

From Empire to Commonwealth

The Fall of the British Empire, 1918-1968, by Colin Craig (Coward-McCann. 368 pp. \$7.95), and ***Pax Britannica: The Climax of an Empire***, by James Morris (Harcourt, Brace & World. 544 pp. \$7.50), discuss the reasons why England lost her dominion over palm and pine. Charles Miller is writing a book on the British Empire and East Africa.

By CHARLES MILLER

THAT WONDROUS WORLD'S FAIR called the British Empire has closed down for good, but it will be some time before we know whether the show scored a triumph or laid an egg. One thing is certain, though: nobody fell asleep during the performance. At its apogee the Empire was Prince Hal in technicolor; in its final years King Lear and Falstaff jostled each other for center stage. History doesn't put on so ambitious a road show every century.

What brought the curtain down? What made it drop so suddenly? Was the deed done by the black-brown revolutions of the 1950s and early 1960s? You may think otherwise after reading *The Fall of the British Empire*, a well-informed, well-paced narrative study by British journalist Colin Cross. First off, Cross believes that the enterprise was licked even before it started: "The British Empire was an historical accident, a by-product of the first contacts between the vigorous people of Europe and the remainder of the world. The surprising thing is less that the British Empire fell than that it ever arose and could ever have seemed to be stable." But of course it did arise and did indeed seem to be stable. There remain the guns that shot it down, and as Cross traces the progress (if that's the word) of imperial disintegration, he highlights certain crucial influences which suggest that postwar Afro-Asian nationalism may have been less firing squad than *coup de grâce*.

From the standpoint of overt resistance, Cross appears to regard India in the 1920s and 1930s as by far the principal cause of the Empire's collapse. There is a particularly good section on the irreparable mischief worked by the man whom Churchill once called a "half-naked fakir" but whom Cross prefers to describe as "more than any other single individual . . . responsible for the fall of the British Empire." Among major events, World War II is seen as a much more staggering blow than any of the uprisings which it subsequently spawned. There is even the suggestion

that the Empire may actually have fallen with Singapore: "The effects reverberated through India and the colonies . . . Hitherto the British had been regarded as invincible on their own ground . . . British authority had rested more upon prestige than upon any other single factor. Now the Japanese had ripped away the invisible cloak." At any rate, "by 1945 the mainsprings of the British Empire were broken," and it's here that Cross introduces a third big assist to the nationalist takeover: Britain herself, through a colonial policy that was consistent only in its inconsistency. This is shown in a fascinating playback of Attlee's enthusiastically panicked withdrawal from India, Churchill's efforts at compromise with the offer of federation (notably in Central Africa and the West Indies) that didn't work, and Eden's desperate last-ditch defense strategy which crumbled on Cyprus and at Suez—all leading inevitably to Macmillan's final retreat before the wind of change.

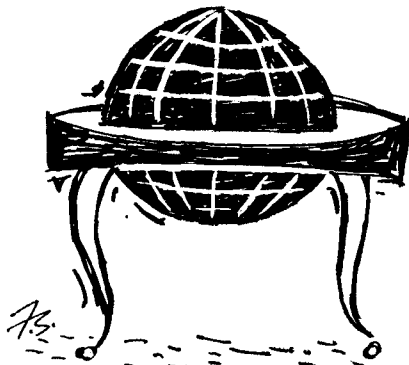
Besides this recap of familiar events, Cross points to several often overlooked influences that also greased the skids. At least two merit special attention. There is first the anti-imperial hanky-panky of the white dominions, determined to gain equal status with the mother country and no less capable than the "lesser breeds" of planting limpet bombs. Cross offers an illuminating look at the senior partners' most damaging acts of constitutional sabotage: the 1931 Statute of Westminster, which ended British parliamentary authority over dominion affairs, and "the more subtle process of splitting up the Imperial Crown and reducing its status in the dominions to that of a mere mascot." While neither of these developments liberated any subject peoples in the colonies (the Statute of Westminster, in fact, was no more than "a tidying-up by which the British formally surrendered legislative powers they had in practice ceased to exercise"), they nonetheless shattered

the constitutional foundations of the Empire. "The dominions for all practical purposes became republics," and the British Empire became more or less officially the British Commonwealth. Noting that the word "Commonwealth" had gained wide currency among Britons long before 1931—as descriptive of "a stronger and more durable form of Empire"—Cross also comments tersely on the emptiness of the term in its newer context: "'Commonwealth' doctrines turned out to be just the lubricant with which the Empire was dismantled. . . . No mechanism could combine the irreconcilables of dominion sovereignty and a united British Commonwealth. Unity could last only as long as everyone wanted unity."

Secondly, Cross reminds us that during the very decade and a half in which the Empire emitted its last gasp, far more pressing matters had come to claim the attention of British cabinets. Even the Empire-oriented Conservatives could ill afford to divert their best talents from the ever-growing problems of European defense. "Churchill himself . . . devoted most of his constructive energy to foreign affairs. . . . In 1954 the process culminated in the British taking on the unprecedented commitment of maintaining an army of 60,000 men in Germany." In short, "The Commonwealth and Empire . . . took, at best, only third place in this professedly imperialist administration's thinking."

There's still another element which, although it can't be stated as a certain cause, opens up an intriguing avenue of speculation. As Cross points out, several of Britain's most rambunctious overseas properties were acquired almost solely for the purpose of guarding the route to India. However, suppose just for a moment that Britain hadn't been quite so concerned with protecting India and that Cyprus, Egypt, Palestine, and Kenya hadn't been members of the imperial family. Would the absence of violent revolt in those superexplosive areas have allowed Britain to hold on longer? Might she even have contrived somehow to keep the Empire from slipping from her fingers? In other words, did a pathological preoccupation with the most precious jewel contribute to the loss of the whole diadem?

Nobody, of course, asked foolish questions about dissolution in the Empire's salad days. Especially on that day of all days, June 22, 1897, when Queen Victoria observed her Diamond Jubilee, and thousands upon thousands of British subjects of every imaginable estate and pigmentation thronged to England from the farthest reaches of the planet to honor their genuinely beloved sovereign. The celebration was a glittering carnival of unrestrained braggadocio that sprawled across the length and breadth



of London in much the same way that a proud red splashed over a quarter of the land masses shown on maps of the world. In *Pax Britannica* another British journalist, James Morris, has fittingly chosen Jubilee Day as backdrop for an exuberantly sentimental but by no means credulous journey through the Empire at its zenith.

Pax Britannica takes you first class all the way (P. & O. wherever possible, of course). You gape at the chandeliered ostentation of the Viceroy's palace in Calcutta and groan at the iron grotesquery of the Mall in Simla. In the depths of central Africa you gallop after foxes (correction: jackals) with the Salisbury Hunt Club. You rub shoulders with Australian sheep barons and win a packet at the Melbourne Cup races. You continually meet gorgeously cockaded and bemedalled fellows holding the Queen's commission (including the Royal Navy admiral who removed his jacket before saying his prayers, horrified at the idea of a British officer kneeling in uniform). In Hong Kong you attend Sunday services at St. John's Church, cheek-by-jowl with Government House and the inevitable public gardens, barracks, and cricket pitch. In a hundred officers' messes and wardrooms you drink the Queen's health. In southern India's Ootacamund Club you join in a game of snooker—appropriately, too, snooker having been invented at "Snooty Ooty." And naturally you have your sundowner at Shephard's.

Mingling in this orgy of swank are

the Empire's titans in all their magnificent effrontery: Salisbury, Chamberlain, Rosebery, Curzon, Kitchener, Lugard, Cromer—to name only a few—and a host of lesser deities. At the drop of a silk hat they will hasten to make it clear that they aren't really imperialists but New Imperialists; this is an important distinction which divorces their robust rule from the tyrannies of past history. "The British would not for long support an institution that was patently unfair, or betrayed the muffled decency of their national code." They don't try to deny that the overseas possessions have brought in enormous profits ("the deepest impulse of the Empire was the impulse to be rich"), but "there was nothing rude then to the epithet of capitalist. It was thought very proper for the British moneyed classes to plow their cash into Indian railways, African mines and Polynesian copra." Nor can you sensibly dispute their benevolent but firm authority over a third of a billion "natives"; after all, the imperial mission has been divinely ordained. "In that last heyday of Christian power the British had no doubts about the superiority of their civilization and its faith. They believed it to be their duty, however arduous or expensive, to distribute it among the heathen and the ignorant . . . they had been chosen for this task." There are the nay-sayers, to be sure, but in the heady climate of self-adulation they receive short shrift. Gladstone, once the thundering Jehovah of anti-imperialism, "watched sadly from his last retirement

. . . as member after member of his shattered party fell into the moral error he himself had dubbed jingoism." Economist J. A. Hobson, "the most forceful of them all . . . preached to an unresponsive audience. In Russia the young Lenin heard him, and believed. In England few listened."

THE thing is far too big, far too arrogant. Its stupendous cheek alone is enough to make you want to reach for the nearest blunt object. Why, then, do you find yourself liking the swaggerers? Perhaps even respecting them? Of course, you may not like or respect them at all; you may see the Empire as no more than a bloated balloon of brag. Yet one nonetheless suspects that after reading Morris's spirited tribute to the vitality—and the accomplishments—of Britain's epic socio-economic-geopolitical adventure even the fiercest Anglophobe might be unable to resist a reluctant, whispered "Wizard, by Jove!"

Spiritual Odyssey

Leo Baeck: Teacher of Theresienstadt, by Albert H. Friedlander (Holt, Rinehart & Winston. 294 pp. \$8.95), traces the intellectual development of the distinguished German rabbi within its historical context. Alan W. Miller is Rabbi of the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, New York City, and a member of the editorial board of the *Reconstructionist Magazine*.

By ALAN W. MILLER

LEO BAECK WAS THE SON of a traditionalist rabbi and scholar. Born in 1873, he studied at Breslau, home of the Historical School of Judaism, which profoundly influenced American Conservative Judaism, and at the Lehranstalt in Berlin, home of Abraham Geiger, pillar of the "science of Judaism" school. It might be said, in American parlance, that he started out Orthodox, moved to Conservative, and ended up as Reform. But the spiritual odyssey was continuous rather than discrete. Baeck always retained a reverence for tradition and ritual even though, in later life, "Halacha became an idea, a concept which he appreciated and honored but which he now saw as an abstraction and not as the reality of his life."

In Lissa (Posen), the border town that was Baeck's home, his father had enjoyed close friendship with a Calvinist minister. Baeck's childhood and education thus all conspired to make of him in his earliest manhood an epitome of the ecumenical. This partly explains the nature of his first major work, *The Essence of Judaism*, by implication an apologetic answer to Harnack's *The Essence of*



"Take me to Havana!"