

Leonard Woolf

The Colour of Our Mammies

IN THE *Times* of 3rd March, 1959, on page 11, Lord Robins wrote:

First of all, the predominance of the white man—the British white African—must continue for at least another generation. Few black Africans of the central African tribes have yet developed the qualities of leadership, or the education and experience to act without control. . . . Social relations must be governed by good manners, civilised behaviour, and the will of both parties.

In the *Times* of March 3rd, 1959, on page 10, the *Times* correspondent in Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia, telegraphed:

Mr. Stonehouse was jeered by white settlers at Ndola, Northern Rhodesia, to-day, before leaving by air for Lusaka. Cries of "White Kaffir," "Go back to your black mammy," "Live in the compound next time," "Don't come back, Stonehouse," greeted him as he walked to the aircraft.

I quote this fortuitous irony of facts and journalism because in the juxtaposition of Lord Robins's mechanical bunkum and the realistic comments of the "British white African" of Salisbury can be seen nakedly the grim problem of imperialism and nationalism in Africa.

I was once for seven years myself an imperialist on Lord Robins's side of the fence. In 1904 I went from Trinity College, Cambridge, into the Ceylon Civil Service, an imperialist as innocent of politics and imperialism as I was twenty-four years before

that when I first entered the world in West Cromwell Road "with no language but a cry." I soon learnt what it was all about—Lord Robins's manners and civilisation, the *Herrenvolk* who are white and know how to rule, and the lesser breeds who are not so white and who, having not "yet developed the qualities of leadership, or the education and experience to act without control," "must continue for at least another generation" to be ruled.

IT is small incidents which often open one's eyes to the realities of politics. I can see a little scene which happened over fifty years ago as clearly as if it was yesterday, for it was the beginning of my doubts whether I was on the right side of the fence with the Lord Robinses and the *Herrenvolk* and the imperialists. When I got to Ceylon, I was sent up to the Northern Province and lived in its capital, Jaffna. After I had been there a year and was second-in-command to the Government Agent of the Province, a new Government Agent was appointed, a *pukka sahib* as they said in those days, a Welshman with the strange name of Ferdinando Hamlyn Price. Shortly after he arrived, I was riding with him up the main street of the town, and, when we got to the top of it where it debouched into the esplanade, I asked him to stop and look back down the street, for if he did so, he would see clearly how people had encroached upon the old line of the street, by building verandas, etc., out on to the highway. I remember the long, straight street in the glare and dust, the white houses and verandas, and women's heads peering

THIS first analysis of Anglo-Saxon Attitudes (towards "Afro-Asia") is followed in this number by two further articles: Constantine FitzGibbon ("America") and Mark Bonham Carter ("Europe").

through blinds and round doors to see what the white men were stopping for. And I can remember my horse turning round restlessly as I pointed out with my riding whip to Ferdinando Hamlyn Price the old line of the street.

I remember all this vividly because of the sequel—and the sequel was this: a few weeks later the central government in Colombo sent for report to Mr. Price, the Government Agent, a letter from the Jaffna Tamil Association. The Association complained that one of its most respected members, Mr. Sanderasekara, a well-known lawyer, had been deliberately hit in the face by the Office Assistant, Mr. Leonard Woolf. Mr. Sanderasekara had been driving in his trap up the main street of Jaffna, and, as he passed the Government Agent and the Office Assistant, who were riding in the opposite direction, Mr. Woolf had turned his horse and deliberately hit Mr. Sanderasekara in the face with his riding whip. The Association asked the Governor of Ceylon severely to punish Mr. Woolf.

I gave my official explanation in writing to the central government in Colombo. I had never deliberately hit Mr. Sanderasekara or anyone else in Jaffna or in the world with a riding whip. But I did remember how restive my horse had been as I pointed down the street with my whip and I could only assume that, as the horse wheeled round, Mr. Sanderasekara was driving past and the whip without my being aware of it had passed near his face. The Government accepted my explanation, but I doubt whether the Tamil Association or Mr. Sanderasekara believed or accepted it. And I felt pretty certain at the time, young and callow imperialist though I was, that they would not believe me. It shocked me that these people should think that, as a white man and a ruler of Ceylon, I would deliberately hit in the face a brown man of the lesser breeds to show him that he must keep in his place. For that is what all this meant. And for the first time I felt a twinge of doubt in my imperialist soul, a doubt whether we were not in the wrong, and the Jaffna Tamil Association and Mr. Sanderasekara in the right, not right in be-

lieving that I had hit him in the face, but right in feeling that my sitting on a horse arrogantly in the main street of their town was as good as a slap in the face. For fifty years ago we *Herrenvolk* in Ceylon were talking the same disingenuous bunkum about Sinhalese and Tamils as Lord Robins is solemnly talking to-day in the *Times* and House of Lords about Africans. And though the British in Ceylon were never quite as ill-mannered, uncivilised, and unfit to rule others as the white settlers of South Africa and Rhodesia, they were occasionally sufficiently offensive to reach the standard of manners and civilisation which Lord Robins and Sir Roy Welensky apparently consider appropriate to the white rulers of black men.

THE Marxists are quite right in believing in the materialist determination of history; what makes them so wrong, so exasperatingly imbecile, is their fantastic delusion that our material interests alone determine our historical actions. If only they did, what a much better world we should live in. The crimes and follies of history are largely due to the poisonous mixture of absurd beliefs, noble delusions and ideals, irrational desires, and the pursuit of our own materialist interests. It is this mixture which determines our political and social behaviour.

Of course, our attitude towards the Sinhalese and Tamils in Ceylon fifty years ago was largely influenced by the fact that we made our living out of their country and that it was very much to our material interest to remain top dogs, and the same applies to-day to Sir Roy Welensky and the white settlers. If only our differences had stopped there in the realm of rupees and pounds, shillings, and pence, it might have been comparatively easy to compose them by the use of reason, common-sense, and compromise, for after all differences in rupees and pounds, shillings, and pence are quantitative, mathematical, calculable. Mr. Sanderasekara would never have imagined that I would hit him in the face over a question of mathematics or rupees. He thought I hit him in order to show that there was a difference in our minds, our

souls—because I thought he was “a bloody native.” Just as the uncivilised white settler in Salisbury thinks that there the catastrophic difference is in mammies—he is under the delusion that if your mammy is white, you must be civilised, and if she is black, you must be uncivilised. Looking at the white settlers and Sir Roy and Lord Robins, one is tempted to say that it is probably the other way about—but that too would be the same sort of delusion. For the truth probably is that we are all equally uncivilised, whatever the colour of our mammies.

I RECALL another day fifty years ago in Ceylon which threw some light—for me—upon the psychology of imperialism.

I had been for some two years Assistant Government Agent of the Hambantota District, a largish district sparsely populated by Sinhalese in the south of Ceylon. Besides myself, there were only four or five other white men, an assistant superintendent of police, irrigation engineers, a Boer prisoner of war who was Game Sanctuary Ranger. Rinderpest broke out in the district and I was directed to insist that all cattle should be tethered or impounded, and to destroy infected or stray cattle. I had spent the whole of one day driving and riding round a heavily infected area—it was before the days of motor cars—destroying infected animals and warning owners wherever I found stray cattle that I should have to destroy them if I found them straying again. Late in the evening I drove through a small village which I had visited in the morning. By the side of the road I found two cows straying, one already showing symptoms of the disease. I sent for the owner and he proved to be a man whom I had warned earlier in the day. I felt that I must, as one said, make an example, and I took my rifle from my trap and shot the two animals.

The whole village had assembled and there was a hostile murmur from the small crowd. I explained to them that the owner had been warned, that by not impounding his animals he was infecting them and helping to spread the disease to other people's cattle all over

the country. As I walked to the trap, they followed me, and as I drove away, I still heard the dull hostile murmur of their voices.

IT WAS the only time in my three years in the Hambantota District, in my seven years in Ceylon, that I heard that note of communal hostility against myself or the Government from villagers. I was profoundly depressed. I knew that the order to impound cattle was futile, because it would not be obeyed and could not be enforced. I knew that the villagers did not believe what I said to them, that I was part of a white man's machine which they did not understand. I stood to them in the relation of God to his victims, and I have no more desire to be God than one of his victims. I spent the night in a tent or a circuit bungalow—I forget which—not many miles from the village, and I had arranged to meet there the Muhandiram or chief headman of the area to discuss with him this problem of rinderpest. The Muhandiram was a very intelligent Sinhalese, English-educated; he had been sent to Hambantota from another district where he had held a higher post—in fact he had been demoted for some error or offence. I liked him, and talked quite freely to him as I would have to a white man. He came to me after I had eaten my dinner and we strolled out on to a headland discussing the administrative problem of enforcing the rinderpest regulations. When we came to the end of the headland, we looked eastwards from a low sandy cliff over the sea. It was the days of Halley's comet. The head of the comet was just above the horizon, the tail flamed up the sky until the end of it was almost above our heads. The stars blazed with the brilliance which they have only on a clear, still, black night in the southern hemisphere. And at our feet the comet and the stars blazed reflected in the smooth, velvety black sea.

We stood in silence; it was a superb spectacle; as a work of art, magnificent. And I suppose it was what is called awe-inspiring. But there is something about these spectacular displays, about the heavenly bodies and the majestic firmament which also irritates me.

From my point of view—the human point of view—there is something ridiculous about the universe—these absurd comets racing round the sun and the absurd suns flaming away at impossible speeds through illimitable empty space. I turned to the Muhandiram and asked him what he thought about the comet and the planets and the stars. His answer depressed me even more profoundly than the Sinhalese villagers. He believed quite seriously in all the astrological nonsense which the *Daily Express* supplies to its imbecile white readers to-day. Our lives and characters, he said, were determined by the position of the constellations at our birth. I foolishly tried to convince him of the absurdity of such an idea. I might just as usefully have tried to prove to the President of the Royal Society that the earth is flat and the sun goes round it. He told me that at a female child's birth the horoscope predicted the year, day, and hour at which her menstruation would begin, and it was always accurate. If I would tell him the place and hour of my birth, he would have my horoscope drawn and it would prove to me that my life and character had been determined by the position of the heavenly bodies at the time of my birth. . . .

THE incidents of those twenty-four hours in the rinderpest-ravaged district of Ceylon fifty years ago were trivial, but they may be read as a moral tale about imperialism—the absurdity of a people of one civilisation and mode of life trying to impose its rule upon a people of an entirely different civilisation and mode of life.

My attitude towards the Hambantota villager was entirely benevolent and altruistic; I was merely trying to save from destruction some of the most valuable of their few possessions. They had less understanding of my ways, my intentions, and my rule than the half-bred bitch walking at my heels. They were the nicest of people and I was very fond of them, but they would have thrown stones at me or shot me in the back as I walked to my trap, had they dared. And the Muhan-

diram through whom I was attempting to impose our rule upon them, so quick-witted, so intelligent, so Anglicised and Europeanised—scratch the surface of his mind and you found that he believed that Halley's sublime comet, the blazing constellations above our head, the spiral nebulae, the infinite galaxies flaming away into space, had been created and kept going through billions of billions of years in order that a grubby little man in the Hambantota bazaar could calculate the exact day and hour at which the Muhandiram's infant daughter would have her first menstrual period.

When the Muhandiram of East Giruwa Pattu and I were looking at Halley's comet in the sky and reflected in the Indian ocean, ninety-nine out of every one hundred white men in Ceylon were saying of the Sinhalese and Tamils precisely what Lord Robins and the white settlers of Salisbury are saying to-day about the black Africans. They had not, we said, "developed the qualities of leadership, or the education and experience to act without control." If we were looking at politics with the eye of God, we should have to say that we were quite right—they would swindle and cheat and exploit and massacre one another and prove quite conclusively that they are not fit to govern themselves.

Where we were wrong was in thinking that it followed that we ought to govern them. Two world wars and the cold war and Fascism, Nazism, and Communism, and our calendar of crime and racial riots make one doubtful whether Europeans are fit to govern themselves. In the eye of God, which is another way of saying, if you are really concerned with the plain brutal truth, politically and culturally the European and the Asiatic have reached two rather different forms of barbarism. The record of our political and social history, even when we govern ourselves, is pretty grim, but we are at least accustomed to govern social relations by our own peculiar form of bad manners and barbarous behaviour. The trouble really begins when one kind of barbarian like Sir Roy Welensky and Lord Robins, no doubt from the highest motives and with the old, old