

# 1 INTRODUCTION

When Alfred Milner was first elevated to the peerage in 1901 as Baron Milner of St James's and Cape Town, he took as his motto *Communis Patria*: roughly, 'patriotism for our common country'. By this he meant the wider patriotism of the Empire, the furthering of which became his life's work. A self-declared 'Anglo-Saxon Race Patriot', Milner's brand of imperialism has over the years been called social, radical, militant, idealist, constructive, excentric, intermediate, consolidationist and forward.<sup>1</sup>

By the time Milner came of age, revolutionary developments in communications led by the telegraph, improvements in steam navigation, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the completion of the Atlantic Cable in 1866 and the completion of the Australian Cable in 1872 had all linked the Empire as never before. Milner also grew up as Disraeli's 1867 Reform Bill ushered in the modern era of mass politics, abetted further before the turn of the century by the franchise extension and redistribution of 1884–5. While he famously engineered Queen Victoria's willing transformation into the embodiment of empire, Disraeli's second premiership also set Britain on imperial courses in Egypt and in South Africa that would profoundly affect Milner. Though the two men never met, and though he lacked the Prime Minister's political opportunism, Milner nevertheless became a self-anointed 'civilian soldier of the empire'.<sup>2</sup> No matter the cost in blood and treasure, Milner believed absolutely that whatever measures he took to further his dream of a unified British Empire were justified. As this work will show, this single-minded righteousness often blinded him to the realities, political and otherwise, of events in which he played an important role.

One year before the Suez Canal was opened (and four years prior to Milner's arrival at Balliol College, Oxford), Charles Dilke, a prominent Liberal MP, published *Greater Britain* (1868), an influential volume that unashamedly predicted future Anglo-Saxon world hegemony after a great racial conflict. This was, Dilke said, all for a higher purpose: 'the power of English laws and English principles of government is not merely an English question – its continuance is essential to the freedom of mankind'.<sup>3</sup> This notion of the unique ability of the Anglo-

Saxon race to govern itself and others through a constitutional system which combined liberty, justice and efficiency was at the core of Milner's patriotism. He also agreed with Dilke's contention that Britain's Empire was her only hope to compete in an increasingly threatening world of continental-sized military and economic juggernauts. Two clear alternatives seemed to present themselves: either national disintegration and decline, or continued world power through imperial cooperation.

Milner's unabashed Anglo-Saxon race patriotism was a powerful movement in his time, but one that seems bizarre and a bit embarrassing in the twenty-first century, fairly or unfairly linked to the European Fascist movement. The intervening cloud of the Third Reich and a twentieth century filled with racist madness and atrocities from Armenia to Rwanda has made ominous the quaint phrase Milner used to describe his imperial creed. By the early 1930s, in the light of Hitler's rise in Germany, race patriotism such as Milner's had fallen into disrepute. In 1933, eight years after Milner's death, the Round Table Sir Edward Grigg noted that though people 'in these days dismiss a belief in race as a crude and reactionary thing, savouring of ascendancy and vulgar thirst for power', it had not been so with Milner. 'He believed in race because without its support he saw no hope of steady growth for the ideals of government which were, in his opinion, the best in the world.' Such a faith was 'not mere arrogance, any more than Christian belief is contempt and intolerance towards other creeds'. In Milner's mind the 'mission of the race was not to itself alone; it was to establish higher standards, wider opportunities, and better life in everything that makes for character and happiness among all types and conditions of men'. There was no 'Hitlerism in his political faith, no wish to exclude or exterminate the best in other strains'. The mission of the Empire, as Milner saw it, was 'one of service rather than of dominance, though only through the strength of the creative race could that mission be performed'.<sup>4</sup>

But there was always something different, something a little alien about Alfred Milner. He never quite fit in with either the politics or the ruling class of his day. He remained an outsider, lacking both the 'political nostril'<sup>5</sup> and the politician's talent for self-promotion. Milner's German birth and education provided a patina of foreignness that never wore off despite legendary academic triumphs at Balliol and years of service to the Empire and the State. Leo Amery noted the German influence on Milner's 'outside view which saw England and the Empire as a whole and not through party or class spectacles, as well as a patriotism which is nowhere so intense as in an English family living in a foreign country'.<sup>6</sup> A lonely childhood, shuttled back and forth between Germany and England, and the loss of his beloved mother while still an adolescent left a void in Milner filled by a religious faith in an Anglo-Saxon race empire. This doomed him to be a man moving against the current of history, and to become

a figure by middle age who would have been quixotic had he not been jousting in South Africa against real, not imaginary, windmills armed with Mauser rifles and Krupps artillery.

Arriving at Benjamin Jowett's Balliol in 1873, the outsider Milner found an unlikely imperial mentor in George Parkin, who arrived from Canada the same year. At the Oxford Union Society, Parkin, a New Brunswick schoolmaster eight years older than Milner, raised the cry for imperial federation under a banner which proclaimed 'Extensior'.<sup>7</sup> Like Dilke he preached that the Anglo-Saxon race had a special capacity for political organization and that a federated Greater Britain must be the end product. Milner first heard Parkin when he spoke in a losing cause against a motion that 'the disintegration of the Empire is the true solution of the colonial difficulty'. In 1919 Milner recalled the 'new vision of the future of the British Empire' that he gained from Parkin – one in which the Empire 'appeared no longer as a number of infant or dependent communities revolving round this ancient kingdom but as a world-encircling group of related nations, some of them destined in time even to outgrow the mother country, united on a basis of equality and partnership, and united at least mainly by moral and spiritual bonds'.<sup>8</sup>

At the Union Milner joined a half dozen or so stalwarts who hammered away in support of empire, not a popular position at the time. He later commented, 'I dare say we bored our audience – on these ideas, that the growth of the Colonies into self-governing communities was no reason why they should drop away from the Mother Country or from one another'. What Milner feared most was another debacle like the loss of the American colonies, 'a dire disaster, not only in the manner in which it came about, but for coming about at all'. No political object, he believed, was comparable in importance to 'preventing the repetition of such a disaster, the severance of another link in the great imperial chain'.<sup>9</sup>

At Balliol Milner also imbibed the gospel of social reform from his close friend Arnold Toynbee and from the philosopher T. H. Green, Jowett's right-hand man.<sup>10</sup> Green, who has been credited with laying down the philosophical foundations of Liberal Imperialism, pricked the social conscience of his students, underlining their duty, as members of the educated elite, to the lower orders.<sup>11</sup> He preached that laissez faire economics protected the interests of the powerful, while it ignored the welfare of the nation. Liberalism to Green meant more than the protection of individual rights from an oppressive government. In a truly liberal state, social reforms would provide people the opportunity to fulfill their moral potential and human capacities. His political philosophy was based on moral principles that promoted the common good and recognized that people had a duty to be concerned with their neighbours' well-being. **Men, said Green, were social beings who fulfilled their human potential only through rela-**

tions with each other in a community, a concept which had been lost in modern industrial society. Milner and other of Green's students embraced these ideas of social service and state aid to the weaker members of society. They also opposed laissez faire economic policy, which in combination with the Industrial Revolution (a phrase Toynbee is credited with popularizing if not inventing) had led to slums and sweated labour for the working classes. Consequently, from his college years Milner took away a political philosophy that combined two seemingly antithetical ideals, the Empire and social reform.

Milner considered himself a Liberal, but was increasingly at odds with the party, which was out of power for most of his Oxford tenure. However, Conservative support of empire and its social reform agenda of 1875 both must have appealed to Milner, who defended the Prime Minister against a motion that 'Mr Disraeli's career has been such as to deserve the reprobation of this house.'<sup>12</sup> Disraeli infuriated his Liberal opponents, both with his 'jingo' adventures abroad, such as the affair of the Suez Canal shares, and by adding 'Empress of India' to Queen Victoria's titles. In response the term 'imperialism', first used in a negative sense by the Liberal press, came into popular parlance.<sup>13</sup>

The 'Jewel in the Crown' of the nineteenth-century British Empire held little interest for Milner. Though he fully realized India's importance, his dream was to link up the white settlement empire and he later opposed giving India dominion status. Milner believed 'We can only fraternize with those with whom we have something in common, morally or spiritually speaking – in other words a community of race, language, civilization, history, tradition and ideals which form the basis of the link between Great Britain and the Dominions.' It was not the same when dealing with 'the other, the Dependent Empire.'<sup>14</sup> Between the 'Two Empires,' Milner's priorities were clear: 'If I had to choose between an effective union of the great self-governing states of the Empire without the dependent states, and the retention of the dependent states accompanied by a complete separation from the distant communities of our own blood and language, I should choose the former.'<sup>15</sup> At the same time, Milner's imperialism was by 1913 at least 'something wider than "Anglo-Saxondom" or even ... "Pax Brittanica". He considered 'The power of incorporating alien races without trying to disintegrate them, or rob them of their individuality ... characteristic of the British imperial system.' It was not by 'what it takes away, but what it gives ... opening new vistas of culture and advancement, that it seeks to win them to itself.'<sup>16</sup>

It was during the Boer War that Milner and 'Milnerism' first came under attack by a number of activists, journalists and politicians, who would be tarred as 'pro-Boers'. Among these critics was J. A. Hobson, a Radical publicist who, like Milner's friend the journalist W. T. Stead, lost his former imperial faith in the fires of the Jameson Raid and the outbreak of the war, and become a zealot for the other side.<sup>17</sup> Before the war Hobson had been in South Africa on assign-

ment for the *Manchester Guardian*, and had applauded Milner's appointment as High Commissioner.<sup>18</sup> However, afterwards he returned to England to produce a stream of articles, pamphlets and books for the anti-war cause, most famously *Imperialism* in 1902. Milner, wrote Hobson, had fallen 'quickly under the control of politicians, financiers and journalists whom [the Transvaal Government] knew to be their enemies'. The High Commissioner had been the 'easy instrument of political partizans and business men whom he has thought to use for purposes of information but who have used him for more practical purposes'. 'The apparent spontaneity of Imperialism', wrote Hobson, was a 'mere illusion: its forces obey the stimulus and the direction of financial masters'.<sup>19</sup> To do battle with critics such as Hobson, and to further his imperial aims generally, Milner fashioned a network of support at home and in South Africa. It has been often overlooked that in addition to friends in Westminster, Fleet Street and the great houses of England, Milner also had a cadre of female supporters of his contentious imperial path.

As High Commissioner in Cape Town Milner had to contend with the 'Race Question' between Briton and Boer, as well as the 'Native Question' between black and white. As the representative of the 'Imperial Factor', Milner also aimed to tame, or at least control, the 'commercial' ambitions of men like Cecil Rhodes. On his appointment, the *Spectator*, edited by John St Loe Strachey, gushed that Milner was a 'wise and able choice' to deal with the 'seething cauldron of blind political passions' in South Africa stirred by the Jameson Raid. The weekly listed the many 'suspicions' which Milner faced, including the commercial community of the Cape 'haunted by the thought that their prosperity may be ruined by changes in the railway policy which may leave them stranded in their Southern vineyards'. The people of the North were 'equally suspicious and ask whether they are to be sacrificed to the South, to have their commerce strangled and not allowed its natural outlet to the sea'. Next came the suspicion of a large number of Dutch and English, that the white men were 'to be sacrificed to the insensate philanthropy of Exeter Hall' and that the 'Imperial factor' was going to 'treat South Africa as a black man's country, and to pamper the native into insubordination or even insurrection'. Others were equally suspicious that the natives would be 'reduced to slavery if the Imperial factor does not hold the white in check'.

Milner's greatest job, the *Spectator* went on, would be to 'allay these suspicions by standing apart from and outside them' and to this task he was believed equal. The over-arching advice offered was for the High Commissioner to follow the 'essential principle ... never to move unless he is supported by South African opinion as a whole'. This, said the journal, was the policy Joseph Chamberlain had been carrying out, and 'but for Mr. Rhodes would have in a few years secured the Outlanders their rights, with the peaceful assent of the Boers'.

The 'true policy,' which Chamberlain had recently reaffirmed in the Commons, would reunite the races and 'no man, from personal ambition, or body of men from commercial aims, must be allowed to destroy it.'<sup>20</sup> This was sound advice that Milner unfortunately failed to follow, choosing war instead.

Back in England after eight years in South Africa, with Joseph Chamberlain permanently sidelined by a 1906 stroke, Milner became the de facto champion of 'constructive' imperialism.<sup>21</sup> He aimed to capture working-class support by offering a 'Democratic Imperialism' which harkened back to Disraeli's popular Tory Democracy, largely discarded by the Unionist leaders Salisbury and his successor Arthur Balfour, who had little interest in social reform. However, when pressed by his many fervent admirers (first among these Leo Amery) to step forward and give substantive leadership Milner, like the Liberal Imperialist Lord Rosebery, demurred.

Milner preferred to work behind the scenes and did so in the years before 1914 (and afterwards until his death) by supporting the Round Table movement led by Lionel Curtis, Philip Kerr and others of Milner's South African acolytes who had done such able work in the reconstruction period. These men returned home in 1909 flushed by their success in the South African Union movement. With Milner's help, they now aimed to unite the wider white empire. As the following chapters demonstrate, the Round Table heavily involved Milner with one dominion in particular, Canada. Unfortunately for the overall movement, its already slim chances of success were doomed by the First World War, which only reinforced dominion nationalism, and, much to Milner's disgust, by the post-war substitution of the League of Nations as an alternative cause for many of his imperial brethren.

However, by the end of Milner's official career, his Egyptian negotiations in 1919 and 1920 point towards a new realism, in this sphere at least, which his Cabinet colleagues reluctantly were forced to follow a year after he left the Colonial Office. About Egypt, Vladimir Halpérin noted that 'at two decisive points in his own career (one at the beginning of it, the other at the end), Lord Milner was the central figure of the changing political scene. He was on the critical spot at the critical hour. Through his ideals as well as through his work he did much to build up the British imperial structure in the Near East.'<sup>22</sup>

Two months after Milner's death, as a testament to his patriotism, Lady Milner arranged for his 'Credo' to be published in *The Times* in 1925. This read in part:

My patriotism knows no geographical, but only racial limits. I am an Imperialist and not a Little Englander because 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. They do not cease to be *mine* because they are transplanted ...

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. We are told there is no such thing as citizenship of the Empire. In the purely juridical sense that may be true ... It is only a question of time when the expansion of the race will compel a new juridical conception, that of a common citizenship of all the countries which that race inhabits or controls.

The wider patriotism is no mere exalted sentiment. It is a practical necessity ...

This brings us to our first great principle – *follow the race*. The British state must follow the race ... wherever it settles in appreciable numbers as an independent community ... We cannot afford to part with so much of our best blood. We have already parted with too much of it, to form the nucleus of another wholly separate though fortunately friendly State. We cannot suffer a repetition of the process.

The time cannot be far distant when this practical aspect of Imperial unity will become apparent to everybody. The work of British Imperialists during my lifetime has been to hold the fort, to keep alive the sentiments which made against disruption, which delayed it, against the time when its insanity became generally apparent ...

Time was, in my young days, when the gradual dissolution of the Empire was regarded as an inevitable, almost a desirable eventuality. This view is no longer anything like so general, anything like so potent as it was. In another twenty years it is reasonable to hope that it may be altogether extinct – that all Britons, alike in the Motherland or overseas, will be Imperialists, that it will be the happier fate of those who come after us to create that State, which it has been our duty to preserve for them the possibility of creating.

What makes this result possible, what makes it, thank God, I believe inevitable, is the shrinkage of the world.<sup>23</sup>

The world would indeed shrink over the following twenty years, but those imperialists who continued to hold down the fort that Milner helped to construct would find themselves overrun by another world war which would dash any lingering hopes for a British Empire on the lines Milner envisioned. The born-again imperialist Winston Churchill, who was ironically still on hand, however reluctantly, to help guide the dissolution, had dubbed Milner the ‘Man of No Illusions’ during the Boer War. In fact his dream of a united Anglo-Saxon race empire proved one of the greatest illusions of them all.

### *Milner and the Historians*

Though Milner opened his papers for several sympathetic works on his South African service and allowed the publication of his speeches, he refused to cooperate with prospective biographers and turned down several offers from publishers for his memoirs.<sup>24</sup> Had he published them, Milner’s recollections doubtless would have radically challenged those of enemies and allies such as Winston Churchill, David Lloyd George and other great contemporaries who shaped the history of his era. Since his death in 1925 several works have revealed something of Milner’s imperial ideology and career. The first glimpse came in

two volumes of Milner's South Africa papers edited by Cecil Headlam and published in 1931–3 with the blessing of Lady Milner, who vetted his papers and became the staunch guardian of his memory and legacy.<sup>25</sup>

Lady Milner also cooperated in the writing of two book-length works devoted to Milner's imperialism, both published in 1952: Vladimir Halpérin's *Lord Milner and the Empire: The Evolution of British Imperialism* and Edward Crankshaw's *The Forsaken Idea: A Study of Lord Milner*. According to Halpérin, Milner, 'by virtue of his work in Egypt, South Africa and, lastly, in London, by virtue of what he said and what he wrote, can truly be called one of the great servants of the British Empire, and what is more, one of the fathers of the British Commonwealth.'<sup>26</sup> What Halpérin found 'so striking' about Milner's doctrine was 'an independence and a precision; even more marked than in his actions ... Imperialism stood for Milner ... not so much for acquisition and gain as for organization, prosperity and unity within those vast domains that were already beneath the British flag.'<sup>27</sup> To his school, the Empire was 'a circle whose centre is everywhere and which has no circumference.'<sup>28</sup> Its credo for continued post-war British rule over the dependent Empire, Halperin found in Milner's 1923 *Questions of the Hour*. 'For that authority is the only one capable, under present circumstances, of ensuring to the peoples of these countries the primary blessings of order and justice. Its withdrawal would be a disaster for them, and on our part a dereliction of duty.'<sup>29</sup>

Crankshaw's *The Forsaken Idea* regarded the South African years as the defining period in Milner's career. There Milner saw himself 'not as a man chosen to muddle the machine along, steering clear of disaster, but as the chief-of-staff of an operation which was to ensure the best possible deployment of South African resources in the interests of its inhabitants, Great Britain and the world at large'. Chamberlain and Selborne at the Colonial Office shared these views, but the 'Government, the Opposition and the public as a whole did not'. To them, the High Commissioner was 'the man detailed to act as a buffer between themselves and trouble emanating from South Africa' and 'to arrange as little trouble as might be'. Milner's problem was that he did not learn this lesson. To the end in South Africa he did not seem to realize he was 'up against the British version of original sin; inertia, wooly thinking, and self-deception'. Milner seemed to believe that 'if only, somehow, you could change the institutions – the System as he called it – you could change the men, forgetting that the System was the proud creation of the men themselves.'<sup>30</sup> To Crankshaw, Milner's 'only weakness, his only blind-spot', was his 'revolutionary optimism – a strange quality to find in a man popularly notorious as a rigid, cold, aloof reactionary'.<sup>31</sup> It was not because he was 'too rigid and cold that Milner could never become a national leader. It was because he was not cold enough.'<sup>32</sup>

In his 1960 *Imperialism and Social Reform* Bernard Semmel dubbed Milner a 'Social-Imperial Idealist'. To Semmel, Milner represented the 'noblest, least self-seeking side of Tariff Reform social-imperialism. For him, support of the social-imperial complex constituted – in his own words – “the highest development of patriotism.”<sup>33</sup> Two years later, in light of the then new Robinson and Gallagher imperial thesis, Eric Stokes reconsidered 'Milnerism'. As did Semmel, Stokes considered the melding in Milner of imperialism and socialism, pointing to the six lectures on socialism Milner gave in Whitechapel in 1882 which defined his lifelong belief in state regulation and endowment. Stokes's analysis also considered the liberal roots of Milner's imperialism and his mentor George Goschen's contribution, marking Milner as a consolidationist and a militant imperialist who more than Chamberlain or anyone else caused the Boer War.<sup>34</sup>

Outside John Evelyn Wrench's 1956 life, *Alfred Lord Milner: Man of No Illusions*, until 1964 no work on Milner had given consideration to his interrelated political and imperial activities in 1905–16 while out of office. Alfred Gollin then remedied this to an extent in *Proconsul in Politics: A Study of Lord Milner in Opposition and in Power*. In Gollin's view, the 'master desire' of Milner's life, 'the reason he sought power, was to serve, to serve Britain and the Empire. His chief contribution to the political thought of his generation' was his 'emphasis upon a need for Imperial Unity'. Milner desired 'not a Liberal or a Labour or a Conservative policy, but a British policy – rational, logical, thoroughly planned'. Unfortunately for the furtherance of his ideas, Milner 'lacked the qualities of a great political leader'. He was 'always more aware of what the Empire needed than of what the British people could be brought to accept.'<sup>35</sup>

From the 1960s much of the Milner historiography has to do with his role in the origins, course, and aftermath of the Boer War.<sup>36</sup> The political/strategic interpretation, which put Milner and Joseph Chamberlain at the centre of events, can be traced back at least to Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher's extremely influential *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (1961) and continued in such works as Thomas Pakenham's *The Boer War* (1979) and by Andrew Porter in *The Origins of the South African War: Joseph Chamberlain and the Diplomacy of Imperialism, 1895–99* (1980). More recently this position can also be seen in Iain R. Smith's *The Origins of the South African War, 1899–1902* (1996).

The economic arguments first wielded by J. A. Hobson and others were revived in 1979 by Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido. To Marks and Trapido, the character of Milner's role in South Africa had been 'persistently misunderstood by the historians'. 'Milner the man', they argued, 'has been overestimated; while on the other hand the nature of "Milnerism", as an expression of late nineteenth-century imperialism at both the ideological and practical levels has been underestimated and indeed virtually unexplored.'<sup>37</sup> The pair extended the 'Blainey thesis' for the Jameson Raid (that it was carried out for specific economic reasons) to 'the war

and the major divisions in the reconstruction period.<sup>38</sup> They also introduced into the factors to be considered the ‘precariousness of Britain’s gold reserve’ and the problems of the international gold supply, 20 per cent of which came from South Africa. It is true that Milner’s mentor Goschen had been a director of the Bank of England and his years working with Goschen at the Exchequer certainly meant Milner was cognizant of such matters. But, as has been pointed out elsewhere, there is no real evidence of any sort that gold supplies played any part in his calculations.<sup>39</sup> Further, he was in fact very uncomfortable having the so-called ‘Gold-Bugs’ as his allies. However, because Milner saw the economic ‘overspill’ of the industry as essential to the rebirth of a devastated South Africa, it is only logical that he should support demands both for cheaper labour and essentials such as dynamite.

Milner’s disdain for the mine owners, and his background and training generally, make his imperial profile appear (outside his pro-Tariff Reform stance at least) to be compatible with the City-oriented paradigm of ‘Gentlemanly Capitalism’ put forward by P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins in their sweeping two-volume analysis, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion 1688–1914* and *British Imperialism: Crisis and Deconstruction 1914–1990*, both published in 1993. Cain and Hopkins take issue with those, such as Thomas Pakenham, who would lay the Boer War at Milner’s feet. In their view, a longer and wider perspective is needed and, although Milner ‘helped to stir the pot, he did not supply the ingredients. More important agents were the imperial government and, indirectly, the mine owners. Neither wanted war; both exerted the pressures that brought it about. The imperial government knowingly adopted a high risk policy.’<sup>40</sup>

More recently, John Darwin has noted the limitations of both the strategic and commercial explanations for the ‘character and timing’ of British imperial interventions. To Darwin the ‘crucial variable’ was the ‘bridgehead: the purchase achieved by British interests on their zone of operations’. British intervention in South Africa was in his view ‘predicated as much upon the reinforcement of the local mean to regional primacy – the loyalist population (on which Milner laid such emphasis); the Uitlanders; Rhode’s political machine; his preemption of Zambezia; and, not least, the economic potential of the goldfields – as upon the urgency of any strategic or commercial threat’. The South African case was to Darwin also a reminder that ‘we must also look to the domestic end of the imperial axis, to a “second bridgehead”: those enclaves of empire-minded or imperial-oriented interests in the metropole whose mobilization was crucial to Milner’s success in creating the “moral field” on which Lord Salisbury, to his chagrin, was forced to play’.<sup>41</sup> Such an examination, concerning South Africa and the wider Empire, plays an important part in the following work.