concentrate against them the hostility of the exploited peasantry and proletarians and the non-privileged among the bourgeoisie. As the concession of "self-government" to any extent can only release native Indian capitalism from all the Imperial restraints upon its development, Indian nationalism can only win self-government to open an era of class-conflicts on an unprecedented scale.

India occupies chief place in this consideration since three out of every five inhabitants of the British Empire are Indians (a fact which the multiplicity of exhibits at Wembley will serve to conceal rather than reveal). Its position is by no means unique, nor will its problems exhaust the stock of trouble before the Empire.

This is perhaps best shown (consciously and unconsciously) by that curious side-line among Wembley attractions—the British Empire Labour Conference. There will be represented the Labour Governments of Britain, of West Australia, South Australia, and Queensland, the Labour Parties of Australia, of New Zealand, of South Africa, and Newfoundland. The Workers' Party of Canada may be represented and so too the Indian Trade-Union Congress. But for the 100 millions of semi-servile and "indentured" labourers and peasant producers—negroes, coolies, Asiatics and Polynesians there will not be a single spokesman.

Yet if the white workers were wise it would be these whose co-operation they would seek before all else. The present necessities of Capitalism and particularly the desperate eleventh-hour effort to stabilise British Capitalism within a self-contained Empire can only mean the ever-increasing drift of employment away from the white to the coloured workers. Years ago it was conceivable that the rulers of the Empire could have made an alliance with the home born or British bred workers on the basis of devolving all the industrial and agricultural work upon the coloured races and maintaining the Whites as a privileged caste of intimate body servants, supervising functionaries, and armed guards. This Kiplingesque conception has been rendered obsolete by the rise of the various "coloured" groups of capitalists and their commercial assistants, concurrently

with the abasement of the British proletariat almost to the coolie level.

When the Imperial Labour Conference meets its attempts at unity will for ever be blighted by the problems of the negro in South and East Africa, of the Yellow man at the gates of Australia, of the indentured labourer in Polynesia and Malaysia—and of exploitation everywhere.

A Labour Party can become Imperial only by surrendering all that justified its birth. Only when the white workers can devise ways of making common cause with the "subject races" for a common struggle against exploitation will we have broken the vicious circle which began when the European Bourgeoisie first ventured overseas to carve out Empires in the New World.

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