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POPULAR LITERATURE AND IMPERIAL SENTIMENT: CHANGING ATTITUDES, 1870-1890

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It has been well established, by Koebner, Thornton and others, that the hesitant expansion of the British Empire during the eighteen seventies and eighties was not the outcome of any driving force of public opinion or mass sentiment. However, it was during this period that the basis was laid for an imperial sentiment which, by the last decade of the century, was to transcend social differences and bind English people of all classes to the cause of imperial expansion.

One area in which this may be observed is in the popular literature of the period. In 1870, according to the returns of the *Publisher's Circular*, the largest group of new books published was 811 volumes on religious subjects; novels came fifth with 381 volumes. By 1886, novels were in first place with 969 volumes, an increase of almost 160 percent. Religion was second but had dropped to 752 volumes. The same period saw a corresponding growth in popularity of works dealing with the Empire. In 1870, Macmillan's published three books on imperial topics and thirty-two religious works. In 1880, the same firm published eight volumes on the Empire and seven on religion. In 1889, the figures were twelve and four respectively.[1] By the end of the period under discussion, "imperial" titles alone had outstripped the total of all bound religious works. And the tone of religious publications showed a significant change from the philosophical to the plebeian; as early as 1879, Macmillan's was publishing such titles as the Reverend H. M. Butler's *War in a Christian Spirit*, in which the Chaplain to the Queen spoke of the influence of war in the development of character and other Christian virtues.[2]

Similar trends may be seen in the public library returns for the period. A survey of seven major public libraries (Liverpool, Birmingham, Newcastle, Bradford, Exeter, Norwich, and Leeds) shows that in 1889 over seventy-five percent of books borrowed were novels and a further eight percent, works of travel and exploration. Theological books ranged from below one percent at Norwich and Leeds to a high

[1] Figures from *Macmillan's Bibliographical Catalogue, 1843-1889* (London, 1890).

[2] A sermon preached in Temple Church (and later at Harrow School), Sunday, November 24, 1878.

of 3.63 percent at the Exeter Public Library. The most popular works of fiction were H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines, Allan Quartermain,* and *She,* of which each library held more than four times as many copies as of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island.* After Rider Haggard, the most called-for author was G. A. Henty. The most popular non-fiction works were H. M. Stanley's *Through the Dark Continent* and Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm.*[3] The writers whose novels generally appear in works on English literature — Hardy, Meredith, Wilde — failed to make a mark except in literary circles.

The trends, or changing attitudes, in popular literature are, then, fairly obvious. With the expansion of the reading public, the staid, reflective, and insular style so characteristic of mid-Victorian literature gradually gave way to the sun-drenched, blood-stained prose of empire, culminating in Rider Haggard and Kipling in the late eighties and the nineties. It was a movement away from a style of novel read only by the upper classes to one read by men in all strata of society. The eighteen-seventies and eighties saw the growth of a generation nurtured on tales of Englishmen overseas.

At the same time, a change was apparent in the area of juvenile literature. In 1866, Edwin J. Brett began publication of the journal *Boys of England,* which appeared monthly until mid-1899. The following year W. L. Emmett, a publisher of "penny dreadfuls", introduced his *Sons of Britannia,* to which Brett replied with *Boys of the Empire.* But the most popular journal aimed at Britain's youth was the *Boy's Own Paper.* First published in 1879 by the Religious Tract Society, the *BOP* was partial to titles like "For England, Home and Beauty" by Captain Gordon Sables, C.M., M.D., R.N., and "Frank Harding; or From Torrid Zones to Regions of Perpetual Snow." One tale of blood and glory was simply entitled "God Save the Queen." The paper claimed the allegiance of Prince Arthur and Prince George, and among its contributors were G. A. Henty, R. M. Ballantyne, Jules Verne, H. de Vere Stacpoole, and the military artist R. Caton-Woodville. It was so popular that, in 1882, *Punch* ran a series of skits on the paper, one of which was called "Wet Bob, or The Adventures of a Little Eton Boy Amongst the Hotwhata Cannibals, by the Author of 'The Three Young Benchers and How They All Got the Woolsack,' 'From Back Bench to

[3] From statistics and other data in the following: Walter M. Gattie, "What the English People Read," *Fortnightly Review* (LII, 1889), pp. 307-321; especially the figures on p. 312. Thomas Greenwood, *Library Yearbook* (London, 1890). George R. Humphrey, "The Reading of the Working Classes," *Nineteenth Century* (XXXIII, 1893), pp. 690-701. *Monthly Notes of the Library Association* (London, 1880-1883).

Yard Arm,' etc." [4] The *Boy's Own Paper* is representative of a trend in juvenile reading away from the lurid "Sweeney Todd" stories to equally bloody, but highly nationalistic and heroic, tales of derring-do in the wilder parts of the Empire, and indicates a movement towards imperial thinking similar to that which occured in the realm of the novel.

Most prolific of all writers on the Empire was George Alfred Henty who, in 1868, while a special correspondent for the London *Standard*, began to write serial adventure stories and books for boys. A complete Henty bibliography runs to over two-hundred items, including some eighty historical novels ranging in time from ancient Egypt to the South African War and in place from New Zealand to India, Africa and Canada.[5] Henty's style was simple and racy; he had none of the literary power of Kipling but achieved somewhat the same flavour by spicing his sentences with such familiars as *dacoit* for a bandit, or *tank* for a drainage pond; "Salaam Sahib" became an almost universal greeting of English schoolboys in the last decades of the century. His literary formula was typical of the novelists of empire. The boy-hero or, in some cases, the young English adventurer, was usually blonde — a fair skin shows the tan better and typifies the Nordic Anglo-Saxon — and he always possessed the penetrating blue-eyed gaze which would make the Asantehene cringe. Of middle-class origin, he had little real personality, and his sex-life was practically non-existent. He was, of course, as brave as a lion, could both take and give punishment with no display of emotion, and held sternly to that code of honour peculiar to the English public school. The hero never speaks of morality or questions the God-given right of his cause and is firm in the belief in his innate superiority over other breeds of men. In short, he was not an individual but a kind of abstraction with which the impressionable reader might identify and strive to emulate.

Henty's adventure stories contained all the superficial ingredients of imperialistic emotion — the hero figure, the racial superiority, the belligerence, the ignorant savage, even the stress on duty — but lacked the deeper, perhaps more sincere, components of humanitarianism and humility. His novels sold by the thousands and were popular with future statesmen and artisans alike. Henty did not require that his

[4] E. S. Turner, *Boys Will Be Boys* (London, 1948), pp. 67-89. Also used was the *Boy's Own Paper* collection in the Special Collections of the Library of the University of California at Los Angeles.

[5] R. S. Kennedy and B. J. Farmer, *Bibliography of G. A. Henty and Hentyana* (London, 1956), passim. The Henty Collection in the Research Library of the University of California, Los Angeles, and the biography by G. Manville Fenn, *George Alfred Henty: The Story of an Active Life* (London, 1907), were used for this paper. See also: Robert A. Huttenback, "G. A. Henty and the Imperial Stereotype," *Huntingdon Library Quarterly* (XXIX, 1966), pp. 63-75. Mark Naidis, "G. A. Henty's Idea of India," *Victorian Studies* (VIII, 1964), pp. 49-58.

young reader think about the rights or wrongs of empire, it was all so obviously right. It was right that Englishmen should impose firm but just government wherever they went, that they should rescue the native from barbarism and plant the Union Jack in the far-flung corners of the earth. It was obvious that Englishmen were superior beings and, as such, it was right that they should rule the native peoples of Africa, India and the East. It was the very "rightness" of it all that made Henty's tales so "comfortable" to read. There can be little doubt that Henty's heroes played their part in the growth of imperial sentiment in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Rivalling Henty in popularity, if not in quantity, was Robert Louis Stevenson, whose *Treasure Island* was first published in book form in 1883. Earlier, from October 1st, 1881, to January 28th, 1882, the work had appeared as a serial in *Young Folks*, a third-rate boy's magazine, under the pseudonym "Captain George North." The original title, *The Sea Cook*, was changed to *Treasure Island* by James Henderson, the paper's editor. In this format it had received little attention but, between hard covers, the book achieved tremendous success.[6] Primarily intended for boys, the work was a blend of romantic adventure and realism calculated to appeal to what Edmund Gosse called the "new taste germinating in the public."[7] Alfred Stevens, whose experience at Mudie's and then Heinemann's placed him in a position to judge with some accuracy what the public was reading, said of Stevenson: "One took him seriously, almost as a religion, and felt it a duty as well as a pleasure to read all his writings if opportunity permitted. When giving books as presents his was one of the first names that would spring to the mind."[8] Stevenson's most enthusiastic readers were men: Gladstone, Rosebery, A. J. Balfour, Randolph Churchill, Lord Birkenhead. Maurice Baring, who read *Treasure Island* in 1889, when he was fifteen years old, pronounced it "a perfect book."[9] Although Stevenson did not write "imperial" novels as such, his works contained many of the elements of Henty — the English schoolboy hero who wins out against tremendous odds, the adventures in exotic parts of the globe, and a certain degree of realism.

With Stevenson and Henty the British public got used to violence, action, and realism in a romantic tale. But these elements first became used with a free hand in H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, which took the country by storm in 1885, selling five thousand copies

[6] Graham Pollard, "Serial Fiction," *New Paths in Book Collecting*, ed. John Carter (London, 1934), p. 275.

[7] Edmund Gosse, "The Literature of Action," *North American Review* (CLXVIII, 1899), p. 15.

[8] Alfred A. Stevens, *The Recollections of a Bookman* (London, 1933), p. 74.

[9] Maurice Baring, *The Puppet Show of Memory* (Boston, 1922), p. 106.

in two months. Neither Henty nor Stevenson ever equalled Haggard in bloodthirstiness, and some of his later novels are little more than tales of imperial slaughter. Yet they were read with delight by men and boys. Winston Churchill, at the age of thirteen, wrote to Haggard telling the author that he had enjoyed *Allan Quartermain* (1887) even more than *King Solomon's Mines*.[10] Even Mr. Gladstone is said to have enjoyed them, while Maurice Baring proclaimed them "excellent and exciting."[11] Haggard's friend, Edmund Gosse, stated that no book had ever so thrilled or terrified him as had *She*. The innocently named *Nada the Lily*, Gosse called "unquestionably the bloodiest book in the world."[12] For all their excess of blood, Haggard's novels contained essentially the same ingredients as those of Henty, only without the historical setting. *King Solomon's Mines* had three steel-eyed English heroes pursuing their adventurous course across darkest Africa in search of fame and fortune. Gosse later wrote of Haggard that "his influence in awakening a taste for violent and sanguinary action is not to be underestimated."[13]

Of all the literary figures of the period, none had a greater impact on all elements of society than the "Banjo-Bard of Empire," Rudyard Kipling, whose books began to arrive from India in the late eighties. William T. Stead, a pioneer of the "popular journalism," wrote in 1899 that Kipling was "the man who most of all has impressed the popular mind, fired the popular imagination, interpreted the popular consciousness."[14]

First published in grey paper covers as the Railway Library, Kipling's little books soon achieved immense popularity. Max Pemberton, the publisher of *Vanity Fair*, stated, in 1888, how he "discovered that many people were fascinated by these clever stories and that Cabinet Ministers were reading them."[15] Sidney Low, editor of the *St. James' Gazette*, told how he "spent an afternoon reading *Soldiers Three* and when I went out to a dinner party that evening I could talk of nothing but this marvellous writer who had dawned upon the Eastern horizon."[16] The aged Tennyson spoke of Kipling as being possessed "with the divine fire."[17]

Late in 1889, Kipling himself came to England from India and by the next year a dozen of his books and collections had appeared on

[10] Letter quoted in Robert Lewis Taylor, *Winston Churchill, An Informal Study of Greatness* (New York, 1952), pp. 58-59.
[11] Baring, *Puppet Show*, p. 105.
[12] Gosse, "The Literature of Action," p. 16.
[13] Gosse, "The Literature of Action," p. 16.
[14] W. T. Stead, "Mr. Rudyard Kipling: The Banjo-Bard of Empire," *Review of Reviews* (April, 1899), p. 317.
[15] Quoted in Amy Cruse, *After the Victorians* (London, 1938), p. 115.
[16] Quoted in Major Desmond C. Huston, *The Lost Historian: A Memoir of Sir Sidney Low* (London, 1936), p. 79; and in Cruse, *Victorians*, p. 115.
[17] Quoted in Charles Carrington, *Rudyard Kipling* (London, 1955), p. 136.

the newsstands. His writings contained most of the components of Henty and Haggard, but in more lyrical style and with one or two important additions. In some ways, Kipling was more difficult for the ordinary man to understand; he had no stereotyped hero and showed a grudging, if patronizing, admiration for the "Fuzzy Wuzzy" the British soldier had to fight. His works were more of a gospel, speaking as much of responsibility as of glory, and his imperial incantations were often obscure and baffling to the reader. It was through his ballads and poems, rather than his prose, that Kipling gained universal recognition. But these were, more often than not, misinterpreted and misquoted. The first two lines of "The Ballad of East and West," first published in the December, 1889, issue of *Macmillan's Magazine,* were more freely quoted out of context, and in exactly the opposite sense which Kipling gave them, than any other work of the period, with the possible exception of his "lesser breeds without the law." The couplet:

> Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
> Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat;

generally appeared without Kipling's commentary:

> But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
> When two strong men stand face to face, though
> they come from the ends of the earth!

Kipling's message, that the divine spark in human nature transcends all earthly distinctions, was lost to the mass of his readers. It was his Cockney "Gawd" and his earthy soldier that made the people feel a part of the greatest empire the world had ever seen, appealing to their warlike instincts and to their patriotism. The appeal of Kipling, or rather the appeal which the public found in him, was different from that of Haggard or Henty but was one which, in all likelihood, could not have succeeded without them. Kipling made the common man feel a part of the Empire in a way that the public school hero of Henty was never able to do. As Oscar Wilde so aptly put it, Kipling "revealed life by superb flashes of vulgarity."[18] It was the cadences of Kipling's *Barrack Room Ballads* that, in the words of Everard Meynell, "sent city readers singing and chanting back from their offices towards suburban sunset and supper."[19]

An interesting sidelight on Kipling's influence is to be found in George Younghusband's *A Soldier's Memories,* in which the general wrote:[20]

[18] Oscar Wilde, "The True Function and Value of Criticism," *Nineteenth Century* (XXVIII, 1890), p. 455.

[19] Everard Meynell, *The Life of Francis Thompson* (New York, 1926), pp. 199-200.

[20] Major-General Sir George Younghusband, *A Soldier's Memories* (3rd edition, New York, 1925), pp. 187-188.

> I had never heard the words or expressions that Rudyard Kipling's soldiers used. Many a time did I ask my brother officers whether they had ever heard them. No, never. But, sure enough, a few years after, the soldiers thought and talked and expressed themselves exactly as Rudyard Kipling had taught them in his stories. Rudyard Kipling made the modern soldier. Other writers have gone on with the good work, and they have between them manufactured the cheery, devil-may-care, lovable person enshrined in our hearts as Thomas Atkins. Before he had learned from reading stories about himself that he, as an individual, also possessed the above attributes, he was mostly ignorant of the fact. My early recollections of the British soldier are of a bluff, rather surly person, never the least jocose or light-hearted except perhaps when he had too much beer.

Did the *Ballads* alter the soldier, or the officer's attitude toward the soldier?

Much of Kipling's important work was not published until after 1890, but with his appearance the tone of popular literature had been firmly set. Kipling came along on the high tide of imperialist sentiment and his writings can be said to represent the culmination of British expansionism. The literature of the seventies and eighties represents the swelling of that tide.

It is, of course, impossible to enquire into the thoughts of the common man and so it is impossible to gauge with any real accuracy the influence of these writers of empire. That Mary Gladstone thought Kipling "splendid," that Prime Minister Gladstone sat up till two in the morning to finish *Treasure Island,* or that the young Winston Churchill was a fan of Henty, really tells us little. But, when we discover that the largest groups of men reading these authors were artisans and clerks, it is difficult to deny that popular literature must have had a considerable influence upon the formation of imperial sentiment, or that it served to bind the majority of the nation behind the cause of imperial expansion.[21] The literature of empire took the tired clerk and the shop-keeper away from the drab semi-detached existence of Bayswater and Ealing to an exotic "cleaner, greener land," giving him a vicarious identification with England's glory. These were tales of history in the making, in which, as a citizen of the greatest empire ever, the reader had a part.

[21] Gattie, "What the English People Read," *Fortnightly Review* (LII, 1889), p. 312., gives a statistical breakdown of the occupation of borrowers of books from the libraries cited earlier.