Ruskin and the British Empire

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There is a destiny now possible to us – the highest set before a nation to be accepted or refused . . .

And this is what she [this country] must do, or perish: she must found colonies as fast and as far as she is able, formed of her most energetic and worthiest men; – seizing every piece of fruitful waste ground she can set her foot on, and there teaching these her colonists that their chief virtue is to be fidelity to their country, and that their first aim is to be to advance the power of England by land and sea . . . The England who is to be mistress of half the earth, cannot remain herself a heap of cinders, trampled by contending and miserable crowds; she must yet again become the England she once was, and in all beautiful ways, more: so happy, so secluded [sic], and so pure, that in her sky, polluted by no unholy clouds – she may be able to spell rightly of every star that heaven doth show; and in her fields, ordered and wide and fair, of every herb that sips the dew; and under the green avenues of her enchanted gardens, a sacred Circe, true Daughter of the Sun, she must guide the human arts, and gather the divine knowledge, of distant nations, transformed from savageness to manhood, and redeemed from despairing into peace. (XX, 41-3)

These are the eloquent words, as Edward Said pointed out in *Culture and Imperialism,*¹ from the final part of John Ruskin’s Inaugural Lecture as Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford in February 1870 – a lecture so popular that it had to be transferred to the Sheldonian Theatre. To many, like myself, who thought they knew Ruskin’s work reasonably well before Said’s book, and who read him in the terms of Raymond Williams’s *Culture and Society* as a radical critic of Victorian society, they came as a surprise and a disturbance. For they suggest – what Tim Hilton has asserted recently in *John Ruskin. The Later Years* – that Ruskin was, at least in some ways, closer to the belligerent imperialist Carlyle than to the anti-imperial Morris.² This is hardly surprising, especially in view of Ruskin’s adoption of Carlyle as his ‘Papa’ after the death of John James in 1864. But Ruskin was always a rebellious son, determined to follow his own argument wherever it might lead him, and so we find no simple discipleship to Carlyle. This article will attempt to follow the course of Ruskin’s thinking about the British Empire.

A point to be made initially is that the Empire is by no means one of Ruskin’s major preoccupations; he never visited any overseas part of it except Ireland, and only a very small part of his huge written oeuvre refers to the topic. This does not of course prove that he had no assumptions about it, but it does mean that we have to look carefully for evidence, and we will find it only sporadically. The main references are to be found in the Newdigate Prize poem of 1839; the Inaugural lecture of 1870; ‘The Pleasures of Deed’ in *The Pleasures of England* in 1884, and ‘A Knight’s Faith’ in *Biblia Pauperum* in 1885; there are also a number of passing
references in letters both private and public, especially at the time of the Governor Eyre controversy of 1866, and that over the death of Gordon in 1885. There is nothing comparable to Carlyle’s vitriolic ‘Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question’, or on the other hand to Morris’s biting critique of imperialism in News from Nowhere.

Ruskin grew up with an admiration for an idealised military type, as E T Cook explains in his biography. At the Rev. Thomas Dale’s school, he came to know the sons of a Major Matson of Woolwich, and he later wrote:

Edward Matson sometimes came yet to dine with us at Denmark Hill, and sometimes carried me down to Woolwich, to spend a day amidst its military displays and arts, with his father, and mother, and two sweet younger sisters. Where I saw, in Major Matson, such calm type of truth, gentleness and simplicity as I have myself found in soldiers and sailors only, and so admirable to me that I have never been able, since those Woolwich times, to gather myself up against the national guilt of war, seeing that such men were made by the discipline of it.⁵

According to Batchelor, the Matsons were invited to Herne Hill, “probably in order to promote their son’s friendship with the Matson boys”.⁴ Ruskin also developed a keen interest in military history, reading and taking notes on the conduct of important campaigns.⁵ Hilton confirms that the Ruskin family had “a long acquaintance with soldiers”, and tells us that Herbert – later Sir Herbert – Edwardes was “Ruskin’s exact contemporary and a guest at Herne Hill and Denmark Hill since the 1840s”.⁶ In 1850 the young soldier and diplomat Edwardes came home on leave from India, to be saluted for his success in putting down a rising in the Punjab.⁷ While on leave, he married Emma Sidney, step-daughter of the “affectionate physician” of Ruskin’s father, and Cook confirms that she and her husband were “on terms of friendly intimacy” with the Ruskins.⁸ Ruskin was to recall hearing Edwardes read Wordsworth’s ‘The Happy Warrior’ to him in his father’s house, and realising that “it was no symbol of imaginary character, but the practical description of what every soldier ought to be”. [XXXI, 506] At this time Edwardes wrote an account of his recent Indian campaign, A Year on the Punjab Frontier, 1848-9, published in 1850. Much later, in 1885, Ruskin was to produce a condensed version of this book, with a running commentary of his own, as A Knight’s Faith. The title suggests the way in which Ruskin was able to perceive the military ideal as embodied in a Victorian soldier who took part in the expansion of the British Empire. As Batchelor argues, the teachings of Kenelm Digby’s The Broad Stone of Honour; or, Rules for the Gentlemen of England of 1823 “were to contribute powerfully to Ruskin’s perception of the way in which society should organise itself”.⁹

By this time Ruskin had already won the Newdigate Prize at Oxford for his poem Salsette and Elephanta, which he read at Commemoration in June 1839. Batchelor calls the poem “a tribute to the British Empire, and a tedious exercise in exotic orientalism with a dutiful conclusion in which the gods of India surrender to Christianity”.¹⁰ Since the topic was set, rather than chosen by Ruskin – he had submitted unsuccessful poems in the two previous years on ‘The Gypsies’ and ‘The
Exile of St. Helena’ – it offers no evidence for Ruskin’s particular interest. Indeed, Ruskin remarks in a passage on ‘Prize Poems’ given as an appendix to Praeterita, that he won the prize at the third attempt, “I imagine because the subject not being popular, there was nobody else to give it to”. (XXXV, 614) E T Cook remarks in his Introduction that “The exotic scenery of the poem has been known to perplex some readers”, and helpfully informs us in a note that “Salsette and Elephanta are islands lying off Bombay, with remains of cave-temples sacred to Hindu divinities”. (II, xxv)11. The sources quoted in the notes show that Ruskin did some diligent preliminary reading, including Bishop Reginald Heber’s Narrative of a Journey . . . from Calcutta to Bombay of 1828. The conclusion of the poem warns Siva that his power is about to be destroyed:

Yes! he shall fall, though once his throne was set  
Where the high heaven and crested mountains met . . .

Then shall the idol chariot’s thunder cease  
Before the steps of them that publish peace.  
Already are they heard, – how fair, how fleet,  
Along the mountains flash their bounding feet!  
Disease and death before their presence fly;  
Truth calls, and gladdened India hears the cry,  
Deserts the darkened path her fathers trod,  
And seeks redemption from the Incarnate God. (II, 100)

Both subject and treatment suggest that Ruskin was well aware of contemporary poetic fashion rather than that he had any real knowledge of his topic.

There is no evidence of Ruskin’s showing any interest in the Empire in the early 1850s, except in so far as Stones of Venice warns of the how moral decline may lead to the fall of a great empire into decadence. However, Ruskin shared the widespread outrage in England at the events in 1857 known to the Victorians as the Indian Mutiny, and expressed it in his lecture at the opening of the Architectural Museum at the South Kensington Museum in January 1858 on ‘The Deteriorative Power of Conventional Art over Nations’, published in The Two Paths of 1859. Here Ruskin contrasted the Indians with the Highlanders who had done so much to put down the rising, in relation to the greater artistic sophistication of Indian civilisation:

Since the race of man began its course of sin on this earth, nothing has ever been done by it so signative of all beastial, and lower than beastial, degradation, as the acts of the Indian race in the year that has just passed by . . . Out of the peat cottage come faith, courage, self-sacrifice, purity, and piety, and whatever else is fruitful in the work of Heaven; out of the ivory palace come treachery, cruelty, cowardice, idolatry, bestiality, – whatever else is fruitful in the work of Hell. (XVI, 262-3)

His answer to the question about the relation of art to ethics was that Indian art, though highly accomplished, was ‘conventional’ in that it was remote from Nature
“it never represents a natural fact . . . To all the facts and forms of nature it willfully and resolutely opposes itself . . .” (XVI, 265) Ruskin is keen to draw a conclusion from this contrast, but the conclusion has nothing to do with the British Empire. It is that “Wherever art is practised for its own sake . . . there art has an influence of the most fatal kind . . . whereas art, devoted humbly and self-forgetfully to the clear statement and record of the facts of the universe, is always helpful and beneficent to mankind . . .” (XVI, 268). It is clear that Ruskin’s concern is with cultural principles, of which the Indian events are used to provide evidence; they are not presented in the light of imperial concerns.

Nor are such concerns to be found in his writings in the early part of the next decade. But in February 1865 he gave a lecture on the subject of ‘War’ at the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, published in The Crown of Wild Olive in the following year, the book which, according to Cook, along with Sesame and Lilies, “first made Ruskin a popular writer”12. This seems a surprising subject for Ruskin, who tells us that he had received more than one invitation to lecture at Woolwich before accepting. (XVIII, 459) But Ruskin asserts a direct connection between art and war: “no great art ever yet arose on earth, but among a nation of soldiers.” (X VIII, 459-60) It is “warrior-nations” that have produced great art, though only when the wars they have fought have been “noble”. The Gothic art of the middle ages coincided with the the coming of “romantic knighthood”: “And the arts are extinguished in his [the Roman’s] hands, and do not rise again, until, with Gothic chivalry, there comes back into the mind of Europe a passionate delight in war itself, for the sake of war.” (XVIII, 462). Some wars are condemned, including “the contest of merely ambitious nations for extent of power” attributed to Napoleon. The good wars are those in which “the natural restlessness and love of conquest among men are disciplined, by consent, into modes of beautiful – though it may be fatal – play”. (XVIII, 465)

Ruskin then goes on to consider war under three headings, for play, for dominion, and for defence. Under the heading of play, war is valorised as the arena in which manhood can be proved (for which it is preferable to cricket). It should not be played with “human pawns”, peasants forced into battle and death (XVIII, 466), but only by those ‘players’ whose main function it is. It is nevertheless worthwhile, humanly valuable when fought without modern equipment as “pure trial”. (XVIII, 471). In a remarkable sentence Ruskin states: “All healthy men love fighting, and like the sense of danger; all brave women like to hear of their fighting, and of their facing danger.” (XVIII, 469). Nothing could be in more direct contradiction to liberal pieties;13 but does it offer a justification for contemporary imperialism? Not much, since Ruskin goes on to condemn “modern war, – scientific war, – chemical and mechanic war” as more barbaric than “the savage’s poisoned arrow” (XVIII, 472) and to recall with admiration the feats of the Spartans. Under the heading of ‘dominion’, we come closer to the idea of empire, but Ruskin’s position is not easily pinned down. He asserts on the one hand that “no government is ultimately strong, but in proportion to its kindness and justice; and that a nation does not strengthen, by merely multiplying and diffusing itself” (XVIII,479), but on the other, that “it is at their own greater peril that they [nations] refuse to undertake aggressive war, according to their force,
whenever they are assured that their authority would be helpful and protective”.

(XVIII, 480)

Under the first principle, the question of India is an open one: “whatever apparent increase of majesty and wealth may have accrued to us from the possession of India, whether these prove to us ultimately power or weakness, depends wholly on the degree in which our influence on the native race shall be benevolent and exalting”. (XVIII, 480) Under the second principle, Ruskin vehemently condemns the idea of non-intervention. He deliberately avoids specificity here, but asserts his overall belief that in the previous decade the English have failed as “a knightly nation” by fighting “where we should not have fought, for gain”; and being passive “where we should not have been passive, for fear”. (XVIII, 480) Under the last heading, war for defence, Ruskin – after an extraordinary passage asserting that the young officers he is addressing have probably joined the army for “sentimental motives” like “love of adventure, of excitement, of fine dress, and of the pride of fame” (XVIII, 481) rather than a sense of duty – goes on to tell them that they should obey their orders only if they know them to be just. If not, their position is no better than that of slaves! They should be acting on their responsibilities as members of the ruling class to make sure that the government is pursuing just causes, so that they can obey its orders with conviction. He even says that corrupt nations can only be restored to health by “a military despotism”. (XVIII, 484) Leadership is what counts; it is what made England great. And these young men must begin to take on their responsibility to bring this about by avoiding the temptation of betting, and by living “a bright, stainless, perfect life – a knightly life”. (XVIII, 488) It is clear how important the knightly ideal was to Ruskin, and although its application to imperial expansion is not easy to determine, it is clear that he could conceive of forms of imperialism that he could support.

Unfortunately the form in which that support was now to be given is one that seems today – as it did to liberals at the time – quite indefensible. In 1866 Ruskin became involved in the controversy over Governor Eyre, who had put down a rising in Jamaica with great severity, flogging and hanging ‘rebels’, and executing the supposed leader of the rising, George Gordon, a black Baptist minister. From Hilton’s meticulous account of the response in England to this event, which divided the liberals led by Mill who wished to prosecute Eyre from those who supported his actions, including the increasingly authoritarian and racist Carlyle, it is evident that Ruskin’s involvement was largely due to his respect and admiration for his chosen father-figure. In Hilton’s words, “Ruskin’s loyalty was not to Eyre, about whom he knew next to nothing, but to Carlyle.”

Ruskin undertook a good deal of work for the Eyre Defence and Aid Fund, and sent letters in the press for this reactionary cause. I do not think that we can pass on to Carlyle all the responsibility for Ruskin’s commitment; we can see that it derived from his ability to see ‘dominion’ as a possibly justifiable national activity, even if he did insist that it should be for the purpose of exercising a “benevolent and exalting” influence.

Ruskin lectured again at Woolwich, in December 1869, this time to the Royal Artillery Institution. His subject was ‘The Future of England’, and his message, in its broadest terms, that the rightful demand of the people for justice should not
become allied with confused and destructive hostility to social order. Ruskin believes that there is indeed a crisis, but also that the political solutions being offered are incapable of solving it. Again he follows Carlyle in calling for renewed leadership from people like those in his audience — “Knights; — Equites of England”. (XVIII, 499) Ruskin’s sense of the crisis is conveyed with great eloquence: “Our cities are a wilderness of spinning wheels instead of palaces; yet the people have no clothes. We have blackened every leaf of English green wood with ashes, and the people die of cold; our harbours are a forest of merchant ships, and the people die of hunger.” He then turns his eloquence onto the audience: “Whose fault is this? Yours, gentlemen; yours only”. (XVIII, 502) The situation can be resolved only by those who should be governing actually doing so. In those circumstance alone will the country’s problems be solved, and the principles of both masters and labourers, ‘Every man in his place’ and ‘Every man his chance’ be equally respected and fulfilled. Ruskin ends on a high patriotic plane, quoting John of Gaunt’s dying speech on England, and warning that their doom is approaching if the rulers will not rule. It seems as if empire can play a part in the desired new order:

That [ruling] is, believe me, the work you have to do in England; and out of England you have room for everything else you care to do. Are her dominions in the world so narrow that she can find no place to spin cotton but in Yorkshire? We may organise emigration into an infinite power. We may assemble troops of the more adventurous and ambitious of our youth; we may send them on truest foreign service, found ing new seats of authority, and centres of thought, in uncultivated and unconquered lands; . . . establishing seats of every manufacture in the climates and places best fitted for it, and bringing ourselves into due alliance and harmony with the dexterities of every race, and the wisdoms of every tradition and every tongue.

And then you may make England itself the centre of the learning, of the arts, of the courtesies and felicities of the world. (XVIII, 513)

This is surely the most idealistic and imprecise of envisaged versions of the British Empire, thanks to its sense of inclusion and harmony, although it does seem as if the relocation of cotton spinning to the dominions is mainly for the benefit of Yorkshire. It is here rhetorically integrated into Ruskin’s Utopian vision of the England he would have liked the Guild of St George to be able to bring into existence. In the Appendix to A Crown of Wild Olive, added in 1873, Ruskin admits that his attitude to war was inconsistent, because he could see both its destructiveness and its power to produce fine human qualities. Despite his distress over human suffering, he still felt that “the historical facts are that, broadly speaking, none but soldiers, or persons with a soldierly faculty, have ever yet shown themselves fit to be kings; and that no other men are so gentle, so just, or so clear-sighted. Wordsworth’s character of the happy warrior cannot be reached in the height of it but by a warrior”. (XVIII, 516) He then recalls Sir Herbert Edwardes — “one of the best soldiers of England” — reading the poem to him, and convincing him that it was not metaphorical but “entirely literal”. (XVIII, 516)

It can thus be seen that Ruskin had been thinking about the Empire in his own
way, as well as being influenced by Carlyle, for some time before he gave his Inaugural Lecture at Oxford in 1870 – quoted at the beginning of this article – with the eloquent appeal to the young men to go out and expand the Empire, to which we are told young men like Alfred Milner and Cecil Rhodes responded. We should not therefore be so surprised by it, or by the fact that in Aratra Pentelici, the lectures given in the autumn of 1870 during the Franco-Prussian war, Ruskin refers enthusiastically to the obedience shown by “perfect soldiers” like Sir Richard Grenville, Cromwell, Havelock, and Stonewall Jackson. [XX, 357] The argument is closely related to the ideals of loyalty and order that he put forward throughout the 70s in Fors Clavigera. These are sometimes associated with the Elizabethan sea-captains like Richard Grenville and Francis Drake celebrated by Carlyle’s disciple J A Froude in his essay on ‘England’s Forgotten Worthies’ of 1852, which had been included in his Short Studies on Great Subjects in 1867. Ruskin told his readers in January 1872 that “I mean to give you many pieces to read out of this book” – referring to Froude’s source-book, Hakluyt’s Voyages of 1600 – although he did not in fact do so. (XXVII, 237) Ruskin does quote a passage about Drake’s decision to execute a mutinous crewman to exemplify the admirable quality of judgment he believes to be found in an orderly hierarchical system. The fact that these sailors lived by what would now be seen as thievery is irrelevant to Ruskin, “the theft, or piracy, as it might happen, being always effected with a good conscience, and in an open, honourable, and merciful manner”. (XXVII, 385) The complexity of Ruskin’s position may be seen in his assertion in the first number of Fors in 1871 that the prevailing Gladstonian policy of non-intervention was a result of “bodily fear” rather than principle. According to Ruskin, Britain feared “the Russians . . . the Prussians . . . the Americans . . . the Hindoos . . . the Chinese . . . the Japanese . . . the New Zealanders . . . and . . . the Caffres”, for the good reason that “our only real desire respecting any of these nations has been to get as much out of them as we could”. (XXVII, 12) Ruskin sees this exploitative attitude as characteristic of the whole con- temporary world, though it would seem from a modern perspective that some of these groups were in a far weaker position than others: the Hindus (after 1857), the Maoris and the Africans were hardly in a position to prevent the British Empire getting a good deal “out of them”. But although Ruskin seems to be admitting the exploitativeness of empire, he implies that vigorous ‘unfearful’ action is what is needed, rather than any reconsideration of British policy overseas.

Nevertheless, his was an independent and unusual position, as can be seen from a passage in the lecture ‘The Power of Contentment in Science and Art’ given in Oxford in February 1872 and published in The Eagle’s Nest. Here, in the context of a lament for the passing of “provincial simplicity”, he remarks on the “practical consequences” that might follow from following his principles “if ever you find yourselves, as young Englishmen are often likely to find themselves, in authority over foreign tribes of peculiar or limited capacities” (XXI, 190) The attitude may be superior, but the advice is surprising:

... ascertain first what the people you would teach have been in the habit of doing, and encourage them to do that better; set no other excellence before
their eyes; disturb none of their reverence for the past; do not think yourselves bound to dispel their ignorance, or to contradict their superstitions; teach them only gentleness and truth; redeem them by example from habits you know to be unhealthy or degrading, but cherish above all things, local associations and hereditary skill.

It is the curse of so-called civilization to pretend to originality by the wilful invention of new methods of error, while it quenches, wherever it has power, the noble originality of nations, rising out of the purity of their race, and the love of their native land. (XXII, 190-1)

It is a pity we do not know which races or native lands Ruskin had in mind, but they can hardly have been European ones, given the context of his remarks.

That he was by no means convinced that the course of empire always coincided with justice can be seen in a letter of 19 July 1874 to his “dearest Papa”, Carlyle, in which he states:

Our modes of dealing with the Aborigines may indeed be looked into with advantage. I heard – I have no doubt of the truth of the hearing – from the Bp. of Natal, that our treatment of the Caffres has been as cruel as dishonourable, and that the effect was now remediless. (XXXVII, 124)

Similarly, in 1877 in Fors Ruskin was quoting the Monetary Gazette to the effect that the famine in India was “a phenomenon of political rule and of paternal government” (XXIX, 282) rather than an act of God, as could be seen from the fact that wheat was still being exported to England and elsewhere at the time of the famine; and in 1881 his denunciation of upper-class “louts” in Love’s Meinie focussed on “the various personages, civil and military, who have conducted the Caffre war to its last success, by blowing women and children to death by dynamite, and harrying the lands of entirely innocent peasantry, because they would not betray their defeated king”. (XXV, 180) Here he was no doubt influenced again by his acquaintance with Frances Colenso, daughter of the late Bishop of Natal, and a great defender of the Zulu and their king Cetawayo.17

Ruskin’s concern with the subject of empire seems to have been stimulated next by memories of a very different acquaintance, Sir Herbert Edwardes, who had died in 1868. Hilton has noted that among the many topics touched upon in Ruskin’s diary for the autumn of 1881, there are “some scattered references to imperialism, probably suggested by the thought of Sir Herbert Edwardes”18 – though he does not explain why Ruskin should have been thinking of Edwardes at this time. Certainly he was, because he gave a lecture at Coniston Mechanics Institute in December 1883 on ‘The Battle of Kinyree’ fought by Edwardes.19 He then went on to produce A Knight’s Faith, based on Edwardes’ account of his Indian campaign, A Year on the Punjab Frontier, 1848-9. A Knight’s Faith was published in 1885 as the fourth volume of Bibliotheca Pastorum. In it Ruskin remarks that “I really remember nobody quite like him – since St. Martin of Tours”. (XXXI, 386) In a note he adds: “This was written in 1883, when I had heard nothing of General Gordon. But Gordon, Havelock, and Stonewall Jackson
were all men of Edwardes’ stamp, only there is a vein of gaiety and natural humour in Edwardes which makes him like St. Martin of Tours, in a sense the others were not.” (ibid.) Ruskin also stresses the troops’ belief in Edwardes’ justice, kindness, sympathy and fidelity. His Conclusion, after the reminiscence of Edwardes reading ‘The Happy Warrior’ at Herne Hill as “the practical description of what every soldier ought to be”, follows this line of association to an ecstatic end:

Such, in truth, and to the utmost, were Havelock – Lawrence – Edwardes – and (he himself would have added) many more sons of Sacred England, who went forth for her, not only conquering, and to conquer, but saving, and to save. Crusaders there indeed, – now resting all of them on their red-cross shields among the dead – but who may yet see, as the stars see in their courses, the Moabite Ruth, and the Arab Hagar, look up from their desolation to their Mother of England; saying, – “thy people shall be my people, and thy God, my God!” [XXXI, 506]

Cook argued for the importance of *A Knight’s Faith* in Ruskin’s thought: “He chose Edwardes as a type of the noblest sort of soldier-administrator. As such, this study fills an essential place in the body of Ruskin’s work.” Cook sees Ruskin as having placed particular emphasis on “the nobleness of human nature”, as expressed also in the creed of the Guild of St George, and on “the bloodless victories of his hero”.20 Ruskin completed his tribute to Edwardes in 1887 when he presented what he named ‘The Edwardes Ruby’ to the British Museum, with the inscription “In Honour of the/Invincible Soldiership/And Loving Equity/Of Sir Herbert Edwardes’ Rule/By the Shores of Indus”.21

It is in this context that we find Ruskin breaking off from his script in the second of his Slade Lectures in the autumn of 1884, ‘The Pleasures of Faith’, to make a reference to Gordon, who had recently been sent out on his fatal mission to the Sudan, as a “Latter-day Saint”, remarking that “the religious temper” lived on, and could be seen in “the lives and characters of men like Havelock and Gordon”. [XXXII, lii, liii] And in the third lecture, ‘The Pleasures of Deed’, Ruskin moves from an account of medieval battles to challenge his audience’s attitude to British India. He refers to Edwardes as an example of how “a Christian British officer can, and does, verily and with his whole heart, keep in order such part of India as may be entrusted to him, and in so doing, secure our Empire”. But he then powerfully contrasts the behaviour and attitude of Edwardes with that prevalent in the England represented by his audience:

But the silent feeling and practice of the nation about India is based on quite other motives than Sir Herbert’s. Every mutiny, every danger, every terror, and every crime, occurring under, or paralyzing, our Indian legislation, arises directly out of our national desire to live on the loot of India, and the notion always entertained by English young gentlemen and ladies of good position, falling in love with each other without immediate prospect of establishment in Belgrave Square, that they can find in India, instantly on landing, a bungalow ready furnished with the loveliest fans, china, and shawls, – ices and sherbet at
command, – four-and-twenty slaves succeeding each other hourly to swing the punkah, and a regiment with a beautiful band to “keep order” outside, all round the house. [XXXIII, 478]

This kind of discrimination of imperialisms can also be seen in the third section of Ruskin’s history book for young people, *The Bible of Amiens*, entitled ‘The Lion Tamer’. Here Ruskin refers to a map in Sir Edward Creasey’s *History of England* of 1869 “purporting to exhibit the possessions of the British Nation” (XXXIII, 88). Ruskin tells us that Sir Edward has written “that ‘our island home is the favourite domicile of freedom empire and glory,’ without troubling himself, or his readers, to consider how long the nations over whom our freedom is imperious and in whose shame is our glory, may be satisfied in that arrangement of the globe and its affairs”. Ruskin then goes on to point out that Creasey has used Mercator’s projection for his map, which represents therefore the British dominions in North America as twice the size of the States, and considerably larger than all South America put together: while the brilliant crimson with which all our landed property is coloured cannot but impress the innocent reader with the idea of a universal flush of freedom and glory throughout all those acres and latitudes. So that he is hardly likely to cavil at results so marvellous by inquiring into the nature and completeness of our government in any particular place, – for instance in Ireland, in the Hebrides or at the Cape. (XXXIII, 89)

If Ruskin’s main point is to lay down the correct principles for drawing accurate maps, he is highly unusual in questioning the colouring of that map, and in relating it to particular imperial problems of the moment. As far as Ireland is concerned, he had asserted his concern in a letter of January 1880 in which he asked his unknown correspondent, “Don’t you know I am entirely with you in this Irish misery, and have been for thirty years.” (XXXIV, 544). And in January 1886 he was to write to the *Pall Mall Gazette* pointing out the positive qualities of the Irish – “an artistic people”, “a witty people”, “an affectionate people” – and arguing that they should be ruled in a spirit that recognised these qualities. (XXXIV, 582)

Meanwhile, in early 1885 Ruskin sent two letters to the *Pall Mall Gazette* about the death of Gordon.22 In the first he wrote to contradict the idea that Britain needed to beg help from other nations because “we have lost a few good men and officers in Africa, and, after dawdling for six months, been too late to save one very perfectly good officer whom, as far as I can make out, Ministers must have wanted to get rid of”. (19 Feb. 1885; XXXIV, 578) The second letter attacks “Englishmen ... making the death of Gordon the occasion of party protest”, and goes on, in a curious way, to link Gordon and Carlyle: “I am edified by the burst of funeral music from the lips of England in praise of Gordon’s honour and faith, while she received for thirty years, with rage and hissing, the words of the one man, now at rest among his native hills, who told her that her merchants should be honest and her statesmen sincere”. (25 Feb. 1885; XXXIV, 579) No doubt Ruskin saw himself as taking over from the recently dead Carlyle
the duty to tell the English people these unpopular truths; but it should be noted that the political sentiments here relate only indirectly if at all to the idea of empire.

Ruskin, as we can see, was not a crude imperialist in the way of Carlyle, however much he may have admired the latter. His attention was focussed on the British Isles, his concern was for the fate of its people, while he could see quite clearly that for many of his contemporaries India was of value only for its "loot". But because of his allegiance to the chivalric tradition, in which he could place military figures operating in the Empire like Havelock, Edwardes and Gordon, he could believe in an ideal empire in which the values he held dear, and which were being scorned in his own society, could somehow find fulfilment for the benefit of all. He wanted the students of Oxford in 1870 to place themselves under the banner of Christ and not that of Mammon in their service of Empire. Whether we see this as noble idealism or an absurd refusal to face facts will depend on our own politics. But it does put Ruskin where we would expect him to be — in a class of his own.

NOTES

All bracketed references are to E T Cook and A Wedderburn, editors, The Works of John Ruskin, 39 vols., George Allen 1903-12.

1 Edward Said, Culture and Imperialism, Chatto and Windus, 1993, pp. 123-5; Said omits Ruskin’s final paragraph, in which he tells his auditors: “You think that an impossible ideal”, and tells them, more liberally, “All that I ask of you is that you have a fixed purpose of some kind for your country and yourselves; no matter how restricted, so that it be fixed and unselfish”. (XX, 43-4) Said concludes, debatably in my opinion, that England’s “art and culture depend, in Ruskin’s view, on an enforced imperialism”. (p.126)

2 Timothy Hilton, John Ruskin. The Later Years, Yale UP 2000, pp. 173-4; subsequently referred to as Hilton.

3 E T Cook, The Life of Ruskin, Allen and Unwin, 1911. 2 vols. I, 46; he is quoting from XXX, 381-2; subsequently referred to as Cook.

4 John Batchelor, John Ruskin. No Wealth but Life. Chatto and Windus 2000, p.28; subsequently referred to as Batchelor.

5 Cook, II, 484.

6 Hilton, p. 370.

7 Dictionary of National Biography, Edwardes, Sir Herbert Benjamin.

8 Cook II, 484.

9 Batchelor, Note p.24; he refers to Ruskin’s tribute to Digby in Modern Painters V (1860). Digby’s purpose, we are told, was to take “tomes of chivalry and ancient wisdom” as sources of “ensamples and doctrines” for the gentry. Note 65, p. 346; ref Digby, 1823, xi-xiii.

10 Batchelor, Note p.40.

11 Ruskin also notes that his success led to his “entirely ridiculous and ineffable
conceit and puffing up”, adding “I cannot understand how schoolmasters of sense allow their boys ever to try for prizes”. (XXXV, 613)

12 Cook, II, 96. Batchelor thinks highly of A Crown of Wild Olive, remarking that these four lectures (including ‘War’) “build a vision of an alternative society chivalrous, just, loving, harmonious. His blazing generosity of spirit, brilliance, wit, philanthropy and indignation burn through these pieces.” (p. 209). He finds in the patriotism of the last “a noble rhetoric”. (p.212)

13 We are reminded of the attitude shown by Ruskin in a conversation with Gladstone recorded by Henry Holiday. Gladstone praised the Quakers for their “social influence” in reforming prisons, abolishing slavery and denouncing war, for Ruskin to reply “I am really sorry, but I don’t think that prisons ought to be reformed, I don’t think slavery ought to have been abolished, and I don’t think war ought to be denounced.” (quoted in Hilton, p. 369). In Praeterita, Ruskin remarks of his friend Charles Norton that he is out of place in the United States “twenty times more a slave than the blackest nigger he ever set his white scholars to fight the South for; because all the faculties a black has may be developed by a good master (see Miss Edgworth’s story of The Grateful Negro) – while only about the thirtieth or fortieth part of Charles Norton’s effective contents and capacity are beneficially spent in the dilution of the hot lava, and fructification of the hot ashes, of American character . . .” (XXXV, 523). He adds that “that story of the Grateful Negro, Robinson Crusoe, and Othello, contain, any of the three, more, alike worldly and heavenly, wisdom than would furnish any three Uncle Tom’s Cabins”. (ibid.) But just previously he remarks that Norton is indisputably “a gentleman of the world, whom the highest born and best bred of every nation, from the Red Indian to the White Austrian, would recognise in a moment, as of their caste”. (XXXV, 521)

14 Hilton, p. 106.

15 Hilton, p. 74, claims that Ruskin “was clearly inspired by” Carlyle when he delivered this lecture. He remarks interestingly:

The lecture was called ‘The Future of England’, just the sort of title that Morris might have used in his later, Socialist days. But at no time would Morris have approved of Ruskin’s call to ‘the soldiers of England’ to help build a new society; and the soldiers themselves might have been puzzled as they listened to Ruskin’s words, to know what he expected them to do.

16 See J E Wrench, Alfred Lord Milner. The Man of No Illusions, Eyre and Spottiswood, 1958, p. 40, on the appeal of Ruskin’s “sane Imperialism”; and Sarah G Millin, Rhodes, Chatto and Windus, 1933, p.30: “the boy Rhodes [he was 20 when he came to Oxford from South Africa in 1853] was ripe for Ruskin’s heroic message, it was the time also of Disraeli”; but neither man had yet come up to Oxford when Ruskin gave the lecture.

17 See Frances E Colenso, History of the Zulu War, 1880.

18 Hilton, p. 427.

19 Hilton, p. 482.

20 Cook, II, 485.

21 Hilton, p. 487.

22 These letters contrast vividly with the position Ruskin had taken up in the
previous year. In ‘A Conversation with Mr. Ruskin at Brantwood’ in the *Pall Mall Gazette* for 21 April 1884 Ruskin told M H Spielman:

I have no opinion on politics or public matters just now – for I don’t know what is going on anywhere – especially I know nothing about Egypt, General Gordon, Ireland or London lodgings. You see, I’m very busy just now, and when I’m busy I daren’t look at the newspapers, or even open my letters, until my work is finished . . . Stay . . . there is one opinion that I do entertain just now, and that is that Mr. Gladstone is an old windbag. (XXXIV, 666)

But in 1885, too, Ruskin’s friend George MacDonald published two sonnets on the death of Gordon, which, as Chris Brooks has remarked, also contributed to “the Victorian construction of Gordon as imperial martyr and Christian warrior”. (C. Brooks and P. Faulkner, eds., *The White Man’s Burdens*, University of Exeter Press, 1996, p.252).