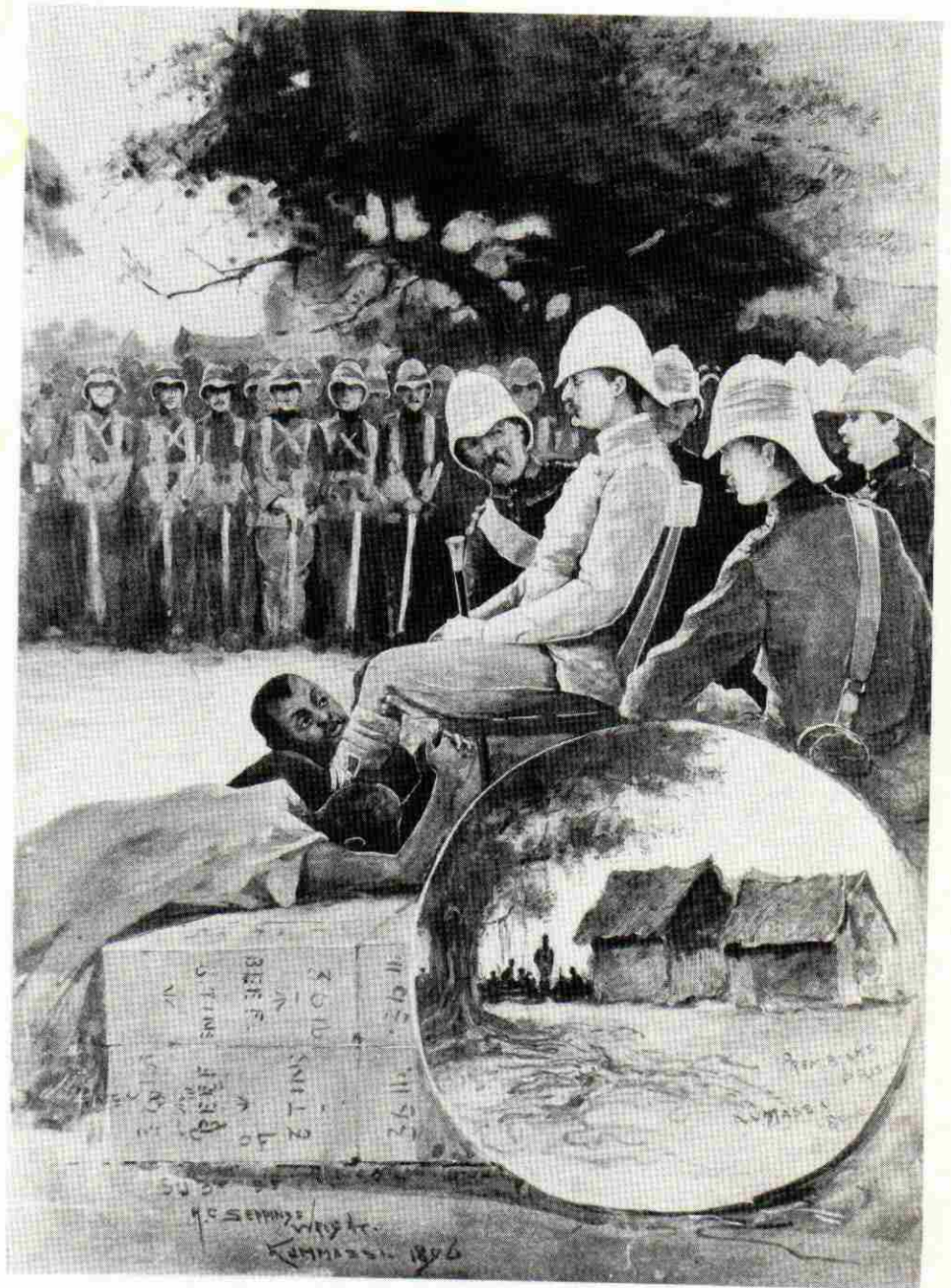


FIN DE SIECLE

'THE WHITE MAN'S BURDEN?'

IMPERIAL WARS IN THE 1890s

Lawrence James looks at the *mélange* of racial theory, economic interest and Boys' Own 'derring-do' that fuelled European ambitions for a 'place in the sun'.



Lords of the earth? The Asante King Prempeh and his mother making submission to the British expeditionary force – a *Graphic* illustration of 1896.

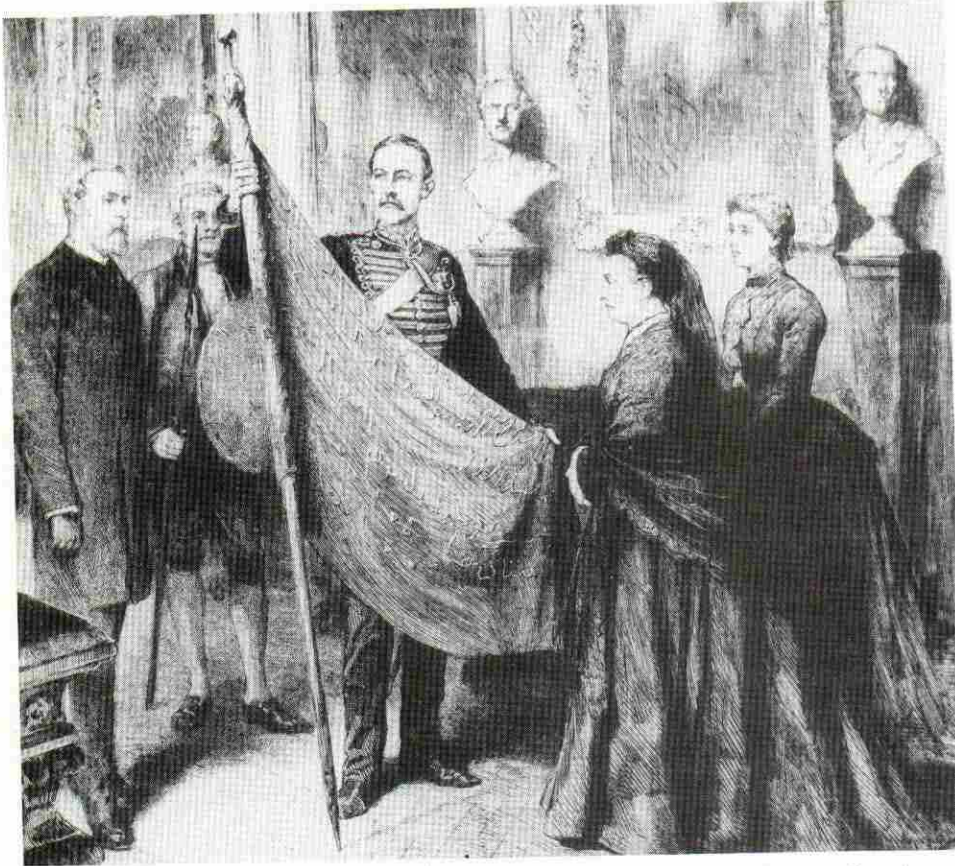
In the summer of 1900, Colonel James Willcocks led a small army of black troops to Kumasi in what today is Ghana to fight the Asante King Prempeh who had defied his new British overlords. During the march, Willcocks was approached by a village headman who claimed the Haussa soldiers had broken down his people's huts in their search for firewood and demanded compensation. Willcocks investigated the story, found it untrue and had its teller seized and brought before him. 'All he had to say', recalled Willcocks, 'was that I was his "good father", and I accordingly treated him as a good father does his child'. Like a naughty schoolboy whose mischief had been

uncovered and punished by a firm but benign headmaster, the headman bore no grudges, later telling Willcocks he was a 'devilish fine fellow'.

This incident, and for that matter the campaign of which it formed a small part, are instructive, shedding light on contemporary attitudes towards empires and their subject races. Willcocks, a professional soldier with twenty years experience waging the small wars of empire, was proceeding against a native prince who had broken faith. His duplicity and that of the headman were reminders that those whom Kipling characterised as 'sullen, new caught peoples, half devil and half child' needed sharp lessons before they

could be set along the road to moral and physical regeneration. Moreover, Willcocks revealed by his treatment of the headmen that he possessed that gift, claimed by many others like him, British and French, of a profound understanding of the native mind which enabled him to see through the fraud, treat its perpetrator appropriately and at the same time win his respect.

While readers today may be repelled by all that is implicit in this anecdote, their counterparts in the 1890s would have seen it as an amusing incident in the irresistible advance of European civilisation across Asia and Africa. This decade witnessed the heyday of self-



Wrapped in the flag? The association of the monarch with imperial exploits – as here in this illustration of Queen Victoria being presented with one of the rebel Mahdi's banners from the Sudan – cemented the new enthusiasm for empire-building. But in Britain at least some of the old dismissive/white-man's-burden elements lingered as in this 1894 *Punch* comment on the acquisition of Uganda, with John Bull's 'What, another! Well, I suppose I must take it in!!'



confident, often self-congratulatory and always aggressive imperialism in which Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States conquered and annexed in the name of civilisation.

This unprecedented spate of expansion was seen as the culmination of a natural historical progression. Nations that had now reached what Cecil Rhodes believed was the highest state of civilisation were taking control over those which had lagged behind, or races, like the Asante, who were considered unfit to manage their own affairs. This process was inevitable and beneficial for all concerned. 'The future of Africa under any form of European tutelage must be better than the dark and evil nightmare of the past' concluded the *Dublin Review* after delegates to the 1885 Berlin Conference had sanctioned the continent's division among the European powers.

The work was soon underway in Africa and in some areas the results looked promising. Technical and cultural progress advanced side by side in the French Ivory Coast where a report of 1896 described the laying of telegraph and telephone lines through the bush. Most important was the spread of French taught in recently established schools where, allegedly, the pupils were proud to be mastering the language of their new rulers. Using their new tongue, they would learn, among other things, about the achievements and superiority of French civilisation and in time feel themselves a part of French culture.

Credit for the transformation of the Ivory Coast was given to a governor who was 'benevolent, fatherly and firm'. This model of enlightened imperialism had its equivalents elsewhere, although Frenchmen in general were dismissive of British civilisation, which they regarded as inferior to their own. For their part the British assumed the superiority of their own moral qualities which uniquely qualified them to govern. 'The British race', proclaimed Joseph Chamberlain, the future Colonial Secretary in 1885, was 'the greatest of governing races that the world has ever seen' and for this reason alone it was Britain's 'mission' to protect and enlarge her empire. In America, ardent imperialists followed a similar moral imperative; in 1900 Senator A.J. Beveridge announced that 'the civilisation of the world' was the God-given 'mission of our nation'. This was the opinion of Kipling, who believed in the brotherhood of all Anglo-Saxon nations. He aired the general view of their duty to uplift and civilise in his poem *The White Man's Burden*, which was an

appeal to the American people after the annexation of the Philippines.

Those who shouldered the burden or undertook its French equivalent, the *'mission civilisatrice'* had first to win over the hearts and minds of subject races and persuade them that what was being done was to their ultimate advantage. Marshal Lyautey, a soldier-administrator who had developed his theories in Indo-China during the 1890s, favoured what he called displays of 'our care and welfare for their [the natives] moral and material interests'. 'It is', he wrote:

... in the moral sphere, the most noble, the highest and the purest one, that the most worthy work of France and her tradition is associated with the destiny of Moroccans – not as a subject people – but as a people who are benefiting thanks to our Protectorate, from the fullness of their natural rights and the satisfaction of their moral needs.

These sentiments were echoed by Kipling who celebrated the conquest of the Sudan in 1898 with a poem whose theme was the British promise to build a university in Khartoum:

They do not consider the Meaning of Things;

They consult nor creed nor clan.

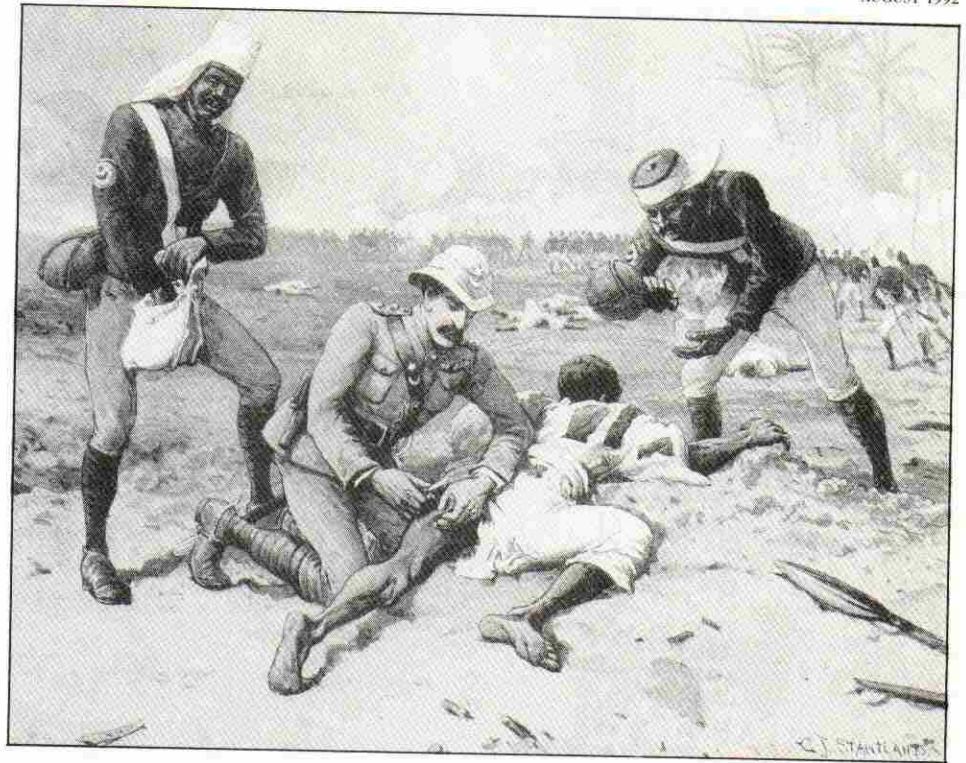
Behold, they clap the slave on the back,
And behold he ariseth a man!

They terribly carpet the earth with dead,
And before their cannon cool,

They walk unarmed by twos and threes
To call the living to school.

This was reassuring since nearly 11,000 Sudanese had been killed by artillery, machine-gun and rifle fire during the recent battle of Omdurman. Such blood-letting was unparalleled in a colonial war of this period, but it had been necessary, argued the *Daily Mail's* war correspondent, G.W. Stevens, to secure the 'downfall of the worst tyranny in the world' and to provide the Sudan with 'immunity from rape, torture and every extreme of misery'. His readers would have required no such reminder since the two-year campaign had been presented by the press as a contest between benign civilisation and brutal barbarism. The contrast was nicely shown in two *Daily Graphic* illustrations: a line drawing which portrayed a medical orderly tending a wounded Sudanese and a photograph of the bones of Jaalin tribesmen massacred at the orders of the Khalifa Abdullah.

And yet the Sudanese had fiercely resisted Kitchener's invasion. Whenever they went in the 1890s, the imperial powers had to overcome determined opposition before they could lay the foundations for their 'civilised' order. Even conquered people could



Noble savages? The propaganda for empire frequently contrasted native atrocities with Christian

behaviour, as above in the *Graphic's* July 1896 'Mercy to a fallen Foe', in which a British army doctor extracts a bullet from the leg of a wounded Dervish at the battle of Firket. Even in the Sudan campaign, however, given an extra edge by the urge to revenge the death of Gordon, there was sometimes room to acknowledge the bravery of the enemy, as in this cover picture (right) of the battle of Omdurman – from the appropriately named *Black and White* magazine – entitled 'the last stand of the Khalifa's standard bearer'.

BLACK & WHITE.



display an alarming recidivism which some found inexplicable. Frederick Selous, colonist and big-game hunter, reflecting on the 1896 Ndebele uprising in Rhodesia, concluded that

armchair imperialists were wrong to expect gratitude 'when we free a tribe of savages from what we consider a most oppressive and tyrannical form of government, overthrow the power of

witch-doctors and take measures to safeguard life and property'. The evidence suggested not, and only the most condign chastisement, resolutely and repeatedly applied, would teach the natives 'the uselessness of rebelling against the white man'.

The dogma of the swift, annihilating response was outlined in forthright terms by General Sir Francis Young-husband who has spent much of the 1880s and 1890s putting it into practice:

The moment there is a sign of revolt, mutiny or treachery, of which the symptoms not unusually are a swollen head, and a tendency to incivility, it is wise to hit the Oriental straight between the eyes, and to keep on hitting him thus, till he appreciates exactly what he is, and who is who.

Politicians, aware that the public could easily misunderstand the nature of these applications of main force, had to be more circumspect. Chamberlain told the Commons in 1895 that, 'expeditions, punitive or otherwise' were 'the only way we can establish peace between contending native tribes in Africa' and 'the only system of civilising and practically of developing the trade of Africa'. Like the nanny's smack or the caning delivered by the schoolmaster, war was a means of inducing the purblind or recalcitrant to accept what was best for their long-term interests.

The application of this simple doctrine revealed a gulf between the high-minded ideals of imperialism and the realities of empire-building. Columns of heavily-armed troops penetrated disaffected districts, chivvied rebels or resisters, burnt crops and villages and slaughtered or carried off livestock. Many found the work distasteful, others justified it on the grounds that barbarous methods were the only ones that would make a lasting impression on barbarous minds. One officer, in his published version of the mini-campaign fought against mutinous Sudanese askaris in Uganda in 1898-99, omitted details of the killing of the mutineers' families and was privately deeply ashamed of what he called a 'hateful' type of warfare. In French territories it took the form of the *razzia*, a systematic programme of destruction and looting designed to induce terror. During the suppression of the Maji Maji revolt of 1905-06 in German East Africa 75,000 died, nearly all the victims of an artificially created famine. Similar methods were employed by American troops in 1900 during the suppression of the Filipino revolt. Asked by a Senate investigating committee to defend the burning of villages, General Robert P. Hughes answered, 'These people are



Other European powers shared in Britain's enthusiasm for imperial expansion – notably the French in Africa (seen, right, defending a colonial outpost in the French Sudan, 1891) with whom Britain nearly came to blows at Fashoda. One country that did not have all its own way in the Dark Continent was Italy – the cartoon (left) illustrates Victor Emmanuel getting a black eye, courtesy of the Ethiopian ruler. The United States also caught the fever – the 'spirit of '98' saw them cleaning up the remnants of Spain's empire – pictured below are American troops in Cuba during the Spanish-American war.



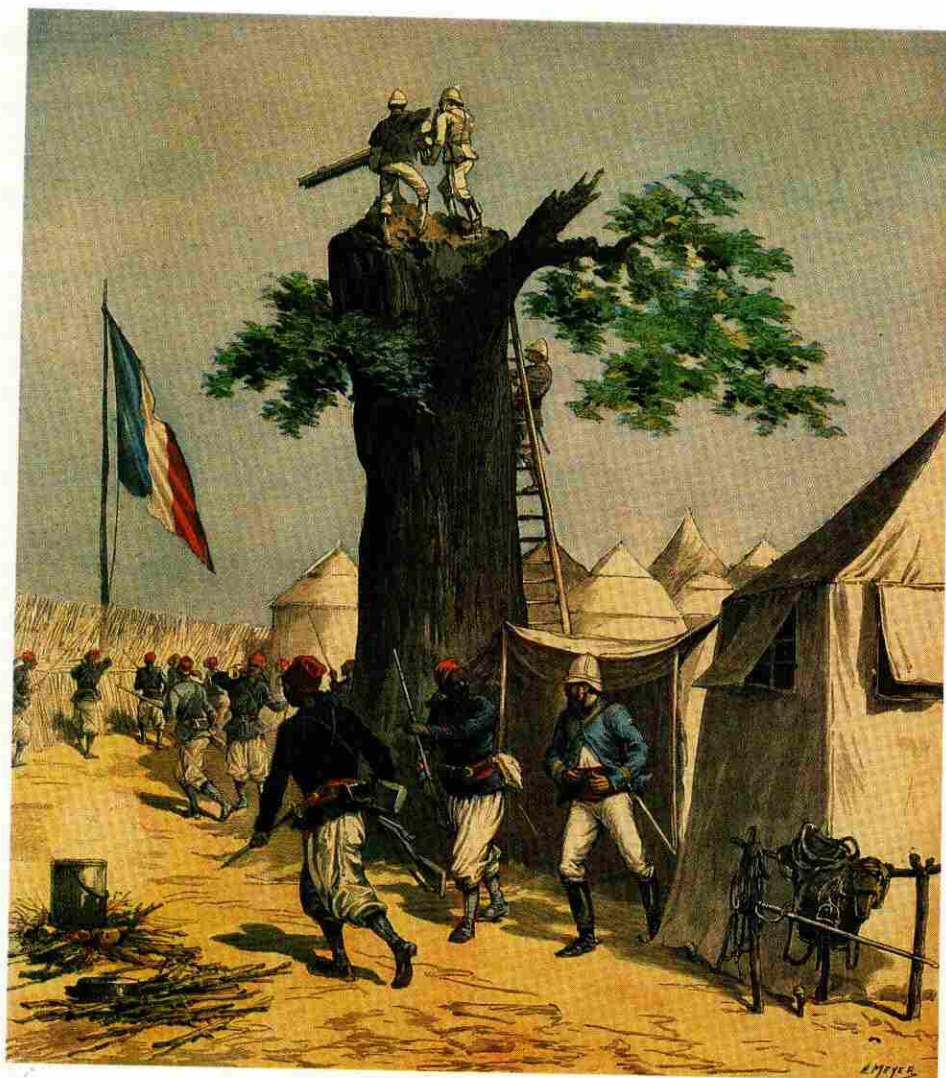
not civilised'.

Hughes' reprisals against the Filipinos had been the response to that most exasperating form of native resistance, guerrilla warfare. In conventional conflicts, imperial armies relied on overwhelming firepower and the all-too-common attachment of many Asian and African generals to the traditional tactic of the headlong charge, often by warriors who had convinced themselves that they had supernatural protection from bullets. On the way to relieve the Peking legations in 1900, Captain Jellicoe, then commander of a

naval landing party, was amazed by the Boxer onrush:

Without any hesitation they charged a Maxim and were literally mown down – coming on at a jog trot and collapsing when hit. They often stopped a few yards off and went through gesticulations for rendering themselves immune from bullet wounds.

Nevertheless over-confident, neglectful or rash commanders could suffer defeats. The Italians were trounced at Adowa in 1896 by an Ethiopian army which, unusually, had a sprinkling of machine guns and modern artillery,



and two small French columns were overwhelmed in southern Chad in 1898-99. The chances of such disasters occurring had been reduced by the Brussels agreement of 1890 by which the European powers banned the import of modern weaponry into Africa.

Climates, fevers and intestinal distempers caused more casualties than native weaponry, modern or antiquated. Three thousand men, a third of the army, died from diseases during the 1894-95 French campaign against the Hovas of Madagascar and only twenty-five from enemy action. Meticulous logistical planning prevented losses on this scale and, whenever possible, native troops and locally recruited auxiliaries were deployed in torrid or febriferous regions. Joffre's detachment of 380 which captured Timbuktu in 1894 contained only twenty-eight Frenchmen. British campaigns in East and West Africa were fought by black troops, Sudanese mercenaries and Sikhs borrowed from the Indian army. White officers and NCOs always commanded and, as a precaution, manned machine guns which were the key to victory on the imperial battlefield. In 1905 there was one machine gun to every 130 men in the German army in

East Africa, a far higher proportion than would have been considered necessary in Europe.

Black, Egyptian, Arab, Indian and Indo-Chinese troops did most of the donkey work in the imperial wars of the 1890s. Their European officers prided themselves in their skill in choosing those races and tribes who were the most warlike and responsive to training and discipline. Furthermore, many believed that their ability to command rested on inner qualities, unique to their race. French colonial officers fancied that they established a rapport with their men through *baraka*, an interior charisma possessed by Muslim holy men that brought the owner luck and the reverence of others. British officers attributed their power of leadership to character, that amalgam of bravery, selflessness, adherence to duty, team spirit and prowess in games that had been instilled in them by the post-Arnoldian public schools. These institutions produced young men who were ideally suited to command and govern; in 1911 a Guards officer insisted that 'Public School spirit and public spirit are almost synonymous'.

It was not a sense of public duty alone that impelled young officers to

seek service on imperial frontiers. Many were drawn to the colonies through a love for adventure, high rates of pay, an addiction for sport, especially shooting game, and the chance to make a name for themselves that would guarantee rapid promotion. 'When one once started on *safari* - i.e. the line of march in Africa, one never knows where it may lead to' wrote one subaltern during the 1898 Uganda campaign. For Kitchener, Haig, Joffre and Gallieni the path led to high command while others, like Wingate, Lugard and Lyautey stepped sideways and became high-ranking administrators.

All warrior preconsuls were unshaken in their belief that they were following a creed that was morally right. In many cases, they were impatient with political control exercised from afar by men ignorant of the day-to-day realities in areas where European power was still precarious. Some, particularly those anxious to make a career for themselves and win public attention, acted off their own bat or defied their political masters. In the early 1890s *commandant supérieur*, Louis Archinard, followed his own initiative and launched a series of offensives, including one against Timbuktu, that caused an exasperated official in Paris to complain about the 'State within a State' created in West Africa by a handful of disobedient officers. Lugard followed his own judgement rather than Chamberlain's and, in 1902, went ahead with preparations for a campaign in Northern Nigeria despite Colonial Office misgivings. Most famously, Rhodes engineered a *coup de main*, the Jameson Raid, against the Transvaal in 1895-96 in the belief that he was serving the best interests of the British Empire and with it the cause of civilisation in southern Africa which he believed would never be promoted by the Boers.

The insubordination and temerity of these men were excused by their domestic partisans, particularly newspaper proprietors and editors. Imperial wars sold newspapers and weekly illustrated journals like the *Graphic*. The 1890s witnessed a rapid expansion of newspaper readership with the appearance of a new type of daily designed to attract the working and lower-middle class. Heavily reliant on a sensational style, the new press paid special attention to imperial wars which were given extensive coverage with front-line reports and pictures. Recent extensions of the international telegraph network now made it possible for the public to read up-to-the-minute news of wars, even in the most distant lands; details of the 1896 Rhodesia campaign took



Co-optation of the white Dominions into Britain's imperial mission was an important psychological element in the enterprise – this *Punch* cartoon of the famous 1897 Spithead Naval Review captures perfectly the sentiment, with the British lion taking the young cubs out for the 'proudest moment of my life'.

Brand loyalty: the mingling of empire derring-do and product promotion at the end of the Victorian era was one of the most visible expressions of the way imperialism penetrated popular culture – as in this Pattinson's whisky advertisement touching, in questionable taste, on the victories of the Sudan campaign.

Pattinson's WHISKY
Victorious all along the line

GORDON AVENGED!
WITH KITCHENER AT KHARTOUM.

THE BOOMING OF THE CANNON is owing to the "booming" of Pattinson's Whisky. Steady unflinching attention to the subject aimed at into the mark and into the battle. Pattinson's have aimed at hitting the public taste for a pure, sound, fully-matured, delicately-flavoured whisky, and they have succeeded. Pattinson's Whisky is the "Sultan" brand in its perfection – wholesome, stimulating, and cream-like. Pattinson's Whisky has fought its way to the front and will remain there.

Sole Proprietors: PATTINSONS, Ltd., Highland Distillers, BALLINDALLOCH, LEITH, and LONDON. Head Office: Constantin St., LEITH.

watched by Royal Niger Company officers.

Each imperial war produced a crop of instant books, either compiled by war correspondents or written by officers who had taken part, like Winston Churchill, whose account of the Malakand campaign was published in 1897. Much imperial literature was directed at the young, produced to encourage patriotism and give examples of the manly courage demanded of those who served the empire. G.A. Henty was the prolific master-wordsmith of this genre. His tales of imperial wars were fast moving, picaresque adventures in which every page is crammed with incident. Issues are presented starkly; in *With Buller in Natal* (1900), the Boers are dismissed as 'an ignorant race, a race almost without even the elements of civilisation, ignorant and brutal beyond any existing white community'. By contrast, Henty's young heroes combine 'pluck' with resourcefulness, a way with the natives and true sportsmanship.

Imperial lessons were taught in the schoolroom. In 1896 the *Practical Teacher* advocated regular lessons in elementary schools on the British Empire in which pupils would learn about the supremacy of the Royal Navy, the names of colonies and trade routes. Adults were reminded of such facts in advertisements; under a headline 'The Two Greatest Navies in the World', Players Navy Cut tobacco displayed the product together with the numbers of British warships and sailors. During the Boer War copywriters went wild and fighting men in khaki endorsed mustard, tobacco, cigarettes, beef extracts and patent cure-alls. This was an attempt to cash in on the enormous public excitement aroused by the war in South Africa. Its early and dramatic phases dominated newspapers (headlines included 'Koorn Spruit Ambush' and 'More Deeds of Derring-Do') and newsreel footage was shot of troops on campaign for showing in cinemas.

Later when the war resolved itself into a tedious anti-guerrilla campaign, public concern waned and the views of opponents of the war made some headway. During the 1890s there had been those, mainly on the left, who were apprehensive about imperialist principles and critical of the methods used in imperial wars. Reports of the fighting in Rhodesia and war artists' drawings of horsemen galloping down fleeing natives provoked Irish and radical MPs to make charges of inhumanity and there was disquiet about stories of Kitchener riding in triumph into a captured Sudanese town followed by

less than a day to reach London from Bulawayo. Soldiers welcomed war correspondents, but cautiously for they had an uncomfortable knack of exposing blunders. 'Remember I can make or mar you' one journalist warned an unco-operative young officer during a North-West Frontier campaign. Press treatment of imperial wars was

vivid. During July, 1896, *Daily Graphic* readers saw spirited line drawings of scenes of fighting in the Sudan and on-the-spot sketches of the bodies of murdered settlers in Rhodesia. Most satisfying for those who accepted the empire as an agent of civilisation was a pencil drawing of Muslim chiefs swearing on the Quran to renounce slavery,

emirs laden with chains. Other, equally distressful incidents like the use of firing squads carrying out the execution of captured rebels to test the effectiveness of different types of ammunition on the North-West Frontier in 1895 were deliberately kept secret for fear of public outcry. The public did hear, in 1902, of the trial and execution of Lieutenants Morant and Handcock for the multiple murders of Boer POWs, a crime which left one senior officer fearful that the Boer War would 'degenerate into pure savagery'. Sometimes the civilisers came close to embracing the very vices they were fighting to extirpate.

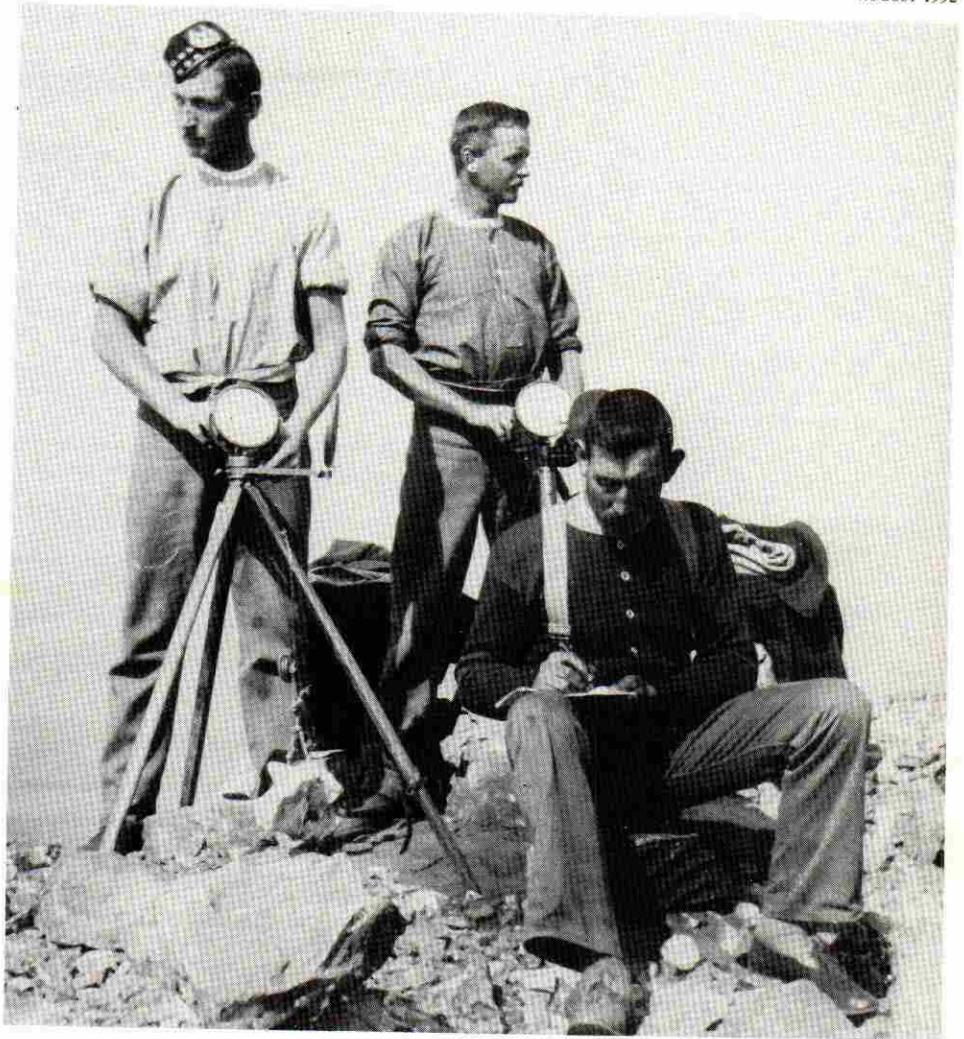
Imperial wars of the 1890s aroused great public interest, most of it emotional and transient. Disappointed and enraged Italians rioted when they heard the baleful news of Aduwa; New York theatre-goers cheered the popular song *Unchain the Dogs of War* as American fleets sailed for Cuba and the Philippines; and the British public swung between mass despondency and delirium during the Boer War. There was exhilaration of another kind in Khartoum when nationalist Egyptian officers heard news of British defeats in South Africa in 1899 which seemed to them to mark an end to a decade of European invincibility. Indian nationalists likewise took heart from the news of Japan's victories over Russia in 1905.

Domestic patriotic hysteria never travelled to the imperial front line. A Scottish volunteer yeomanry man in South Africa noticed that soldiers never sang the jingoistic songs so popular at home. Another yeomanry man discovered in Cape Town a book kept to record the comings and goings of young patriots like himself. It contained one entry that read: 'Reason for Joining: Patriotic Fever; Reason for Leaving: Enteric Fever'. There was always a gap between rhetoric and reality in the imperial wars of civilisation against barbarism.

FOR FURTHER READING:

The best general account of this subject is V.J. Kiernan, *European Empires from Conquest to Collapse, 1815-1960* (Fontana); Winston Churchill's *The Malakand Field Force, My Early Life and The River War* and Richard Meinertzhagan's *Kenya Diary* (Eland Books) give valuable insights. Something of the flavour of war in the 1890s can be gained from old copies of the *Graphic* and *Illustrated London News* and the mood of popular imperialism is reflected in the boys' stories of G.A. Henty and Captain Brereton which are still plentiful in second-hand bookshops.

Lawrence James is the author of *The Iron Duke*: a military biography of the Duke of Wellington (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, March 1992). He is currently working on a biography of Allenby and a general history of the British Empire.



The Boer War in South Africa (above, a British heliograph crew in the field, 1899) excited unprecedented jingoism at home, though not necessarily with the troops. The British soldiers suffering heavy casualties and privations at the hands of the Boers, might well have had a sardonic word or two for the spectacle, left, of 'Art's Tribute to Arms' – an 'installation' to celebrate the relief of Mafeking prepared (complete with British lion and bust of Baden-Powell) by South Kensington Art Students.

