

Milner Reconsidered

J. Lee Thompson, *Forgotten Patriot. A Life of Alfred, Viscount Milner of St James and Cape Town, 1854-1925*

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Alfred Milner appeared frigid to many who encountered him, though his close friends and the young men known as the “kindergarten” basked in his personal warmth and charm, as did the women in his life. Biographers may also have been chilled by the “imperial icicle”, as someone at the Cape called him and he has received so little close attention that J. Lee Thompson’s new biography of him is called *Forgotten Patriot*.

Forgotten? In South Africa he is to many still a villain, the warmonger whose intransigence brought about the South African War. The reason for his refusal to compromise in the final, fateful negotiations with Paul Kruger that began on 31 May 1899, most historians agree, was his imperial ambitions for Great Britain; his, to quote Thompson’s somewhat overheated phrase, “religious faith in an Anglo-Saxon Race Empire”.

In the politics and public affairs of his time, Milner was a unique player, both at home and in South Africa. Never elected to office (his one attempt, in 1885, to win a seat in the House of Commons failed), he lacked “interest” (the word then for wealth and family connexions), was a poor public speaker (his voice was said to be “squeaky”), had that unfortunate aloof manner and was unlucky in love, not marrying until his retirement in 1921. Yet he quickly rose to the top of the public service as head of Inland Revenue, became High Commissioner in South Africa during its greatest crisis, Governor of the New Colonies (the defeated Boer Republics), Colonial Secretary (refused when first offered, as was the Viceroyalty of India), was as Minister without Portfolio, an invaluable aid to Lloyd George in the 1914-1918 War Cabinet, and finally became Secretary for War in April 1918.

In his last years he was able to serve as an active trustee (appointed in Rhodes’ last will) of the estate of his most admired friend and to keep his ideals alive. He was elected Chancellor of Oxford University, but died 12 days before taking office, on 13 May 1925. Oxford had been the making of him, above all his sponsorship by the Master of his college, Balliol, Jowett (of whom the rhyme ran, “There’s no knowledge but I know it”). With his first class degree in Greats (Roman and Greek history and philosophy), through the company of some of the best minds of the day, Milner took away “from his college days ... a political philosophy that combined two seemingly antithetical ideals: the empire and social reform”, and a rule of life that could simply be called “public usefulness”, eschewing the crudities of political careerism and self-centred ambition.

His love of ancient Greece and its literature was fostered at Balliol, after sound early teaching at a *gymnasium* in Tübingen. His childhood in Germany had been broken by years in England when his improvident, but much-loved father practised unsuccessfully as a General Practitioner in Chelsea. His mother died when he was 15. The sense of superiority that his Balliol years had given him, was accompanied by an ideal of natural beauty at its height in his conception of Hellas. An ardent supporter, the writer Violet Markham, recalled dining at Government House in Cape Town just before the outbreak of the South African War, when Milner

... drew for us the picture of a temple, not a famous place, but a ruined shrine exquisitely situated in a grove near the sea-shore. Broken shaft and column still gleamed white through the dark foliage and the blue waters of the Aegean rose and fell gently in an unvisited bay ... all at the table forgot Kruger and the Uitlanders ... The eternal spell of Hellas held us silent” (p 147).

Despite his eight years in South Africa and much travel throughout the region, he is said to have been quite blind to its beauty in all its varieties, even of the Cape itself, with its mountain landscape seen daily from his home, Newlands House. There, surrounded by “like-minded, pro-British partisans ... the High Commissioner’s distaste for Cape Town soon became well known” (p 113). Yet, Hugh and Mirabel Cecil’s *Imperial Marriage* (Oxford, 2002) quotes his awareness of such places as Muizenberg, revisited at the end of his life when it had become, he wrote, “a crowded and rather vulgar seaside place and lost all its old charm and solitude and unspoiled natural beauty” (p 307). Pretoria, twenty years before, he had found a green and pretty place, spoiled by hideous, bourgeois architecture.

If he disliked the English and “Dutch” of Cape Town and found “no clever or interesting people out here” (p 113), he had an even lower opinion of the republican Boers across the Orange and Vaal Rivers, led by the “frock-coated Neanderthal” (Milner’s phrase), Paul Kruger. Sir Percy Fitzpatrick, nevertheless, recalled in his posthumous *South African Memories* (1932) Milner’s difficulty in understanding the Boer leaders (but for De la Rey, in whom Milner vouchsafed complete trust). He found them “quite uneducated, in our sense, ... yet gentlemen in the best sense”. He experienced the leaders as most hard to penetrate in argument, “because of their amazing oneness as a race to which all others are alien” (p 194).

This, then, was the nub of it. The British “race” and their Afrikaner predecessors in South Africa were in a life-and-death struggle for possession of “this land of gold” (as Smuts called it – p 148), whither both had migrated in an earlier time. Secondary issues like the dynamite monopoly, or even the franchise details, could be argued over at the fateful Bloemfontein Conference which led to war. It ended with Kruger’s tearful outburst: “It’s our country you want, it’s our country you want” (p 139). British suzerainty was non-negotiable by either side.

Bloemfontein failed, as had the earlier meeting at Middelburg, convened by the old former president of both republics, Marthinus Wessel Pretorius, and Smuts’ last-minute proposals after it. Milner remained convinced that suzerainty, as laid down in the Pretoria Convention of 1884, would ultimately be accepted and citizenship made possible for the *Uitlanders* on reasonable terms. Salisbury, as Prime Minister, and Joseph Chamberlain, Milner’s master as Colonial Secretary, supported Milner’s intransigence and were convinced, like him, that Kruger would stop short of provoking war. Thompson refuses

to absolve Salisbury from responsibility for the war, “because he was deeply distracted by the grave illness of his wife” (p 144). He, Chamberlain and Milner were equally determined to maintain British suzerainty. Milner later wrote, privately, that “it is not a very agreeable, and in my eyes, not a very creditable, piece of business to have been largely instrumental in bringing about a big war”. He hoped that “in the distant future people will say it was better than burying my head in the sand” (p 166).

The best than can be said is that the war he precipitated, with all its death, destruction and the Boer women and children (and the unmentioned blacks) who died in the “refugee” (later “concentration”) camps, plus the noxious form of Afrikaner Nationalism that succeeded it, did create the nation state of South Africa, which had been beyond the grasp of proconsuls like Sir George Grey and Sir Bartle Frere, and a statesman like Carnarvon for half a century. Milner achieved the recall of General Sir William Butler, in command of British troops at the Cape, an Irish Catholic with pro-Boer sympathies, who had warned that “a war between the white races would be the greatest calamity that ever occurred in South Africa”. He then found Butler’s successor in command of British forces in South Africa, Field-Marshal Lord Roberts, an unwilling collaborator, and Kitchener, who followed Roberts on the latter’s triumphant return to Britain after the fall of Bloemfontein and Pretoria, ruthless and vindictive in his farm-burning strategy. Anxious to move on to greater things elsewhere, Kitchener was later soft on Milner’s demand for unconditional surrender. The two years of guerrilla war that followed Roberts’ departure seemed endless, and when at last the Vereeniging peace terms were accepted by the Boers, and the Herculean labour of post-war reconstruction lay before him, Milner knew that though “it is no longer a war with bullets, it is war still” (p 224).

The old watchword of public duty obliged him to refuse the offer of the Colonial Secretaryship in succession to Chamberlain at this point. Having asked to return to Britain when the war ended, he had been persuaded to stay on, but in 1903 felt himself “honestly convinced that, in the present juncture, I can render the government and the country better service in the office wh. [sic] I actually hold than in the higher office wh. [sic] you offer me” (p 229).

The continuing war for a British South Africa, impossible without the anglicising of the former republics, was lost by the British people, who failed to migrate to a war-torn land. The Boer heartlands were in deep poverty, worsened by cattle disease and a serious lack of mine

labour, essential for creating the revenues to finance reconstruction. The *Uitlanders*, whom Kruger had feared would swamp his burghers, became a shrinking community. When Campbell-Bannerman's Liberal government gave self-government to the republics in 1906 as the Transvaal and Orange River Colony, Milner knew his war was finally lost. When Louis Botha's *Het Volk* party won the 1907 Transvaal elections, he exploded: "My feelings about what has happened in South Africa are not capable of description in any language wh. [sic] it would be decent to write. So I will spare you." He continued in this vein when the new Union constitution came before Parliament in 1909: "All the power is with the Boers and will remain with them ... the British attitude to the whole question is so astounding, to my mind so absolutely idiotic, that it makes me mute".⁶ Torrance makes it clear that the South African union, though the result of Milner's work, was brought about by the vision, tact and determination of his successor as High Commissioner, Lord Selborne. For Milner it was the death of a dream.

The Union that Selborne worked for failed to take up the great issue of the future which Milner, albeit tentatively and cautiously, had kept alive. If it was, in his view, "idiotic" to hand power over to the Boers only eight years after a war to take it from them in the wider interests of South Africa, how much more so to disregard not only the indigenous people, but also all those of mixed race and to the Indians who had been brought into the country. The 60 000 Chinese brought in under Milner to revive the gold-mines, the so-called "Chinese slavery", which lost the Unionists the 1906 general election in Britain, had mercifully been repatriated by 1911.

Milner had aroused controversy by calling the *Uitlanders* "helots"; but the true heirs of these serfs of ancient Sparta, who suffered so much more than the withholding of the franchise, were the Africans and the others rejected by their Europe-descended rulers. In an age of social Darwinism and a belief in "race" that appear naïve to us, Milner showed a commendable support for the humanitarian treatment of the indigenous people. As far back as 1884, when writing for W.T. Stead's *Pall Mall Gazette*, he had helped the Reverend John Mackenzie campaign against the threatened cession of Bechuanaland to the Transvaal partly on account of the Transvalers' "brutal record", though more to keep them from the "supreme political position in South Africa ... the highway to the interior, to have the native policy of the future ... all in their hands" (p 42).

6. D.E. Torrance, *The Strange Death of the Liberal Empire* (MQUP, Montreal, Quebec and Kingston, Ontario, 1996), p 179.

A trivial incident in his first years in Cape Town showed where his sympathies lay. Hanbury Williams, the wife of his military secretary, and his official hostess at a schoolchildren's celebration of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, "shocked local opinion by kissing the cheek of both a white and a black girl who presented her with bouquets" (p 114). The Press in Britain ignored reports of the Jubilee celebrations in South Africa, but for the story of the two kisses. Milner agreed with the Press, since this was "really the most important thing that had happened since I came here ... I think she was right. There you have the great South African problem posed at once. It is the Native Question." "Anglo-Dutch" friction was "child's play compared to the antagonism of White and Black. That the White man must rule is clear – but how?" It was a subject "with respect to which I see the greatest difficulty" (p 114).

During the years that followed, he repeatedly expressed sympathy for the coloureds and "civilized" Africans and pondered the way to their political advancement. He later expressed bitter regret at having given up the fight even, in Thompson's words, "for the minimal rights afforded 'civilized' non-whites [sic] in the Cape" (p 200). When leaving South Africa, he told Selborne that if he had known

... the extravagance of the prejudice on the part of almost all of the whites – not the Boers only – against any concessions to any coloured man, however civilized, I would never have agreed to so absolute an exclusion, not only of the raw native, but of the whole coloured population from any rights of citizenship, even in municipal affairs (pp 200-201).

Milner had made himself unapproachable by all but his closest colleagues and friends: how much more difficult for blacks of the calibre of those who came to England with W.P. Schreiner to lobby against the act of union in 1909 – J.T. Jabavu, Walter Rubusana and the others – to put their case to him. He made a significant speech in Johannesburg in 1903 in which, calling himself "the man on the watch tower" who "may see further than the man on the Veld", he echoed Rhodes' phrase and recalled his cause in calling it "an unhappy day when any large British community in South Africa completely and finally repudiates the doctrine of one of South Africa's greatest statesmen – full rights for every civilized man". He urged also that "the most educated and civilized Asiatic among us" should not be denied "all the other privileges which civilized men enjoy" (p 226). Four days later he met an Indian delegation led by Mohandas K. Gandhi and "[unnamed] leaders of the coloured community as well" only to "recommend patience until the shift in sentiment he believed inevitable came about" (pp 226-227).

Thompson concludes Milner's South African career – a third of the book, covering 8 of his 71 years – with a profit-and-loss account. He credits him with “laying an industrial and agricultural foundation for the future”, with the work of the “kindergarten” (Merriman's mocking phrase for the young Oxford men he recruited to further the post-Boer-War reconstruction) under his revered leadership, and for the achievement of Union, for which they worked so hard, albeit to find it under Afrikaner and not British control. Milner's schemes to ensure British supremacy by flooding the country with British immigrants, increasing land settlement on a large scale and by building a large British military establishment all foundered. Decisions he had accepted

... left the status of the non-white [sic] population to the tender mercies of the white colonials, which meant disenfranchisement and the perpetuation of a segregated South Africa. His naïve hopes of eventual white enlightenment would take almost a century, much bloodshed and suffering, before being realized (p 236).

Milner went home in 1905 to a hero's welcome, equalled in South Africa in 1924-1925, when he revisited the country – by then the Union of South Africa – though to some, like John X. Merriman, his High Commissionership had been “an unmitigated failure” (p 179). If his chief object had been to create a British South Africa, the charge was just. The magnitude of Milner's errors as empire-builder was typified by his total incapacity to include the indigenous people among the people of the Empire he strove to protect and promote. Two months after his death on 13 July 1925, *The Times* published his patriotic “credo”, which read in part:

I am a British Race Patriot. It is not the soil of England, dear as it is to me, but the speech, the tradition, the spiritual heritage, the principles, the aspirations of the British race ... I feel myself a citizen of the Empire ... Canada is my country, Australia my country, New Zealand my country, South Africa my country as much as Surrey or Yorkshire. ... It is only a question of time when the expansion of the race will compel ... a common citizenship of all the countries which the race inhabits or controls (p 179).

What of the millions of others inhabiting those states, whether Asians or Africans, or those of mixed race, Aborigines, Maoris, Inuits and more? If Saint Paul could say “*Civis Romanus sum*”, why not could indigenous people of those countries equally say “*Civis Britannicus sum*”? “Race” was the qualifying or disqualifying factor. It was, of course, enlightenment world-wide, shut out by the Afrikaner Nationalists until the last minute, that brought democracy to South Africa through universal suffrage. It was a far cry from the franchise Milner sought for

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Uitlander men or even the old non-racial male franchise of the Cape Colony which was lost first to African voters and then to coloureds a generation later.

Disappointed – as were his fellow British Race Patriots and their bard Kipling – in the aftermath of the South African War, Milner might have felt it right that in time it was the disenfranchised, chiefly the indigenous people, who finally inherited South Africa. The Boers, *Uitlanders*, British South Africans, and even the Randlords (whose role as Milner’s alleged masters is effectively dismissed in Iain Smith’s *The Origins of the South African War*, 1996) all filled him with varying measures of distaste. If Britain was not to rule South Africa, except through “loyal” Afrikaners like Louis Botha and Jan Smuts in the Dominion days, it was spared perpetual rule by the Afrikaner Nationalists. They have given place to African “race patriots”, equipped to rule in far greater measure than in Milner’s day, with a greater historical claim to the land, and committed to a non-racial South Africanism that would have been incomprehensible to Alfred Milner’s generation.

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