

Lord Cromer: Victorian Imperialist, Edwardian Proconsul

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It is curious that it should have taken imperial proconsul Lord Cromer (1841–1917, Evelyn Baring until 1892) nearly a century to find a scholarly biographer worthy of his centrality to British, imperial and Egyptian history in the Victorian-Edwardian age. The Marquess of Zetland's now 72-year-old *Lord Cromer* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1932) displays the frequent defects of official biography. Roger Owen observes that in contrast to another great proconsular symbol of Britain's imperial noon, Lord Curzon, Cromer 'is hardly remembered outside the Egyptian context' and that his 'once mighty reputation has now almost totally disappeared' (p. vii). Much of the difference must lie in Curzon's post-Calcutta prominence, particularly as foreign secretary in the critical post-war years from 1919 to 1924.

At a time of intense debate about American empire today, Owen's *Lord Cromer* takes its place alongside the growing number of books reassessing earlier empires. The author notes that the current wave of globalisation strikes many of the same chords as a century ago, when Cromer wrestled with global issues of international finance, bankruptcy, and economic orthodoxies on fiscal management, loans and free trade. Late nineteenth-century globalisation was different, however, in coinciding with the high tide of Western expansion and in openly using white racial superiority to justify subjugating others.

This is Owen's first biography, but it brings his scholarly work full circle. In 1966 he published his first academic article on 'The Influence of Lord Cromer's Indian Experience on British Policy in Egypt 1883–1907.'⁽¹⁾

The subtitle 'Victorian Imperialist, Edwardian Proconsul' conveys well the author's determination to project Cromer's image well beyond the Egyptian stage. Owen tracked the residences and offices of his subject not

just to Cairo but also to Malta, Calcutta, and Simla. He devotes 60-odd pages to a close examination of Baring's Indian years – as private secretary to his cousin Viceroy Lord Northbrook (1872–76) and then as financial adviser to Viceroy Lord Ripon (1880–83). But before India and 'the new empire in Africa' Baring served 'in the old empire of island fortresses like Corfu and Malta' and even briefly in the West Indian sugar colony of Jamaica. After leaving Cairo in 1907, Cromer's writing and his speeches in the House of Lords engaged issues on both the British domestic and the imperial scene beyond Egypt.

Owen has exhaustively mined the private papers of Cromer, the Baring-Cromer family, and their British contemporaries. He draws on some two dozen sets of papers, many never used before for Cromer's biography.

Like most men of his time and class, Cromer jealously guarded his inner life, and the exterior mask hardened as the years went by. Most of the correspondence of the successive Lady Cromers (née Ethel Errington and Katherine Thynne) is missing, but a few of his letters and notes to them have survived and reveal the depth of his devotion. Losing Ethel to kidney disease in 1898 cast a pall over the British Residency, which Cromer's second marriage in 1901 only partially alleviated. Glimpses of the man's lighter side come through in his friendship with Edward Lear, the painter and nonsense poet whose verse Cromer sometimes imitated. This biography also uncovers the deepest Victorian secret of all, the illegitimate daughter Louisa Sophia whom Baring sired, presumably with a Corfiote mistress, in 1863. Letters from the Catholic Archbishop of Corfu reveal that Baring supported Louisa with twice-yearly payments and a final lump sum when she turned eighteen.

Such intimate glimpses aside, *Lord Cromer* is primarily the story of a public life. Well-chosen part, chapter, and section titles usher the reader down a logical chronological-thematic path. Two of the life's four parts are preparatory: 'The training of an officer and a gentleman, 1841–1872' and 'An apprenticeship in imperial government and international finance, 1872–1883'. The centrepiece is 'Governing Egypt, 1883–1907' and the concluding part is 'Reimmersion in British political life, 1907–1917'. Slightly more than half of the 400 pages treat the Egyptian years.

One source of particular interest is the 'Biographical Notes', which Cromer assembled in 1905 with his children and any future biographer in mind. Here he cast his life as a morality tale of an indifferently educated and undisciplined young man reformed by the love of a good woman. The power of this narrative line deeply affected Zetland's biography. Owen is careful to keep the trope at an appropriate critical distance, comparing the Biographical Notes carefully with contemporary evidence.

In 1762 Evelyn Baring's paternal grandfather Francis founded the Baring family's banking firm in London. Evelyn, who was the eleventh child of his father Henry, spent his first years on the family estate in the fishing port of Cromer in Norfolk. Henry died when Evelyn was seven, and his mother Cecilia packed him off to boarding school. At eleven he entered a military preparatory school and at fourteen the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich. He graduated at seventeen with an artillery commission.

From 1858 to 1867 Baring was aide-de-camp to Sir Henry Storcks, High Commissioner of Corfu and then governor of Malta. Baring enjoyed hunting and society at the governor's palace but also began acquiring on his own the classical education he had missed in military schools. In 1866 he assisted Stokes on a royal commission of inquiry into the repression of a rebellion in Jamaica. After two years of Staff College back in England, Baring helped implement post-Crimean reforms at the War Office, where his older cousin Lord Northbrook was under-secretary.

When Northbrook became viceroy of India in 1872, he took Baring along as private secretary. Here, in the spirit of Gladstonian Liberalism, Baring crystallised the administrative desiderata for governing subject peoples which he professed all his life: tight control of expenditure, a simple and low tax structure, minimal military strength, concern for peasant welfare, and an eye on the press as a gauge of local public opinion. Back at the War Office in 1876, 35-year-old Baring finally married Ethel Errington, the death of her father having removed his veto over a non-Catholic match.

Retiring from the army in 1877 after twenty years, Baring went to Cairo as British commissioner on the Caisse de la Dette Publique. Khedive Ismail had plunged Egypt into bankruptcy, and the Caisse was set up to protect the interests of European creditors. Owen devotes 40 pages to Baring's immersion in the administration and politics of Egypt's international debt. Khedive Ismail was deposed in favour of his docile son Tawfiq, and in 1879–80 Baring became British controller of finances in the Egyptian government. Like most Europeans, he underestimated Egyptians' anti-European feelings and indigenous junior officers' resentment of the Turco-Circassians' monopoly of high army posts. In 1880 Baring left for three years in India as financial officer under Lord Ripon. Baring's Gladstonian Liberalism had its limits: he had to defend opium exports to China as essential to the Indian budget and opined 'we shall not subvert the British Empire by allowing the Bengali Baboo to discuss his own schools and drains. Rather we can afford him a safety-valve if we can turn his attentions to these innocuous subjects' (p. 168).

Meanwhile in Egypt the Urabi revolution and the ensuing British occupation unsettled the established order. In September 1883 Baring arrived back in Cairo as British agent and consul-general with a mandate for minor reforms and a prompt withdrawal of British troops. He had the advantage of already knowing Khedive Tawfiq and Riaz, Nubar and Sharif, the pashas who had lately held the prime ministry. Baring's initial request to slash the British garrison from 6,700 to 3,000 and withdraw it from Cairo proves his initial belief in early evacuation.

The Sudanese Mahdi Muhammad Ahmad's defeat of a British-officered Egyptian expedition under Colonel Hicks in November 1883, however, changed everything. Gladstone's cabinet ordered Egypt to evacuate the Sudan to the Egyptian frontier, dispatching Charles 'Chinese' Gordon, with Baring's support, to Khartoum to carry this out. Gordon's death in the fall of Khartoum in January 1885 prepared the ground for the eventual Anglo-Egyptian reconquest of the Sudan a dozen years later. Baring, Gladstone and Gordon each had their partisans in distributing blame for the 1885 fiasco, and recriminations continue to this day.

From 1885 to 1887 Baring ran a 'race against bankruptcy' (p. 215) – struggling to find the money to keep up payments on Egypt's debt, pay for the occupying army, finance the administration, and fend off French and British domestic objections to the occupation. He decided against evacuating Egypt in the foreseeable future. Perhaps without fully realizing it, he

had helped to place Egypt on a path along which the only logical destination was not self-government but annexation ... the country would now be subject to the familiar colonial process by which the more reforms were implemented, the more further reform was seen as absolutely necessary[.] (p. 233)

For the next decade Baring worked to convince opinion makers back home, from cabinet ministers to journalists, that Britain must stay in Egypt. Alfred Milner's *England in Egypt* (London: Edward Arnold, 1891), an unabashed defense of the occupation, was a powerful weapon in this campaign. Alternating Conservative and Liberal cabinets under Salisbury and Gladstone complicated his task. Gradually he came to believe that the Conservatives looked out for imperial interests better than his own Liberal Party. By the late 1890s few Britons still believed in evacuation. Only Cromer's fellow aristocrat and nemesis Wilfrid Blunt kept up a persistent drumbeat of opposition to Britain's empire on the Nile right through Cromer's tenure and beyond.

For all but his last three years in Cairo, Cromer had to fight against French resistance to the British occupation of Egypt. He railed at what he saw as French obstructionism, often expressed through the Mixed Tribunals or the Caisse de la Dette Publique, which delayed or hindered reforms he thought necessary. Finally in 1904, the Anglo-French Entente afforded him a triumph – a hand for Britain in Egypt in return for one for France in Morocco.

In the late 1890s, Cromer implemented what would now be called privatisation, circumventing French and other European interests on the Caisse by raising loans through Ernest Cassel and his local banking partners in Egypt. Cassel set up the National Bank of Egypt, which obtained a monopoly on issuing Egyptian banknotes. He also made immense profits at Egyptian government expense through a concession to sell off the state lands of the Daira Saniya. Cromer came to recognise the dangers of permitting such profiteering but had only limited success in reining it in.

Irrigation improvements inspired by British experience in India and often supervised by Anglo-Indian engineers were central to Cromer's plan to revive Egyptian agriculture and government revenues, benefit peasant and landlord alike, and reap political support for the occupation. He repaired the barrage north of Cairo and in 1902 crowned the irrigation improvements with the Aswan dam. Owen suggests that he thereby

presided over one of the world's first modern green revolutions, in which a temporary surge in yields and outputs based on a combination of extra water and more prolific strains of cotton was bought at a longer-term cost in terms of waterlogging and an intensification of pest attacks beginning in the early 1900s. (p. 397)

With Egypt firmly fixed in his mind as an agricultural country exporting raw cotton to industrial Britain, Cromer refused tariff protection to fledgling Egyptian-based textile factories. His educational policies famously failed to accommodate the demands of the growing urban middle class. His Indian experience had led him to fear that underemployed graduates of Western-style schools were likely to turn to nationalist protest. He starved the several higher professional schools and the primary and secondary system that fed them, left the traditional religiously-centred education concentrated on al-Azhar alone, and offered the masses only a few years of terminal elementary schooling.

The title of chapter 16, 'Things fall apart', aptly describes the last three years of Cromer's reign. His cocksure belief in his own righteousness and the ill will or depravity of his opponents, the narrow scope of information on public opinion which filtered to him through Oriental Secretary Boyle, the return of the Liberals to power back home, and the rapid crystallisation of Egyptian nationalism all contributed to his undoing. The limited victory of the Anglo-French Entente in 1904 encouraged his dream of sweeping away remaining international constraints on British freedom of action in Egypt. He wanted to abolish the Capitulations and Mixed Tribunals and set up a European legislative council alongside the existing Egyptian one. Under benevolent British hegemony, he even dreamed of 'fusing together all the races of the Valley of the Nile' (p. 332) Owen is on the mark here: 'it is difficult to exaggerate the extraordinary, and misguided ambition behind this exercise in what would now be called "nation-building." Even more striking than the unreality of the whole project is the megalomania involved' (p. 332).

The outrageous death, prison and flogging sentences handed down to delta villagers at Dinshway in the summer of 1906 – punishment for their resistance to British troops shooting pigeons in the neighborhood – mobilised Cromer's detractors in Egypt and back home in parliament. The concessions of Cromer's last few months, such as resurrecting the ministry of public instruction under future national hero Sa'd Zaghlul, came too little and too late. Cromer resigned in the spring of 1907.

Back home he nursed his health and published *Modern Egypt* (London: Macmillan & Co.) early in 1908. Then he began the final stage of his career as a politician in the House of Lords and an essayist. Avoiding public comment on the travails of his hand-picked successor Sir Eldon Gorst in Egypt, Cromer concluded that the Empire was in danger from without – the Germans – and within – from suffragists, the Irish, and socialists. He anguished over the constitutional crisis of 1909–11 prompted by Lloyd George's budget and the powers of the House of Lords but decided to make the campaign against women's suffrage his top priority. In 1910, with Curzon at his side, he presided over the merger of separate men's and women's anti-suffragist leagues into the National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage. He was president; Curzon succeeded him.

Why did the great proconsul focus on votes for women as the most pressing issue of those unsettling times? He feared that the Empire might be at stake: 'As the "German man is manly [and] the German woman is womanly ... can we hope to compete with such a nation as this if we war against nature and endeavour to invert the natural role of the sexes?"' (p. 375) What of 'the unsexed woman voting at the polling booth, declaiming on the platform and in Parliament, and possibly sitting at the desk of the Cabinet Minister to decide some question affecting the destinies and interests of her fellow-countrymen and women in the Antipodes?' (p. 374) Or was the worry closer to home? Cromer's old enemy Blunt gleefully gossiped to his diary that 'Lady Cromer has become a suffragette in opposition to her Lord' (p. 375).

Scholars everywhere will be indebted to Owen for this masterful biography. Thoughtful Egyptians will hardly disagree that 'For better, and often worse, Lord Cromer is as much a part of Egypt's history as he is of Britain's' (p. xii). Owen correctly reminds us that 'many of Cromer's Egyptian contemporaries were much more ready to acknowledge some of the positive effects of his rule than most of those who followed' (p. xiv). Yet the author is uneasy about how Egyptians will receive his book:

A final word to my Egyptian friends. I am well aware that by writing about someone as well known and well hated as Lord Cromer I run the risk of appearing as an apologist of empire, which I am certainly not. (p. xii)

Indeed, Owen is not an apologist of empire. As illustrated above, some of his assessments of Cromer's record are harsh, as they should be. Yet for all his negative remarks, Owen's admiration for the man's ability, energy, determination, and achievements shines through. Owen takes most seriously the biographer's and historian's duty of viewing things through the eyes of the subject and his contemporaries. Yet Owen's

perceptive reflections keep the reader well aware of twenty-first century perspectives. This reviewer was frequently reminded of the arrogance, ignorance, hypocrisy and folly of contemporary American empire in Iraq.

Like all important books, this biography will challenge scholars to further research, amendment, extension and reinterpretation. In light of the excesses of many applications of psychological theory to history, one may feel relieved that Owen sticks close to his sources on such matters as the paucity of parental warmth and approval in Baring's childhood, his austerity and authoritarianism as an adult, and the fierceness with which he fought women's suffrage. Owen does reflect on the corrupting effects of power, but in light of recent work on masculinity and femininity in relation to empire, one wishes he had pushed a bit further. Cromer and Curzon together at the head of the anti-suffrage crusade cries out for further analysis.

The vantage points of Owen's *Lord Cromer* are mainly the imperial centre and the colonial outpost in the periphery: Whitehall and 'the man on the spot' in the British residency on the Nile. If the sources are inevitably overwhelmingly British, at least anti-occupation Gladstonian Liberals and the eccentric and acerbic Wilfrid Blunt make sure that the views are not monolithic. But there is room for further inquiry into others' reactions to Cromer and his public persona – from the French diplomats with whom he sparred for so many years and above all from the Egyptians over whom he ruled.

The subtitle "Victorian Imperialist, Edwardian Proconsul" is excellent for situating its subject in the British global context but at the cost of omitting the crucial word that would call this book up in a title search under 'Egypt'. Egyptian public opinion as viewed through the eyes of Boyle, Cromer, and Blunt is fascinating, but more should be done from Arabic primary and secondary sources. One wishes for more analyses direct from Arabic sources, such as the interesting analysis of *al-Manar*'s review – presumably by Rashid Rida – of Cromer's *Modern Egypt* and of Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid's balance sheet on Cromer's reign in *al-Jarida*.

In sum, Owen has written a biography of Cromer which no student of modern Egypt or British imperialism can afford to ignore. It is unlikely to be superseded for a long time to come.

Notes

1. Published in Albert Hourani, ed., *St Antony's Papers*, 17: *Middle Eastern Affairs*, 4 (London: Oxford University Press, 1965). [Back to \(1\)](#)

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