"THE CHARACTER CREED": HOW CHARACTER SHAPED THE BRITISH IMPERIAL ENTERPRISE

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> The secret of British success is to be found in the character of the British people (de Thierry 65).

If late-Victorian Britons agreed upon anything, it may have been in their valuation of "character" as the basis of British success. Contemporaries on both sides of almost every public debate in *fin-de-siècle* Britain invoked "character" as an integral component of their argument. This was particularly so in the case of empire. "Character," in fact, was something of a national preoccupation in the late-Victorian era and the important position it held in the late-Victorian social and intellectual milieu is noted in secondary literature on the era. The focus, however, is most often on domestic issues such as the Charitable Organization Society or the social policy debate between liberals and socialists, while the role of "character" in empire has been relatively unexamined. This is puzzling considering that empire was the nexus of the late-Victorian socio-political world, the foundation of British identity. As William de Thierry notes in discussing Rudyard Kipling's talent for portraying the imperial "character" of British soldiers: "He discovers us their lust for life, their abounding optimism, their faith in the Empire, of which they are the central pillar, their courage and devotion to duty, their grip of first principles, their good-natured contempt for . . . insoluble problems and portentous notings" (80).

What *were* the traits that Britons believed they successfully carried with them into the Empire? George C. Brodrick asserted that "it is doubtless the spirit of individual and self-reliance fostered by all this amateur energy that fits the Englishmen to act for themselves in distant lands" (524), while Herbert Spencer saw "character" as "the end which the statesman should keep in view as higher than all other ends" (Collini, *Public Moralists* 94). Political actors of the day certainly agreed with Spencer, arguing that it was "a necessary prophylactic against . . . economic or political disasters" (Collini, *Liberalism and Socialism* 28). They, like most Victorians, believed "character" to be a public virtue, the trait which linked together all members of the social unit and necessitated their mutual participation in improving the social "organism."

Many other contemporaries believed that "character" played an integral role in the construction of an imperial identity—witness one soldier's exultation of "character" in battle: "it recks nothing, avoids nothing, considers nothing . . . it upsets failure at the last moment, transforming it into success" (*Daily Mail* 14 May 1900). The *Daily Chronicle* noted at the end of the Boer War that "the knowledge that the crisis was worthy of our endeavour nerved us to effort, and still renewed effort. Whenever a disaster befell our arms, the spirit of Britain's sons asserted itself more indomitably" (2 June 1902). Both advocates and critics of imperialism debating its merits at the turn of the century argued that the maintenance of a strong national "character" was imperative to Britain's continued success as an imperial power. Winston Churchill, an avid imperialist who

became famous in part through his sensational escape from a Boer prisoner-of-war camp, termed the relief of Ladysmith "the most remarkable example of national tenacity and perseverance which our later history contains" (210). The journalist Arnold White, who criticised the manner in which the war was prosecuted, saw strength as the essence of imperial success, requiring intelligence, moral resolve, and national duty.

This essay reflects on the place of "character" in the imperial context. It does not pretend to offer a comprehensive definition of imperialism itself, offering instead an exploration of the distinctive theme of "character," a theme which has often been undervalued in studies of British imperialism. In *Public Moralists* Stefan Collini argues persuasively that "character" was *the* central ideal of the political discourse of the Victorian period. What precisely was meant by the term "character"? The *Encyclopædic Dictionary* (1894) defines it as "the moral and mental constitution" of an individual or group (940). For Collini "character" was the aggregate of the "individual's or nation's mental and moral qualities, in contrast to others [and] formed through nature and habit" (96). "Character" was identified with restraint in pursuit of a greater good, and stressed courage, will-power, and service. Many late-Victorians, revolting against the tradition of Georgian leisure, believed these attributes were best expressed through work, a notion most famously expressed in the philosophy of Samuel Smiles. The valuation of such qualities can be traced back explicitly to Samuel Smiles's twin works *Character* (1871) and *Duty* (1880).

The second Anglo-Boer War, the apex of the New Imperialism, provides a useful test study,[1] an appropriate event through which to examine the role of "character" in imperialism because it precipitated a vigorous national debate on the virtues of empire which crossed political, racial, and gender barriers. The war, waged between Britain and the Transvaal and Orange Free State Boers from 1899 until 1902, attracted more interest in Britain than any foreign adventure since the time of Napoleon. While the Fashoda incident and the death of General Gordon at Khartoum had heightened awareness of Britain's African exploits, the Boer War served to crystallise contemporary discourse concerning the role of imperialism in British society.

The controversial nature of the Boer War heightens its usefulness as a case study: imperialists (in the context of this paper defined as those who supported the war) and pro-Boers (those who publicly supported the Boer cause) fought a vicious battle over the morality of the war in the domestic press, both sides using "character" to justify the morality of their cause. The Liberal Imperialist H.H. Asquith urged the nation to "stand together with an unbroken front, to endeavour to see that on our side the conflict [is] persecuted with such promptitude and energy as to secure the most rapid, and the most merciful end . . ." (*Times* 13 October 1899). Pro-Boer W.T. Stead commended the character of Boer General Christian de Wit in order to illustrate the unjustness of a war that persecuted such a gallant people: "[Though] born outside the breastworks of civilisation, he is noble in manner and deportment" (*Review of Reviews* April 1901: 371). Concern over the national "character" was preeminent in the debate over the war

[1] The first Boer War, more appropriately termed a rebellion, occurred in 1880-81 when the Boers successfully revolted against Britain's attempt to annex the Transvaal. The Boers prevailed at Majuba Hill and Britain contented itself with a vague assertion of suzerainty in the region until 1899. All references to the Boer War are to the second conflict, 1899-1902.

as both imperialists and pro-Boers identified personal traits with the national collective.

Since "character" was most often invoked on a national level, before addressing the relationship between "character" and the jingoism it elicited some background information on how Imperialists used "character" to justify their actions will be useful. In 1902 J.A. Hobson remarked that "imperialism has been floated on a sea of vague, well-sounding phrases which are seldom tested by close contact with the facts" (*Imperialism* 206). Although this notion has been contested by innumerable historians, many still presume that imperialism was a "thing," an identifiable entity or policy which contemporaries generally agreed upon. It is important to remember however that the term imperialism had only recently become part of the popular idiom, deriving its currency from Louis Napoleon's Second Empire and the ultra-expansionist rhetoric of Benjamin Disraeli.

At its most basic imperialism simply denoted territorial aggrandisement. But beneath this shallow definition lay a myriad of competing notions struggling for predominance. Men and women of many different political, social, and economic backgrounds thought of themselves as imperialists, despite their sometimes conflicting views about other issues. There was little agreement, however, over what imperialism in the national context actually meant. For Hobson it intimated a temporary maladjustment in the capitalist system brought on by nefarious speculators. For White it implied a world stage on which rival nations pitted their "national efficiency." For Joseph Chamberlain and other New Imperialists it signified the opportunity to further the "national interest" of their country. Such differences are often overlooked by social commentators. It seems most useful to understand imperialism as a "way of thinking" about the social connections formed among Britons and with those foreign races with whom they came into contact.

A cursory look at late-Victorian domestic politics would initially seem to justify this conjectural definition. The "Khaki Election" of 1900 in which the Unionists retained power was fought primarily on the Boer War issue and illustrated deep domestic divisions concerning the morality of the war. The Liberal party, inheritor of William Gladstone's "Little Englander" legacy, had begun to splinter into Liberal-Imperialist and Radical factions presaging its eventual eclipse by the Labour party. The ostensible issue in both these cases was foreign affairs, but underneath lay questions concerning the British people's relations with each other and with their Empire. Doubts were raised as to the moral character of the British, their possible eclipse by a rival nation, and the best means to preserve the "national interest." Such doubts influenced political decision-making abroad, and changed the political landscape at home; the debate over a militia bill in 1900 is one example: opponents of the war had warned of the infirmity of Britain's troops from the outset, and by 1901 many pro-war advocates, worried that physical infirmity was a sign of poor moral fibre, voiced similar concerns. The editor of the *Nineteenth Century* bemoaned that the army "consists almost entirely of undersized and immature boys" (November 1901: 702). Although no militia bill was passed during the war, the underlying fear of a decline in the nation's character remained.

Viewed in this context "character" functioned as an index of progress, a measure of vitality for both individual and nation. Although historians have sometimes implicitly

placed the concept of "character" in a subservient role to class in the socio-political superstructure of the period—the tool of paternalistic middle-class philanthropists[2]—it often superseded class when viewed in the imperial context. The Empire was seen as an expression of the entire nation not just of a certain class, a phenomenon Bernard Semmel has argued was attributable to the rise of social imperialism in the 1890s. Social imperialism, as Semmel describes it, "was designed to draw all classes together in defence of the nation and empire and aimed to prove to the least well-to-do class that its interests were inseparable from those of the nation" (13). When the Boer War broke out the social imperialist language of Chamberlain and other pro-war imperialists had temporarily succeeded in propagating such a notion of national unity. Kipling's "The Absent-Minded Beggar," a jingoistic call for national unity, raised £60,000 in the three months following its publication in the *Daily Mail* on 31 October, 1893 (*Daily Mail* 8 January 1900: 4).[3] Imperialism, however, remained an enterprise valued most highly by the middle and upper classes. Working-class apathy and even hostility often boiled over during the war. At its outset *Reynolds Newspaper* railed that "in the long history of rapacity and cunning which has characterised English class Government in dealing with weaker states, nothing worse has been done than the hypocritical way in which we have declared war on the Transvaal" (15 October 1899: 3). Even some soldiers began to doubt that imperialism was of benefit to them: "I look upon this war as having ill repaid me for the kindly and jubilant tone in which I have dealt with it. And, oh! how sick of it I am" (*Daily Mail* 16 May 1900: 5). Nevertheless, such views were slow to gather support. For those involved in the imperial enterprise, and they included working-class soldiers, navvies, and even newspaper readers, as well as the usual upper and middle-class suspects, imperialism and "character" were seen as inseparable.

If "character" was deemed necessary to further the enterprise of empire, it was "character" in turn that helped shape that goal: "Character" both formed individuals and provided their complete environment. Britons felt that imperial successes were attributable to the "character of Imperial actors," an attitude sardonically referred to by Oscar Wilde as "the sickly cant about duty" (Collini, *Liberalism* 50). The British "character" was especially lauded in the face of adversity, as when it was reported that Britons received the news of the Ladysmith siege with "fortitude befitting an Imperial Nation" (*Blackwood's* December 1899: 883). These events subsequently reinforced the importance of "character." While Britons at home were expected to show restraint, impulsiveness became an acceptable trait for imperial actors. Victorians abhorred apathy, as it created dependency and thus a strain on the social unit. People were encouraged to take an active role in empire, as shown by the exuberance which greeted news that war had begun in October, 1899: "Movement and eagerness are stamped upon the faces of all ranks at Aldershot under orders for the Cape" (*Times* 14 October 1899: 9). The belief that unity was the trait of a great nation explains the particularly virulent

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[2] Eric Hobsbawm's *The Age of Empire* is a good example of such prioritising; useful theoretical works include Anthony Brewer's *Marxist Theories of Imperialism* and Charles A. Barone's *Marxist Thought on Imperialism*.

[3] The poem's refrain read as follows: "Duke's son—cook's son—son of a hundred kings— / (Fifty thousand horse and foot going) / Each of 'em doing his country's work / Pass the hat for your credit's sake and pay-pay-pay!"

accusations of "traitor" levelled against pro-Boers and the pride shown in the contributions of the colonies in the war effort.

"Character" played a dual role for many Victorian imperialists. The construction of a strong national "character" was seen as a primary goal whose achievement necessitated the exhibition of good "character" among the general public. "Character" was imbued with a moral autonomy which imperialists believed sanctified their enterprise. As "character" was the goal towards which the Victorians strove, any action which seemed to reflect its proper display was viewed by imperialists as a moral action. "Character" as an ideal existed in the abstract but it was also something one showed through one's actions; this was important in the context of empire, since imperialism was not merely an ideology but something one *did*. "Character" was therefore used to sanction imperial actions. Ralph Waldo Emerson described "character" as "moral authority [expressed] through the medium of individual nature" (Collini, *Public Moralists* 100). Applied to the British imperial context, this definition helps to explain what Kathryn Tidwick has termed the contradiction of imperial authority: sanctified brutality and ostensible benevolence (205-06). Imperial rule relied primarily upon personal influence, and the wielders of this influence—men such as Chamberlain and Milner, as well as lesser colonial officials—epitomised manliness and responsibility. These traits became part of the "character creed," completing the circular process.

We are left with a most ambiguous conception of what was meant by "character" at any one time. Such a conceptual fluidity, however, ensured that "character" remained integral to late-Victorian imperialism. It was adaptable enough to incorporate domestic concerns, but when employed by imperial actors "character" became a known entity, a reliable set of personal attributes in the face of unknown challenges. This is why at the beginning of the twentieth century Joseph Conrad's Kurtz was to become such a tragic figure for contemporary readers: he failed to maintain the "imperial character" when it mattered most—in isolation (Said 198-201). Ambiguity also explains the universal appeal of "character" as a social cure-all. It was not a dogma, an "ism" which attracted acolytes and critics. It served to unite, rather than divide, and was thus inevitably linked with empire as a universal endeavour.

Historians have asked to what degree this conceptual fluidity was simply used by imperialists as a defence for operating in an exploitative manner. Indeed imperialists such as Sidney Low—who noted with frustration that "the Negroid and Bantu races, in spite of clothing, missionaries, and small-pox, have shown an inconsiderate disinclination to smooth the way of progress by dying out" (868)—certainly played the "character card" to justify Britain's advance into new markets. However, predatory capitalism, such as the usurious financial speculation Hobson claimed was occurring in South Africa, was denounced by all but the most ardent Cobdenites. Furthermore, while the so-called tropical colonies dominated the headlines at the turn of the century, it was trade with the self-governing colonies (Canada, Australia, New Zealand) and foreign countries that most profited Britain. The motives of those imperialists who used "character" as a defence for their activities in South Africa had more to do with national efficiency and xenophobia than the base pursuit of profit. "Character," however, was viewed by both imperialists and pro-Boers as a unifying factor. This was certainly the

case for Sidney Sheppard, an imperialist author who believed it was every Britons' duty to participate in the war (4).

The notion of unity was important in an age when society was conceptualised as a collective composed of the sum of its parts. Society, through its opinions and organisations, was believed to be the cause of immoral behaviour; *all* people were thus responsible for such ills, and *all* had a responsibility to redress them (Freeden 174). To solve social problems, both liberals and socialists believed it was imperative to maintain a high national "character," their main point of contention being the means to affect this change—socialists placing more emphasis on state action. The notion of the nation as a collective gained prominence during the war as Britain was swept up in a wave of imperial nationalism.

On 11 October 1899 when news of the outbreak of war reached Drury Lane Music Hall, "the orchestra struck up 'Rule Britannia,' while the whole of the vast audience rose and cheered so lustily that the National Theatre—fit scene for such a burst of Big Englandism—seemed to shake on its foundations" (*Daily Mail* 12 October 1899: 4). Such an outburst of war fervour was not surprising, as British imperialists, and this included the majority of the population at this stage, saw in the conflict an opportunity to assert the nation's dominance on the world stage. Britain, after all, had God on its side. This belief was epitomised by A.W. Frodsham in a letter to the *Daily News*: "If we go to war with the Transvaal, I believe we shall be a rod in the hands of Providence" (4 October 1899: 6).

What role did "character" play in the manifestation of British nationalism during the war? Imperial supporters of the war believed patriotism was the natural outward expression of a strong national "character." As the late-Victorian Positivist J.M. Robertson noted, "patriotism, conventionally defined as love of country, now turns out rather obviously to stand for love of more country" (162). Unlike the Radical patriotism of late-Georgian figures such as Tom Paine, late-Victorian patriotism was decidedly imperial and racial, the political tool of the Unionist government. Patriotism, nationalism, and imperialism became interchangeable in the popular idiom, part of "the awakening of a truly loyal and Imperial spirit in the breasts [of Englishmen]" (*Daily Chronicle* 2 June 1902: 4). Both the working-class and government press equated being a patriot with supporting the imperialist war in South Africa. As a Welsh haberdasher exclaimed:

> We cannot all be soldiers brave and wear a khaki coat,
> But we'll back the British Empire while there's breath left in our throat.
> We cannot all march bravely to conquer or to die,
> But every man that wears a shirt can wear a khaki tie. (O'Moore 6)

Indeed, when the pro-Boer movement began to gather momentum, its members were not denounced as anti-imperialists, but rather as traitors (*Yorkshire Post* 9 March 1900: 4).

Such vitriol is indicative of the particular form of nationalism which emerged during the Boer War. Victorians saw the nation as "an aggregation of persons belonging to the same ethnological family, and speaking the same language" (*Encyclopædic*

Dictionary 3: 3254). The war caused many Britons to close the ranks of their "ethnological family." Boer War patriotism flamed beyond mere national chauvinism to become what contemporaries termed "jingoism," that "inverted patriotism whereby the love of one's own nation is transformed into the hatred of another nation, and the fierce craving to destroy the individual members of that other nation" (Hobson, *Psychology* 1). British jingoism was in fact provoked by the existence of Empire, not by indigenous sentiment. The Empire being essentially an antithetical entity (British/Boer, British/Indian, and so on.), this is perhaps not surprising. It also explains the oscillating intensity of war-time jingoism. During the early days of the war, revenge was on the lips of many Britons:

> Pull the Lion's tail and wake him and you'll find he isn't dumb;
> And if you want to work him up to action rougher still,
> Rouse his mem'ry too, and whisper in his ear, 'Majuba Hill!
> (Bishop 57)

At the same time the Mafeking celebration, "unparalleled in its mad, frenzied happiness" (*Daily Mail* 19 May 1900: 4), is legendary for its exuberance. As the war dragged on, however, the public seemed to lose interest. Jingoism was increasingly seen as nothing more than "music-hall madness," a negative force manifested only by dying races. It was certainly most rampant at the outset of the war when the British public generally expected a swift victory: contributions to *Blackwood's* argued that there could be "no greater mistake than to suppose that the conquest of the Transvaal Boers, left to themselves, is a task which would severely test the British army" (March 1899: 265), while Dr. James Kay, a Ladysmith physician, stated that "my personal opinion is that we should finish it [the war] by January" (*Daily Mail* 21 May 1900).

The theme of "character" is evident in jingo crowds rallying in the belief that their brand of nationalism was an "informing spirit" which helped shape the human material of the Empire.[4] The war seemed to provide an ideal opportunity to display the traits which had created the Empire. As the *Daily Chronicle* reported, "anyone familiar with the national character must know that . . . dogged determination was paramount" (2 June 1902: 5). The jingo press emphasised such traits at every opportunity. Even after the British were humbled at Spion Kop, jingoes exclaimed that though the nation was "baffled and beaten, she works on still: Weary and sick of soul, she works the more, sustained by her indomitable will" (Wilson 319). As one war commentator put it, "there is an instinctive recognition that man's part is not to shirk the hardships or escape from the sorrows of life" (106). Indeed, courage and honour in the face of adversity were trumpeted as the British imperialists' greatest qualities:

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[4] It must be remembered that "jingo" was a derogatory term applied by "Little Englanders" to enthusiastic supporters of the New Imperialism and the government's policies in South Africa. Jingoes would most likely have termed themselves patriots.

Though valor [sic] unrewarded die
Nor every field be won
We'll bate no jot of courage high
Before our task be done (Godley 79)

Imperialists valued these traits because they believed that imperialism was a benevolent force in world history: "Britannia, armed, goes forth to war, / For progress, fainting on her throne ("For Honour" Borthwick 26). Although it was not only jingoists who held such views, as evidenced by the broad spectrum of support the Boer War generated. The equation of imperialism and progress was one taken up by most Liberals at the time, including the Liberal-Imperialists led by Lord Rosebery. However, Liberal views on imperialism, unlike Conservative ones, required sterner self-explanation. While ostensibly it would seem that liberalism would be inimical to an enterprise which advocated the subjugation of other peoples, most liberals were able to rationalise support for imperialism by arguing that it "magnifies or makes approximate to the Divine this mortal life of ours" (Cramb 150). As one pro-war preacher put it: "I need no convincing that in the maintenance of our empire are involved the interests of peace, justice and humanity of millions of human beings. It is true Israel had a mission. So has England a mission" (Goddard 174). Even those liberals who were uneasy with the militarist nature of the New Imperialism comforted themselves in the belief that imperial war was moral as long as the imperial nation conferred no personal gain beyond the political rule of a less-advanced people. J.A. Cramb, a late-Victorian historian, voiced this self-deception, stating with "just confidence that our very blood and the ineffaceable character of our race will save us from any mischief that militarism may have brought to others" (110).

Liberals also found refuge in the conception of the state as a collective. While nationalism and its bastard child jingoism certainly conflicted with many liberals' sense of individualism and internationalism, liberal imperialists (both those who belonged to Rosebery's political faction and those who held similar convictions independently) could fall back on what they saw as imperialism's support of liberty and freedom to buttress their support for empire. Transposing the organic theory of the state to the Empire, liberal imperialists argued that the Empire was a benevolent force because it served to spread freedom to previously shackled populations—in essence, Kipling's "white man's burden." The measure of any imperial action's morality was what John Gibbins has termed "the good motive" (492). Since motives are of course difficult to ascertain, the true measure of the "good motive" was really "character." If an imperial actor, say Chamberlain, decided upon a specific course of action, the morality of that action was measured in relation to Chamberlain's character. His unbending prosecution of the war was favourably viewed as a result of his "disinterested patriotism." Even opponents of imperialism couched their criticisms in terms of character; W.T. Stead in particular was fond of attacking the person of his adversaries. He termed the conflict in South Africa "Mr. Chamberlain's War" and went on to denigrate Chamberlain as "a man who, if we may judge from these negotiations [between Chamberlain and Kruger prior to war], had not even an elementary conception of honesty and straightforward dealing" (*Review of Reviews* November 1899: 464).

Eric Hobsbawm has pointed to the equation of imperialism with progress as the central component of nineteenth-century Liberal discourse on imperialism. Nationalism (which appears as jingoism in the period under examination) "was seen inevitably as a process of expansion . . . in tune with historical evolution only insofar as [it] extended the scale of human society" (32-33). Hobsbawm agues that such sentiments were largely constructed by élites seeking to maintain their hegemony; this does not, however, fully explain the oscillating jingoism of the Boer War years. The cheap sentiments of figures such as Alfred Austin, the Poet Laureate—"Empire whose sole and not unworthy boast/ Is to proclaim the fettered must be free ("The Merciful and the Mightiful"—were certainly attempts to garner support for the government's cause, but more often than not it was the general public itself who contributed to the war fervour, and at the heart of this fervour was a concern for "character." When the debate over the morality of the concentration camp system the British had implemented in Africa reached a peak in the summer of 1901, the *Yorkshire Post* saw the ordeal in terms of the national "character": "There is no alternative, and the strength of the nation will be shown by its patience" (16 July 1901: 6). Even the art produced by soldiers and war correspondents stressed themes of heroism, sacrifice, and duty—the most important qualities of the imperial character.[5]

The importance of the imperial "character" manifested itself in two major areas during the War: in the myth of the imperial Hero, and in the conception of the Empire as a continuum, part of a grand British past of triumph and success. Supporters of the war believed they were acting at the behest of Progress, fulfilling Providence's mission of civilising the earth by "laying the foundations of states unborn" (Cramb 219). Empire, one commentator asserted, "was the process of building up other and vaster Britains" (de Thierry 80), and as such, liberals who embraced imperialism could overlook its faults in the name of a great, humanitarian effort. This reversion to simple "ends justifies the means" logic reveals the difficulty liberal thinkers had in rationalising support for imperialism.

The Empire, like the "nation" itself, gained emotional support through false claims of tradition. The New Imperialism, which was barely thirty years old when the Boer War broke out, appealed to Britons by stressing their integral role in the British tradition of empire. Imperialists boasted a "determination to keep for the Anglo-Saxon race whatever the Anglo-Saxon race has won" (Cramb 18). Ignoring the fact that during the three decades following Disraeli's call for pride in the Empire Gladstone's "Little Englandism" had held its own as a political force, the Lady Mayoress of London remarked that the war was an opportunity "for us [the British people] to show ourselves worthy of that Empire which has been created and handed down to us by our ancestors and forefathers" (*Daily Chronicle* 2 June 1902: 7). Everywhere it was stressed that the Empire was a great continuum of which all Britons were a small, but significant, part. This sentiment underscored the apparent need for carrying on those traits which supposedly had built the Empire: courage, duty, honesty, and, as the writer G.A. Henty

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[5] See, for instance, Herbert Wilson, *With the Flag to Pretoria.* Vols 1 & 2, and *After Pretoria: The Guerrilla War* Vols 3 & 4; both contain much war art from soldiers, war correspondents, and British artists.

was fond of saying, "pluck." Stories of British soldiers displaying such qualities found a receptive audience at home.

The tales that perhaps resonated most broadly were those which focused upon the imperial Hero. Though the press delighted in recounting the glorious deeds of British soldiers, the Boer War above all carried on the British tradition of venerating war heroes. Despite a paucity of dignified candidates (given the disastrous early campaign, the comparisons between figures such as Buller and past imperial heroes like Gordon seem far-fetched), the press began its search for the next Wellington or Nelson. The *Daily Mail* ran an extensive series in the war's opening months focussing on military leaders such as Lord Kitchener and Major-General Sir John French. The glorification of Lord Roberts—"I fancy that, in the minds of their worshipers, some of the soberer Gods of the old mythologies had faces like his" (Wilson 218)—was perhaps the height of hagiographic hyperbole. Even those such as the humanitarian Alice Stopford Green, who opposed the government's war measures, remarked that the exertion of personal influence was the most appropriate manner in which to administer the war (972-83).

The lionising of imperial Heroes was not restricted to those at home. Soldiers during the Boer War had just as much enmity towards their officers as those in any other conflict, but much of their writing reveals respect for those officers who fulfilled their Imperial "duty." One soldier, apparently reacting to criticism of the British staff's competency, wrote:

> Stoopid? By Gawd, they may be!
> An' long let 'em so remain,
> If they gives us lads o' the bull-dog breed,
> Lads as is born, not learned, to lead,
> No matter 'ow small their brain.6 ("Coldstreamer" 59).

Baden-Powell, not surprisingly, was also held in high esteem by those under his command as the following entry in the diary of Edward Ross, a resident of Mafeking during the siege, attests: "His tone, his self-possession, his command of self, his intimate knowledge of every detail of the defenses . . . shewed us the ideal soldier, and what the British officer can be and is in moments of extreme peril" (*Diary* 229).

Imperial heroes such as Baden-Powell gained immense popularity because they embodied the traits to which all British imperialists aspired. This can be imputed to the myth of the imperial Hero. The imperial "character" was epitomised by men working independently through their personality for the good of Britain. As this was a collective goal, at least ostensibly, class distinctions became secondary at the imperial level. Unlike nations such as Russia, where national heroes like Pushkin and later Lenin and

[6] A major problem with the British war effort was, of course, the very fact that there *were* too many officers who tried to get by on "bull-dog" tenacity despite a lack of education and training. A veneration of "character" over professional training was the root cause of this, a point touched on by advocates of the national efficiency.

the revolutionary heroes, were deified as divine figures among men,[7] British heroes were portrayed as the epitome of what any Briton could become if he applied himself. The historian John Field has described this phenomenon in terms of an "imperial relationship." Duty, personal will, military aggressiveness, and ambition were traits to which imperialists aspired looking to figures such as Kitchener or Chamberlain as their models. Field's analysis is useful in its emphasis on personal "character" in the Empire, especially as it relates to imperialists' equation of the individual with the nation (229-33), The myth of the imperial Hero served to unite British imperialists because it stressed the emulation of "character" for the good of the entire nation. While ambition was certainly praised in the individual, the fruits of this ambition were believed to be for the good of all. A man such as Cecil Rhodes could accumulate great personal wealth and influence while simultaneously reaping economic and strategic benefits for Britain. The infrastructure created through his ventures certainly filled British coffers.

Of course there were those in Britain who believed there was corruption in the Empire. Such critics, though sympathetic to the goals of imperialism, objected to how it was practised. The most prominent example was the liberal economist Hobson who believed that imperialism had many redeeming features: "The desire to promote the causes of civilisation and Christianity, to improve the economic and spiritual condition of lower races, to crush slavery and to bring all parts of the habitable world into closer material and moral union" ("Capitalism and Imperialism" 15). What Hobson objected to was the manipulation of jingo sentiment by self-serving financial speculators. He disapproved of speculation as a "parasite . . . which leaves its economic fangs in the carcass of its prey . . . converting public trusts to very private uses" (4-5, 7). Hobson was in part reacting against the imperialist credo that "trade followed the flag," what one contemporary termed "emporialism" (Hirst 67-73). Most imperialists believed that capital, as well as the British navy, served to keep the Empire together. This fact could not be denied by Hobson or other imperial critics. Their real complaint was over "the proper motive," or how that capital was employed. Hobson had no complaint with benevolent despotism if a subject people were incapable of using their resources to their utmost efficiency. For Hobson and other liberals the proper use of capital was in the cause of equality and the promotion of liberty through the removal of privilege. Such a "liberal" imperialism could only be achieved if it was based upon moral enthusiasm, again rooted in proper character. The Liberal Imperialists certainly supported such a course praising Milner's steadfastness and thoroughness as qualities which were conducive to strong leadership, and proposing the use of efficiency to guide the administration of imperial affairs. Their failing was that "they gave little thought as to what efficiency ought to mean in practice, or as to what Milner meant by it" (Matthew 183).

If "good" character was not present, as liberal critics charged in the case of Chamberlain, Rhodes and the South African "cartel," then tyranny ensued: "Let the spirit of predominance prevail, and the spirit of equality is quenched; gratify the lust of

[7] On Russia and the deification of its national heroes, and more specifically on the role of "naive monarchism" in the construction of the Lenin cult, see Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia.*

conquest and the love of liberty is stifled" (Goddard 85). J.L. Hammond sketched out what this meant in the Boer War context, terming the situation a "degradation of character," and blaming imperialists for bringing dishonour and moral bankruptcy to the English nation. Britain's repressive war measures, Hammond argued, showed the Unionists to be advocates of "a tumid, plethoric, dissipated England," rather than the "strenuous, virile, self-respecting, and honourable England" which liberal nationalists envisioned (182, 183, 165).

Thus Hobson's economic argument had at its heart a concern for the British character. Hobson did not object to the unfair accumulation of wealth,[8] but rather to the adverse social consequences for Britain of such a practice.[9] Nowhere is this clearer than in his poignant description of South African imperialism and the jingoistic sentiments it engendered as atavistic phenomena, an expression of barbarous qualities which the British people had otherwise evolved beyond (*Imperialism* 212).

In an effort to explain the spread of jingoism during the war one liberal writer declared that"let us suffer any person to tell us his story, morning and evening, but for one twelve month, and he will become our master" (Hirst 165). The same process was at work in the formation of the imperial character. "Character" helped to reconcile the mass movement of imperialism with the individual experience of British citizens. Although merely spectators in the imperial enterprise, Britons at home could none the less feel like they contributed by maintaining a strong national character. "Character" was an inclusive factor fostering a sense of participation, unity, and national purpose. The "story" told to Britons was the "character creed." Imperialists presented the "character creed" as a progressive force, part of a glorious imperial continuum whose purpose it was to spread the virtues of British civilisation around the globe. As Britons everywhere were constantly reminded, courage, doggedness, discipline, and self-sacrifice were the qualities of a strong race. If Britons sometimes had difficulty understanding the tangible benefits of the Empire (and the bitter debate over the Boer War certainly illustrates this), imperial leaders could always point to character as a justification for their endeavours.

Both imperialism and character have been described in this essay as somewhat ambiguous notions—"ways of thinking" rather than identifiable concepts—and for this reason they were seen to interact harmoniously. Proponents of the imperial character emphasised a collective national effort to achieve a collective national goal: the maintenance of British imperial honour and supremacy, measured in large part through

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[8] Hobson was a firm supporter of the free market terming imperialism a perversion "in which nations trespassing beyond the limits of facile assimilation transform *the* wholesale *stimulative rivalry of varied national types* [Hobson advocated international free trade] into the cut-throat struggle of competing empires" (*Imperialism* 11, 60 passim; emphasis added).

[9] This point is crucial for an understanding of Hobson's treatise on imperialism. It explains why Marxist commentators have been essentially wrong in claiming Hobson as a progenitor of their world-view; see, for example, V. I. Lenin, Rosa Luxembourg, or Mikhail Bakunin. Hobson was not overly concerned with the exploitative nature of imperialism as it affected subject peoples. He was concerned with how this process shaped *the dominating nation*, and it was with this thought that he attacked the class system. In short, Hobson was primarily concerned that the British capitalist was becoming "slovenly," not that the mill worker or tradesman was being exploited. See *Imperialism* 87-93 in particular, and Part I in general. This point is further revealed through Hobson's anti-Semitism (29).

national efficiency. Because the imperial character was conceptually fluid, imperial actors were able to avoid responsibility for imperial setbacks. This conceptual fluidity enabled the imperial character to resonate at the imaginative level, playing to the romantic view of empire so many Britons held. Tommy Atkins was all too aware of this romanticisation:

> For if you ain't a volunteer
> Or in some long-legged 'Ighland corps,
> Nor yet a Dublin fusilier,
> You won't get wrote about no more
> Than h'if 'twas jam, not blood, you'd spilt; -
> My! 'ow the Public loves a kilt! ("Coldstreamer," "The Press" 45)

Further proof that the imperial character worked primarily on an imaginative level is the fact that many soldiers became disillusioned with the imperial enterprise once actual fighting commenced. As one soldier noted: "An' it ain't my bloomin' idea at all / O' what Mr. Kipling likes to call / The 'Gawdliest life h'on earth! ("Coldstreamer," "The Blockhouse" 31)

In this manner character functions in the same way as the "imagined geography" of Edward Said. In *Orientalism* he argues that imperialism was facilitated by the construction of a Western, ethnocentric view of the "Orient" created to make the unknown familiar through a shared discourse. The imperial character was also "manufactured" to this end: British imperialists argued that the prosecution of the Boer War was beneficial to the national character, and by using this as their rationale, diverted attention from other issues being played out during the conflict. In their view, particular actions could not be immoral, unethical, or otherwise wrong if they contributed to the attainment of such a worthy goal. Such a rationale made it possible to castigate pro-Boers as traitorous or irrational.

The relationship between imperialism and "character" was shaped during the Boer War by the force of nationalism. Fears that national efficiency was in decline allowed jingoism to temporarily gain national prominence. The celebration of the virtues of Providential Progress and dutiful patriotism helped imperialists identify "character" with the Empire's glorious past and the heroic traits of duty, perseverance, and determination. This identification was expressed through jingoism.

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