

Heaven's Command

Jan Morris

October 4 - October 27, 2004

This is the first book in a trilogy on the rise and fall of the British Empire. It roughly covers the period from the ascension of Queen Victoria up to the brink of her demise. In short, during the Victorian Age Britain rose from a reluctant acquirer of foreign dominions to an enthusiastic empire builder. At the height of the empire, it involved a quarter of the land and a third of the population of the planet, and as far as empires goes, this has never been surpassed in the past. The big mystery is how this came about. Unlike classical states with imperial ambitions, England was never a particularly militaristic country. It never maintained a large army, its borders were confined to its isles, and in European military politics it always played a peripheral role. Well-known is its strategic position to always back the second strongest continental power to maintain a balance. So what made England so special, and how come it rose to such ascendancy during the 19th century (only to regress to a third rate power during the next?). Those questions are very interesting questions, but unfortunately Morris does very little to address them. Thus in the absence of an intellectual plot the reading becomes cumbersome in spite of the fact that the mode of presentation is the lightly anecdotal. Those five hundred odd pages feels at least three times as much, the reason being, I suspect, that the discontinuous structure of the narrative makes you start over all over again with monotonous regularity.

Yet, something must be learned, after all Morris covers a lot of ground, from the hot tropics of India to the frozen wastes of the Canadian territories. Many a vignette is presented, as well as thumb-nail portraits of Victorian notables, now (mercifully?) forgotten. In occasional footnotes the author refers to a personal pilgrimage (around 1970) along the routes covered by the Imperial story, sometimes one wonders whether it would not have been such a bad idea to bring this personal pilgrimage to the forefront, letting it provide the back-bone that is now missing in the narrative structure.

The grand story is that the explorations of the 16th century opened up the big world to Western Civilization. At first there was the New World, where the Spanish and Portugese colonializers had the advantage of superior fire-power and immunity to disease, in practice wiping out indigenous populations and making the land a 'tabula erasa'. The Spanish and Portugese dominance was broken during the 17th century and Holland and England came to the fore, as well as France. The 18th century was a century of extended trade, and Britain established its Navy, essentially unchallenged. The notion of empire was not an articulated one, it was the commercial East India company that regulated interaction with India, and British governmental authority was not assumed until the early 19th century. The prime interest was the Indian subcontinent where French and English interest clashed, as they had done in North America. For a variety of reasons England won out in India, and also in North America where it gained the northern expanses, only to lose, much to the glee of the French, their hold on the American colonies.

The 17th and 18th century saw the establishment of the slave-trade, an infamous

triangle of trade involving sugar from the West-Indies, manufactured goods from England (mostly textile) and slaves from the West African coast. Deplorable as the custom appears to us, one should bear in mind that the practice of slavery is very ancient. Slaves were not extracted by force from the African hinterland but supplied willingly by Africans themselves, internal warfare and the taking of slaves being a longheld tradition, which also the Arabs had been taking advantage of for centuries¹. The excesses of the trade were due to the huge volumes that were involved. Thus it is somewhat anachroistic to view the slave-trade as basically a racial exploitation, it was a general human exploitation. Still there was a growing moral indignation, and the British were among the first to abolish it. It lived on in infamy in the American South until the second half of the 19th century and was finally discontinued about the same times as the renunciation of serfdom in Russia, a practice with which it should be compared.

The greatest irony of the imperial spread of colonialism is the moral underpinning. While during the 18th century the attitude towards natives were one of benign neglect and tolerance, with the early 19th century came the missionary project, which to a large extent is still with us. With the abolition of the abominable practice of slavery the Christian idea of the equality of all men came to the forefront. Western Civilization, including that of religion, were seen as something that should benefit everybody. Nowadays we feel that the ideals and practices of democracy, and to some extent also the blessings of market economies, should be part of the lives of every human being. There is a saying that nothing is as insidious as good intentions, and indeed, it is very hard to fault the motivations behind the campaigns against suttee (the burning of widows) and the thugs (a religious sect engaged in ritual murder of innocents) intended to stamp them out². The turning point was the so called Sepoy Mutiny. White colonialists were massacred, creating a public furor and a terrible vengeance. One may speculate that it actually cemented the notion of racial superiority that were to guide the colonial venture in the decades to come. Morris treatment of the mutiny is characteristic of his general flippancy. On one hand he makes light of the massacres and the individual tragedies, which would of course have been in extremely bad taste had he been a contemporary. On the other hand he describes with hidden approval the British military exploits. There is no question of where his real sympathies lie. The English appear as delineated personalities, the natives as an undifferentiated mass, except for the spectacles of the pathetic last Moghul. Myrdal has compared³ the crack-down of the Mutiny unfavourably to the atrocities committed by the Nazis almost a hundred years later. What truly shocked people with Hitler was that he was treating Europeans with the disregard characteristic of Colonial power. In fact, Myrdal notes, that while the Germans of the 20th century committed their atrocities out of duty, the English of the 19th performed theirs joyfully.

So again what does the reader learn from the various Imperial vignettes provide by the author. I have refered above to the Thugs, the religious order engaged in ritual murder,

¹ It is interesting to note, as Braudel does, that no black populations have survived in Arab countries, unlike the case in the Americas. One reason could be that the interchange was never that extensive, another that they fared worse and were never able to replicate themselves

² Although there were at the time Englishmen who opposed such meddling into internal affairs

³ See the review of 'Indien väntar'

thus committed in a spirit of exaltation rather than personal animosity and hate. As a phenomenon it is no doubt extremely interesting as an indication of the great variety of human customs possible. It also presents, as noted, an important question, the answer to which will not be free from agony, as to the degree respect should be conceded to foreign cultures; whether well-meaning meddling invariably has tragic consequences, or whether abstaining from it is always morally defensible. Another vignette places us in Ireland during the Potatoe famine, reminding us that colony is not always at the other end of an ocean but can be at your door-step. Ireland as a colony may have been as poor and backward as India itself during the 19th century. This is suggested but not elaborated upon. We are brought down to Southern Africa a few times, confronted with the fundamentalist Boers, old Dutch stock, who in their stubbornness and renunciation of state control reminds us of certain contemporary extremist sects in the United States. A brief visit to one of the Ionian islands off Greece meeting the young Gladstone, as well as a trip to Jamaica to confront an anti-rebellion gone awry. The Suez-canal, planned and brought about by the French, but snatched out of their hands by the financially scheming Disraeli, provides a key-story, because after all Egypt, as Napoleon remarked, was the key to the East. In fact Gladstone, the erstwhile opponent to Imperial ambition and then its reluctant warden and Disraeli the flamboyant Imperial enthusiasm, do flitter through the pages repeatedly (Gladstone eventually in connection with Irish Home Rule) reminding the reader of a more exciting perspective that could have been taken. But the domestic perspective is not the one chosen by Morris, he prefers the visits to the distant corners of the earth. Thus even the boreal wastes of northern Canada have their colonial story to tell, as well as fate of the Fiji islands in the South Seas. Obviously the forages into the dark Continent to find the sources of the fabled Nile provide tales of exploration not to be overlooked. Livingstone makes an appearance, as does the busy-body Stanley. Most of this probably provide but well-known tales to the average reader, and Morris seems to have little to add to what has been told much better elsewhere. The extermination of the native Tasmanian population is on the other hand a less known one and among the few more gripping contributions in the collection. Because a collection the book remains, consisting of disjointed stories that somehow fail to connect into a more coherent picture. Many of the stories might stand on their own as magazine articles, but taken together yet present a smorgasboard where the totality of dishes tend to overwhelm the appetite rather than sharpen it.

October 31, 2004 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se