

Gordon at Khartoum

Gordon at Khartoum, by Wilfrid Scawen Blunt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. \$6.00.

THIS is the fourth of Wilfrid Blunt's volumes to be republished by Knopf, the others being *The Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt, 1880-1882*, and *My Diaries, 1890-1914*, in two volumes. The present book deals with the events of 1883-1886, among which the mission of General Gordon was most significant in its effect upon British politics. Gordon was a stone, cast recklessly into the pool, by ministers at their wits' ends to know what to do. Blunt is less concerned with the immediate splash, than with the waves which spread in widening circles to break upon the distant shores of the Empire. The volume contains comparatively little of Gordon and Khartoum; much of Gladstone, Morley and Churchill in London and Sir Evelyn Baring in Cairo.

Wilfrid Blunt's works may be described as footnotes to history. With no official position he was an amateur of politics. By family connection or through acquaintances made in his early diplomatic service he had access to the men who governed Great Britain, and was intimate with many of them. He had travelled widely in the East and knew personally the leading Mohammedans—Egyptians, Arabs, Turks, and Indians. Accordingly of one phase of imperial history, the relation of the Empire to Islam, he had an extraordinarily close and immediate view. He had an instinctive sympathy with the weak, the suffering, the oppressed, which seemed to his countrymen abnormal, and a complete distrust of modern civilization in its dealings with primitive peoples, which seemed sentimental. His very prejudices are therefore valuable in correcting the prepossessions of the age. In his war against these prepossessions he came to have a profound scepticism in regard to the pretentious records which constitute official history. Readers of *My Diaries* will remember the pertinacity with which he exhumed and exposed the actual facts about the Jameson Raid, the Alexandria massacres and the desecration of the Mahdi's tomb by British officers. He had the courage to challenge lofty reputations—John Morley, "Lord Shillyshally," who meant well feebly; Gladstone, "this pitiful man of blood who has not even the courage to be at the same time a man of iron." When his country was wrong, as in his opinion it nearly always was in its dealings with weaker peoples, he was a defeatist.

In 1882 when the British Empire entered upon the last phase of its expansion with the conquest of Egypt, Blunt became the special attorney for that country at London, Paris, Constantinople. The official history of the English occupation runs to the effect that Arabi Pasha, the leader of the Egyptian nationalists, was responsible for the massacre of Christians at Alexandria, in consequence of which Sir Beauchamp Seymour bombarded that city and Sir Garnet Wolesley's troops smashed the Egyptian army at Tel-el-Kebir. Blunt proved that the massacres were instigated by officers of the Khedive Tewfik, puppet of the British occupation. He paid for the defence of Arabi out of his own pocket, and saved his country from the shame of putting that patriot to death. He waged a campaign by letters to the newspapers, by public meetings, by questions asked by his friends in Parliament, by personal communications to ministers, to bring Great Britain to fulfill her promise of evacuation of Egypt. When the Mahdi raised the standard of revolt in the Soudan he sympathized with

that struggle for liberty. He liked Gordon personally; he approved his mission if it were one of peace, but when it appeared as war, he rejoiced in the victory of the tribesmen and the fall of Khartoum.

On this point the present volume clears up certain historic doubts. When Gordon fell into difficulties at Khartoum the British government tried to escape responsibility by pleading that he had disobeyed orders. The instructions issued to Gordon were to report on the best means of evacuating the Egyptian garrisons of the Soudan, and to perform such other duties as might be entrusted to him by the Egyptian government through Sir Evelyn Baring, afterwards Lord Cromer, the British Resident. Blunt quotes a letter of Lord Cromer to Gordon (suppressed in the Blue Books and in Lord Cromer's own book, *Modern Egypt*), in which he extends Gordon's instructions to the establishment of "some rough form of government which will prevent anarchy and confusion arising on the withdrawal of the Egyptian troops." It was in fulfillment of the latter order that Gordon committed himself to a course of action which made it impossible for him to abandon Khartoum and save himself. Blunt thus appears in the rôle of defending Gordon's reputation while condemning his action.

The effect of Blunt's annotation of history is to show how underneath its smooth official surface, on which great men appear to be guiding human destiny, perhaps wrongly, but at least with full consciousness of what they are doing and steadfast will to its accomplishment, all is in reality the result of ignorance of conditions and confusion of purpose, of circumstance and casualty. The British ministers became aware of the falseness of Tewfik in the matter of the massacres, but they dared not lose face by confessing that the bombardment of Alexandria was unjustified; and continued to support the Khedive, even in the execution of men who, far from conniving at the massacres, had intervened to save the victims. The ministers sent Gordon to Khartoum with two incompatible objects. They tried to save themselves at his expense; and when he fell they made him a national hero, whose martyrdom was later used to arouse public opinion to the conquest of the Soudan.

Again, Blunt's evidence reveals the narrowness of margin in decisions affecting the life and death of thousands, the trivial makeweight in compromise which caused the difference between their welfare and woe. In the face of his narrative one cannot doubt that the British ministers were on the point of recalling Arabi to Egypt, and even of sending Blunt himself to negotiate with the Mahdi. But if Arabi had been recalled, Lord Granville would have been obliged to resign the Foreign Office, and he was an amiable man and needed his salary. If Blunt had been sent to the Soudan it would have been a repudiation of Lord Cromer and Cecil Rhodes and the Egyptian bondholders and South African shareholders whom they represented.

And finally it clearly appears how constantly the ministers who constituted the responsible government were at cross purposes, fooling each other and deluding themselves. Hartington, Dilke and Northbrook, (the forward party in the Cabinet) tricked Gladstone, and Gladstone hoodwinked his conscience. Thus the ship of empire continued to run before the wind of self-interest, the grand old man at the helm which was jammed, with a compass which was false surrounded by officers whose nautical skill was limited to telling which way the wind blew—truly a ship of fools.

ROBERT MORSS LOVETT.

Atomistic Philosophy

The A B C of Atoms, by Bertrand Russell. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company. \$2.00.

NEVER before in history has the human mind been given so many strange and difficult ideas to digest as it has during the last decade. Bohr's theory of the atom, Planck's theory of quanta and Einstein's theory of relativity, coming all together, have thrown into confusion our fundamental conceptions of the universe. Even mathematicians and physicists are a bit bewildered and those of us who are neither need somebody with an exceptionally clear and logical brain to explain to us what it is all about.

Bertrand Russell has as clear and logical a brain as any now ensconced in human cranium, and he has done all that can be done within 150 pages to make plain these novel notions and their startling implications. He does not, as some of the rest of us have done, merely play timidly around the edges of the subject and try to throw a little light upon it from the sides by more or less misleading analogies. He dodges nothing, but actually undertakes to tell in words and figures and a minimum of algebraic symbols the essence of these ideas and their philosophical significance. Nobody else has attempted so much and nobody else has accomplished more in the way of enlightenment of the general reader.

The very title has more meaning than appears, for the idea of atomicity has lately spread from chemistry to all other fields of science. The old atom of the chemist has itself been atomized and resolved into a complicated solar system of littler electrons. The corpuscular theory of light, ostracized for three centuries, seems to be creeping back in disguise. Energy according to Planck is absorbed and emitted by jumps of a finite amount. Discontinuity is the order of the day. We may detect a chuckle between the lines when Mr. Russell records the fact that "the atom changes from one state to another by revolution, not by evolution." Also a hint of his political proclivities, so violently repressed during the war, may be discerned in the following passage:

Perhaps it is merely habit and prejudice that makes us suppose space to be continuous. Poincaré—not the Prime Minister, but his cousin, who was a great man—suggested that we should even have to give up thinking of time as continuous, and that we should think of a minute, for instance, as a finite number of jerks with nothing between them.

This idea of the discontinuity of time and space is suggested by the peculiar behavior of the electron which, when forced out of its orbit into a larger one by taking on a quantum of energy, may later give up the same quantum and snap back into its former orbit *instantaneously*. This sounds as shocking to us as though an astronomer should tell us that Mars might slip into the earth's orbit without taking any time in transit or passing through the intervening space. Planck and Bohr are even more disconcerting to conventional conceptions than Einstein, but they have not yet caught the spot-light of public interest.

In the leisurely days of the last century the universe seemed to run smoothly and continuously, but now everything is on the jump. The Mendelian method of evolution by jerks has displaced the Darwinian method of the gradual accretion of infinitesimal variations. The ghost of

abiogenesis, once thought laid by Pasteur, again walks the earth. And now comes Einstein with his creased and humpy space, and Bohr with his excitable atom. How the old physics can absorb the new atom remains to be seen. As Mr. Russell says:

One of the most astonishing things about the processes that take place in atoms is that they seem to be liable to sudden discontinuities, sudden jumps from one state of continuous motion to another. This motion of an electron round its nucleus seems to be like that of a flea, which crawls for a while, and then hops. The crawls proceed accurately according to the old laws of dynamics, but the hops are a new phenomenon, concerning which certain totally new laws have been discovered empirically, without any possibility (so far as can be seen) of connecting them with the old laws. There is a possibility that the old laws, which represented motion as a smooth continuous process, may be only statistical averages, and that, when we come down to a sufficiently minute scale, everything really proceeds by jumps, like the cinema, which produces a misleading appearance of continuous motion by means of a succession of separate pictures.

A curious feature of modern theorizing in this field is the tendency to fall into language ascribing will and foreknowledge to inanimate matter. Perhaps some such anthropomorphism is inevitable whenever a thinker is confronted with phenomena which he cannot yet comprehend. But what we hear nowadays is more than mere anthropomorphism; it is a superhuman power of prescience that electrons appear to possess. For instance, from what some physicists say we might infer that an electron knows in advance, and without trying it out, just which orbit it should jump into. Again Professor Eddington of Cambridge, in talking of Einstein's rolled-up and therefore finite universe, suggests that the circumference of space, the greatest length in nature, may determine the relative size of the electron, the smallest thing in nature. Or as he humorously puts it:

An electron could never decide how large it ought to be unless there existed some length independent of itself for it to compare itself with. . . . Similarly it would not know how long it ought to exist unless there existed a length in time for it to measure itself against. But there is not radius of curvature in a time-like direction; so the electron does not know how long it ought to exist. Therefore it just goes on existing indefinitely.

So, too, Mr. Russell says of the periodic processes of the quantum theory:

Every periodic process arranges itself so as to have achieved a certain amount by the time one period is completed. This seems to show that nature has a kind of foresight, and also knows the integral calculus, without which it is impossible to know how fast to go at each instant so as to achieve a certain result in the end. All this sounds incredible.

So it does, but doubtless it will sound less so when the physicists have had time to devise new technical terms that will obliterate, or at least conceal, the anthropomorphic implications.

The fact that these new conceptions sound incredible is not regarded as evidence against such views but rather the contrary. Eddington thinks that the quantum principle may be the first real law of nature that has been discovered