

BRITISH IMPERIAL
LITERATURE, 1870–1940

Writing and the administration of empire

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Introduction

An explorer visits a penal colony one day to observe an apparatus. The guardian of the apparatus is an officer, who, without being asked, proceeds to explain the history of the ingenious machine to the explorer. The machine, it seems, was originally a product of the fertile imagination of the exalted “old Commandant,” who was responsible for “the organization of the whole penal colony” in former days.¹

As the explorer soon discovers, the apparatus itself is no ordinary engine of torture. It is, in fact, a writing machine, the “Designer.” Equipped with a harrow fitted out with a sharp needle, the apparatus is designed to write into the naked flesh of the prisoner the commandment that the prisoner is charged with having disobeyed. It does so by making numerous slow passes across the body of the prisoner while he is strapped helplessly to its bed. While the first of these etchings creates superficial wounds, each time the apparatus finishes a complete sentence, the needle, which is fitted into the arm of the apparatus, returns to the beginning again to make another cut – each subsequent pass producing progressively deeper marks in the prisoner’s body as the apparatus embellishes its initial sentence. By this method, the officer assures the explorer, the unwitting prisoner comes to “know” his sentence: he learns it “on his body” just before he dies – usually within twelve hours after the torture has begun. Lest the explorer worry about the humanity and legality of this form, the officer assures him “Guilt is never to be doubted.”

Despite the officer’s best efforts, his explanation does inspire some unease in the explorer, who finds himself in something of a moral quandary caused by his doubts about his right to intervene in a scene to which he comes only as an observer, not as an actor. Suspecting as much, the officer seeks to enlist the explorer in the cause of the apparatus by waxing nostalgic about the golden years of the old Commandant – now gone – when the apparatus was first placed into service in the

colony, a time when executions were important social events, eagerly watched by young children. The officer even goes so far as to portray himself as a victim of bureaucratic machinations, at one point petulantly voicing his suspicion that the explorer may well have been sent by his bureaucratic enemy, the new Commandant, precisely to disapprove what he sees in order to provide “foreign” support for the Commandant’s plan to bring the tradition of executions to an end.

Yet the explorer remains unmoved by the officer’s increasingly desperate plea to preserve tradition within the colony – “help me against the Commandant!” – and instead simply reaffirms his own neutrality – “I can neither help nor hinder you.” Although he treasures his political neutrality, the explorer does not remain completely indifferent to the officer’s pleas, however. He does what he can to reassure the officer by telling him that, while he does disapprove of the torture procedure, he would never betray the officer’s confidence. And the explorer closes with the reminder that any doubts he has about the procedure will be voiced to the Commandant only in private, not in public.

Apparently not completely reassured by this, the chastened officer proclaims, “Then the time has come,” and frees the prisoner from the apparatus. He takes a new paper out of a leather wallet and shows it to the explorer. While the explorer cannot read the words written on the paper, the officer insists that the paper contains the words “Be Just.” Taking this paper to the Designer, the officer then spends some minutes readjusting the controls on the machinery so that – presumably – the apparatus will inscribe this new commandment on the body of a new prisoner. He then doffs his uniform and stands before the explorer naked, resigned to take the place of the newly freed prisoner. As the text says,

Now he stood naked there. The explorer bit his lips and said nothing. He knew very well what was going to happen, but he had no right to obstruct the officer in anything. If the judicial procedure which the officer cherished were really so near its end – possibly as a result of his own intervention, as to which he felt himself pledged – then the officer was doing the right thing; in his place the explorer would not have acted otherwise.

The officer then proceeds to lie down on the bed of the apparatus and commands the soldier to strap him in. Unexpectedly, the apparatus begins to malfunction at this very moment. As the Designer box spits out its cogwheels one after another, the helpless officer is then spitted in a rather gruesome fashion on the harrow of the now out-of-control

machine. The explorer notes: “this was no exquisite torture such as the officer desired, this was plain murder.” As the harrow lifts the mauled body of the officer over the pit, the explorer is finally moved to take a definite action, demanding that the reluctant soldier and the freed prisoner help him to ease the body of the poor man off the arm of the apparatus:

But the other two could not make up their minds to come; the condemned man actually turned away; the explorer had to go over to them and force them into position at the officer’s head. And here, almost against his will, he had to look at the face of the corpse. It was as it had been in life; no sign was visible of the promised redemption; what the others had found in the machine the officer had not found; the lips were firmly pressed together, the eyes were open, with the same expression as in life, the look was calm and convinced, through the forehead went the point of the great iron spike.

2

Kafka’s story “In the Penal Colony,” written sometime around 1914 by a rather gloomy clerk living in Prague during the waning days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, is a classic story about colonization, penalty, and bureaucratic manners. Like most of Kafka’s stories, it floats in an allegorical free space, cut free of overt reference to any particular place or time, and consequently, evocative of many places and many times. Yet, in its preoccupation with bureaucracy, the story is recognizably the work of a twentieth-century European writer. Kafka seems to catalogue in his fiction the central anxieties of Europeans in the first half of the twentieth century: anxiety about the specter of organized, state-directed, and highly efficient terror; fear of the threat state power poses to the individual subject; the tribulations occasioned by the process of decolonization; and the unsettling belief, inherited from Christianity but soon to be discredited by the experience of World War I, that self-sacrifice ennobles whatever cause it serves no matter how corrupt or questionable.

I have briefly summarized Kafka’s narrative here simply to suggest that the story encapsulates many of the main themes of this book. “In the Penal Colony” is a story about: 1) how bureaucrats manufacture a teleologically ordered history; 2) how the manufacture of this kind of history involves the inversion of the ordinary relationship of agent to instrument; 3) how the imperial bureaucrat comes to imagine his own mastery as a peculiar form of self-sacrifice – and especially, as an

erotically charged, masochistically tinged, form of service to some higher power or higher ideal; and 4) how, through the alchemy of self-sacrificial abjection, he finds himself translated to a higher sphere of power.

The chapters that follow examine the narrative construction of a certain type of European bureaucratic subject – a subject perhaps now all-too-familiar to those of us who have been living in a world analyzed with such precision by Kafka. While some of the writers I examine wrote in the early part of the twentieth century, my main interest here is in the Victorian determinations of the type of subject they wrote about, a subject constructed during the high noon of European expansion to accomplish the work which is rule. While I focus my attention here mainly on writers who had some experience working in lands which were, or would eventually become, components of the British Empire, I do so to make a larger point about how an ideology of bureaucratic work was evolving toward crisis by the time of World War I. What I will call here the dual subject position of the European bureaucrat takes a number of forms, all of which are related – agent and instrument, author and character, perpetrator and victim, master and slave. While the management theories of Lord Cromer and Frederick Lugard (discussed in Chapter 1) project an ideal bureaucratic type who is somehow comfortable living within these dualities and is willing to seem to take a less histrionic part on the stage of history, and while actual imperial rule nonetheless often required the management of colonized people in what could be a brutally obvious way not envisioned by the theory, the Empire was merely a privileged stage on which England played out a larger ambivalence about the exercise of power over people. To put it another way: this book is about how the bureaucrat justifies writing on bodies by submitting his own body to be written upon.

Chapter 1 discusses the historical context in which this imperial bureaucratic ethos evolved. I argue that the politics of imperial competition at the end of the nineteenth century helped to push British society in the direction of rapid bureaucratization. My conclusions are twofold: 1) that the British Empire expanded rapidly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries most directly under the prompting and through the supervision of a growing professional managerial elite; and 2) that British writers found imperial service to be the best stage for dramatizing the evolution of bureaucratic power and a bureaucratic ideology, for it was in imperial service, above all, that work became rule. In discussing Lord Cromer in Chapter 1, I mean to locate in his

theorization of Indirect Rule the intellectual outlines within which the debate over bureaucratic power in the colonies was to take place. Cromer's pose of intellectual modesty and other-serving reformism helps position him as the chief spokesman for a benevolent extension of imperial rule at the very beginning of the worldwide "Scramble" for colonies officially sanctioned by the Congress of Berlin in 1885. Cromer was able to tap into the moral energy of "humanitarianism" and siphon much of it to support a project which led to a vast expansion of British imperial responsibilities. But he was able to do so by identifying the actual instruments of such a "forward" policy as self-abnegating moral heroes finally putting the world on a sound footing once and for all. Implicit in Cromer's discussion of empire as "moral" service is the idea that the self-sacrifice of the imperial bureaucrat is the chief indicator of the value of imperial rule.

Chapter 2 steps back in time from Cromer to consider one of the important ways in which an evolving ideology of bureaucratic rule comes to lay claim to a portion of the world little known to Europeans of the 1830s: Sub-Saharan Africa. In this chapter I discuss the best-known Victorian traveler/adventurers of their day – David Livingstone and Henry M. Stanley. My contention is that the younger man's eventual eclipse of the elder marks a culturally significant movement from ethnographic/missionary adventuring that is significantly independent of the exercise of bureaucratic power (Livingstone's "solitary" explorations of South Central Africa in the years 1849–1855) to that which is deeply beholden to large-scale organization (Stanley's large-scale exploration of the Congo River, 1874–1877). When Stanley published *Through the Dark Continent* on his return to Europe in 1878, his catalogue of Africa's needs – "tramways," better communications, centralized political authority – testifies to his inability to distinguish between the needs of a large-scale European exploratory safari and the needs of the African tribes among whom he moved, as well as to his convenient loss of consciousness of the disruptive impact of his own private army (at one time numbering 350 men) on the African peoples among whom he traveled. Stanley's travelogue was one of the most influential and compelling Victorian attempts to construct Africa as a space of need: a continent, in short, which lacks on a grand scale what Europe has. While it almost goes without saying now that this reinvention of Africa ultimately served European colonialist rather than African needs, the project is particularly significant for my argument because of Stanley's inadvertent demonstration of how the practical necessities of a large-

scale exploratory safari determine the construction of this “needy” Africa. In this sense, Stanley’s travelogue dramatizes, however inadvertently, the important loss of awareness that the bureaucratic reinvention of history imposes on Europeans, a loss which will only later on, in the twentieth century, be lamented as the loss of any alternatives to the dominant historical narratives of “modernization” and “progress.”

The subject of Chapter 3 is Rudyard Kipling, arguably the most important literary celebrator of bureaucracy. Yet Kipling’s notably ambivalent writings are the place in which the Darwinian thematic of “systemic intentionality” and the Cromeresque emphasis on bureaucratic invisibility are most clearly joined together under the rubric of “The Law.” While some of his early “Indian stories” (and especially *Kim*) celebrate a vision of imperial harmony clearly based on the efficient functioning of a bureaucratic hierarchy, *The Jungle Books* give a deliberately biological turn to the notion of “Law” while, nevertheless, managing to promise anything but a simplistic harmony. In fact, the scale of violence in *The Jungle Books* not only sutures Darwinian law into human history (Mowgli’s accomplishments are deliberately of epic proportions), but comes close to dissolving the conventional distinction between lawful and lawless behavior. In Kipling, the Darwinian thematic of “systemic intentionality” is explicitly connected with a recognizably bureaucratic model of social order projected back into an evolutionary past. In this sense, one of the most important ideological functions of works like *The Jungle Books* is to “naturalize” and thereby domesticate bureaucratic forms of social order, to make the historically contingent ideology of bureaucratic service seem a reasonable response to the imperatives of nature.

Chapter 4 discusses the work of Joseph Conrad. Arguably the most important literary critic of bureaucracy before Kafka, Conrad is important to this project, for his major novels (*Lord Jim*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *Nostramo*) examine how teleological narratives of history become institutionalized and thus resistant to change. Moreover, Conrad’s attention to the limitations of individual agency in history is undergirded by a prescient insight into how the bureaucratic organization of work under European capitalism invests otherwise meaningless work with value. Conrad was aware, to an unusual extent, of how bureaucracies institutionalize historical metanarratives which then, in circular fashion, come to serve their own professional interests. Conrad’s novels are thus about how professionals justify what they do by casting themselves in heroic roles in self-serving historical narratives.

In his emphasis on invisible management, Cromer constructed an archetype of colonial rule which lays stress on secret manipulation, indirect suggestion, and the exercise of power in such a way as to make it invisible in its effects: power no one has exercised can be seen as power exercised, somehow, by the victim of power. The unstated political and professional burden of Cromer's theory was to shift attention away from the conventional goals of the exercise of power and onto the means, and, by so doing, to ground the exercise of imperial power, for the European colonialist at any rate, in a self-sacrificial ethos. Thus, in Cromer's vision, the personal satisfactions of bureaucratic management for the individual manager lie, paradoxically, in the disavowal of public recognition. This self-abnegating professional ethos is simply a recirculated form of the traditional renunciatory ethos of Victorian middle-class culture. Yet, renunciation is not simply the forbidding ascetic ideal it may seem to most twentieth-century readers. Renunciation, in fact, holds out the promise of its own unique gratifications. In investing self-sacrifice with the libidinal, if purely vicarious, meanings of self-negation, it can become powerfully attractive for the "right sort" of individual, who derives an implicitly erotic pleasure from selfless service.

The problematic figure of T. E. Lawrence, who is the subject of Chapter 5, is the historical figure best exemplifying the practical efficacy of this strategy of rule and yet also the one who most clearly dramatizes the contradictory emotions – psychological and political – that Indirect Rule imposes on the ruler. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Lawrence's account of his years of involvement with Prince Feisal in the creation and successful execution of the Arab Revolt against imperial Turkey, is traced by the contradictions which underlie his own self-construction as "Lawrence of Arabia": tormented by the complexities of his multifold political role in Arabia – slave to English geopolitical objectives in the wake of the Sykes–Picot accord, master/servant of the antithetical idea of Arab nationhood, and leader of men in a new kind of war – Lawrence oscillates back and forth between the libidinal and professional attractions of what he calls "happy slavery" and the harshly forbidding conditions of political and military mastery. In Lawrence, the renunciatory ethos of bureaucratic professionalism, promising a grandiose expansion of responsibility at the price of renunciation of recognition except by knowing bureaucratic superiors, is condensed in his post-war career: having returned from the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919 to attend – anonymously – Lowell Thomas's lectures about the unacknowledged "King of Arabia" – himself – he then retreats to subaltern

anonymity in the guise of, first, “Aircorpsman Ross” and, then, “Private Shaw,” characters ultimately recognized by their commanding officers for their important, if decidedly unheroic, abilities as good typists and morale boosters among the enlisted men.

Chapter 6 argues that during the interwar period the novel of “imperial manners” evolves into a novel of “official manners” in the work of the Modernist figures George Orwell and Joyce Cary, both of whom had first-hand experience in British colonial possessions, and both of whom were writing in a period in which the imperial optimism of Cromer’s generation had been thoroughly discredited – at least among members of the intellectual class. These anti-imperial writers detach the “law” from its embedding in either the cosmos or Darwinian natural order, rendering empire as a field of conflict over what amounts to manners. Writing in the aftermath of World War I, these figures imagine the Empire in terms that help codify a recognizably twentieth-century ambivalence about the large-scale exercise of power: an ossified bureaucratic structure, resistant to change, and oppressive in its autocratic claim to a monopoly on modernization, the Empire both gives officials work to do and insures, however inadvertently, that that work is emptied of larger significance and value.