

## Eminent Victorians

*L.Strachey*

May 2-12, 2012

When Bertrand Russell read the book while in jail during the First World War he laughed so loud that he was admonished by his wardens that you were not supposed to have so much fun in jail. I read most of the book at an emergency clinic, where I was stuck for almost twelve hours without food or drink. I did not laugh, although the book is funny enough, and no one would have cared to admonish me for unseemly mirth. Unfortunately the book was not long enough to sustain me throughout the ordeal.

The book was written during the First World War, less than twenty years after the end of the Victorian era. That era must have loomed large at the time, and as Strachey remarks, it would be impossible to do it justice in a historical work, the only resource at the disposal of a historian, or in this case, a biographer, is to make some pointed attacks, put some details under the limelight and make them speak for a much larger context. Strachey is no biographer proper, as far as the reader can tell, he uses nothing but secondary sources and presents no research of his own, only his poetic interpretations.

Four eminent Victorian notables are selected for special treatment. Three of those, Cardinal Manning, Dr Arnold and general Gordon, are mostly forgotten and thus obscure to the modern reader, while Florence Nightingales candle is bright enough a hundred years after her death to kindle recognition by the general reading public. At the time I guess all four were venerated household names.

Who cares about Manning? Cardinal Newman many have still heard about, while Manning seems to have been an erstwhile friend, admirer and supporter, only to become a rival at the end. Catholic revival in Britain is interesting. Although the Anglican Church is close in spirit to the Catholic as far as church service goes, there is a big chasm between the two from a political point of view. Jacobites and Catholic leanings were anathema during the whole of the 17th century, and the compelling reason why the vacated throne was given to the House of Hanover, and still remained in abeyance during the more enlightened 18th century. Catholicism is admittedly about religious service but more importantly about institutional power. Here Manning found his true vocation. He was a born climber, with the quiet ruthlessness and perfect sense of timing which characterize those. The section on Manning is long, with many a diversion, yet in the end somewhat pointless. And indeed, this seems to be the very point. Manning at the end of his life is made to confront the pointlessness of it all.

Florence Nightingale is a different matter. She was a selfless hero at the time, serving needy soldiers during the Crimean War. The image of her walking the dark hospital wards with a candle lightening up the misery of its inmates was one with which I was made familiar as a child. And the light of that candle is still strong enough to glow one hundred and fifty years later. Who could have anything against her, that would be sacrilegious, like dumping on Mother Theresa today. Strachey does not really have anything against her, she is an admirable woman. The problem is that she is just too admirable. She

had a will of iron and a determination to match, and a capacity for hard relentless work to support both. Alas, this did not go for people in her vicinity, to whom she was not so much dependent upon support as exploiting as unpaid labor. Who could resist her and her demands? Delivered with irresistible force, overbearing conviction and overflowing energy. She wore them out one by one, and her staunchest supporters literally went into death fighting her battles. She was unstoppable, yet physically almost an invalid. But how could she rest? There simply was far too much to do. It was a man's work, and at a time when women had no way to carry it out, hemmed in as they were by all kinds of restraints and constrictions. be they social or legal. But she persevered. And the work was technical and matter of fact, relating to proper buildings and organization of hospitals, with a special emphasis on nursing. She more or less single-handedly created the nursing profession. Or so at least we are led to believe. It was of course work motivated by caring, but mostly consisting in hardcore statistics and logistics. It mattered a lot that she was well-born. Moved at ease in the best and most influential of circles. Received by the queen and her consort, out of which she made maximal mileage. And then long before the era of the contemporary media-star, she played that part of society - public opinion, with perfect skill and ado.

She lived long and fully, but at the end she softened considerably. It was her mind that softened, while before she had made men tremble and wait in abeyance for the privilege of an audience, now she was the picture of a lamb. totally gone were her acerbic wit and sardonic tongue, so often expressed through the quill. Not to put too fine a point on it. She had simply become demented. It could happen to the best of us. It usually does. No amount of hard work and mental gymnastics can stave it off, once we have been targeted.

Strachey's final verdict of her was that hers was a practical intelligence. A no-nonsense kind. But when it came to more abstract thought and principles, she showed a remarkable naivety. There must be a lawmaker as there are natural laws, her argument went, and here *ipso facto* she has created a God. The rest of her metaphysical thought went along the same lines.

Arnold is different. His life was short but to the point. He has been heralded as a reformer of public school and education, while he in fact was nothing but a reactionary, who introduced no educational reforms, banned science, on the excuse that it was too hard for youngsters to learn properly and besides they could very well go through life being ignorant of basic scientific facts. But what he did not skimp on, was moral instruction coupled with a thorough grounding in the classics. This was what he had been subjected to himself, and what had been good for him was of course good for everybody else. This is the way we tend to think most of us, would we be honest enough to acknowledge it. So what Dr Arnold did was to bring order and discipline into a system that was threatening to derail into anarchy. Boys are boys (and girls are girls) and potentially an unruly bunch, always in need to be reined in.

General Gordon is a comical figure. Honest to the core, and as the case with all such people a social misfit, impatient with the petty niceties of civilized life. He did his own thing, whenever allowed, and that was not always the case. A figure to catch the public imagination. He had done well in China, or so the press had reported. Had been in charge of a small army and brought about law and order and disposed of unruly warlords. This is

what a general is supposed to do, when not enlisted to further national glory. But between assignments of that kind there was not much to do. Gordon was basically an adventurer and could not be relied on to perform routine work. Thus he was for most of the time kept in storage. But when the crisis in Sudan was getting out of hand, just as it did some hundred and twenty years later, Gordon maneuvered himself into position. He had some friends in high places, almost everyone who has made some mark in life has. There was opposition feebly presented as misgivings. When the momentum had gained enough rolling power, he too was unstoppable and he got his terms. Ostensibly appointed to supervise an honorary retreat he quickly redesigned his task as a more palatable one to a daring imagination.

There was a strong rebel army, the nature of which is too familiar to modern spectators of the political scene of the Third World today. The upshot was that he ended up being beleaguered inside Khartoum with a smaller force. He was holding out of course, but for how long? Months were going by and public opinion clamored for an expeditionary force to rescue the trapped general. But Gladstone, once again in power dragged his feet. He was not going to be swayed by mere public opinion. There is some grandeur in a politician that has enough trust in his own judgement and savvy to dispense with momentary pressure and take the long point of view. In the end Gladstone had to relent, as the key minister, who slowly had come to a decision that Gordon had to be saved, put an ultimatum to the Prime Minister, who could not risk having his coalition crumble over the issue. The rest is history, but too late. The general was overwhelmed by the besieging forces and hacked to pieces. Of course in the end there was lord Kirchner, and the British reestablished their colonial authority. But Gordon was a hero, none the less for having been defeated. It was this kind of mentality that paved the way for the worshipping of that bumbler Scott some twenty years later.

May 16, 18, 2012 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*