

YOUNGHUSBAND AND IMPERIALISM

RICHARD A. REMPEL
History / McMaster University
Hamilton, ON L8S 4L9, CANADA

Patrick French. *Youngusband: the Last Great Imperial Adventurer*. London: Flamingo, An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 1995. Pp. xxii, 440. £20.00 (paperback £7.99).

Fifty years ago British imperial rule over one quarter of the world was still regarded popularly as a worthy, often noble, mission in many parts of the Commonwealth, not least in much of Canada. The pathfinders of Empire—men such as David Livingstone, Richard Burton and Francis Youngusband—and the proconsuls—Lord Curzon, Lord Milner and Lord Cromer—were viewed with respect and even veneration in many corners of the “white” Dominions, for all that controversy often surrounded some of their imperial policies. The twenty-fourth of May each year was a major celebration for children in the British imperium, for, after all, it was Queen Victoria’s birthday. The exploits of these and other imperialists were celebrated in songs sung at school and in churches, in much of the English-speaking press and in the tales of adventure written by John Buchan, G. A. Henty and Rudyard Kipling. As recently as the early 1950s in Canada, Kip-

ling's *Kim* was still a set book in the Grade ix English syllabus and Henry Newbolt's "*Vitai Lampada*" a required poem—

The Gatling's jammed and the Colonel's dead ...
And England's far, and Honour a name,
But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks,
"Play up! play up! and play the game!"

At the scholarly level, many standard texts, however critical of aspects of imperialism, tended to stress British policies of benevolent "trusteeship" and the manner in which colonies grew into their inheritance of parliamentary government and the rule of law. There were, of course, searing attacks, such as Eric Williams' Marxist study, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944).

But what of the Empire and its votaries now? Scattered and reviled, only a few may now be found—and then generally only on the far Right of the British Conservative Party. The anti-imperialists are now in the ascendant—especially those who can plausibly claim to have been victims of what scholars and laymen alike now tend to view as the predatory, racist, male chauvinist and brutally tyrannical British imperial rule. Learned journals and the movies, often most searchingly represented by British scholars, are laden with analyses of sexually repressed architects of imperial policy, of misogynistically driven explorers, of rapacious administrators and hegemonically motivated authors of elementary school readers. In the light of such broadsides, how could so many in the Commonwealth have adhered to the earlier, shallow, misguided view of imperial values! British imperial values, in popular culture, seem only for the satirical appetites of *Monty Python*.

Of course, even in the heyday of the Empire, it had its vociferous and often trenchant critics—the South Africans who remembered the Boer War concentration camps, the Catholic Irish bowed but by no means broken by centuries of English misrule, Indian Nationalist leaders such as Gandhi and Nehru and writers, notably J. A. Hobson, Leonard Woolf and Bertrand Russell—although the latter's anti-imperialism has never been deeply scrutinized and, I would argue, his writings contain many more examples of an imperial cast of mind than generally recognized.

In Patrick French's *Younghusband* we find a mature balance between the uncritical, all-too-naïve reverence for British imperialism of 50 to 100 years ago, and the often numbingly dismissive anti-imperial scholarship so fashionable currently. Certainly Younghusband's psychic abrasions and precarious personal relationships are examined in detail. There are the references to Younghusband's unsatisfactory relationship to a cold, indifferent mother; speculation abounds as to whether he had an incestuous association with his older sister Emmie; the author describes Younghusband's emotional immatur-

ity that blighted his engagement to a seemingly compatible woman; his subsequent, apparently sexually arid marriage to a bigoted and rigid wife is then explored; and his liberated affair in old age is dealt with at great length—indeed, it takes up almost as many pages as his stunningly heroic trek in 1887 from Peking, across the Gobi desert and through the nearly impassable Mustagh Pass by K2 and down into India—a feat in many ways comparable to the alleged travels of Marco Polo!

But these aspects of Younghusband's personal life are dealt with, for the most part, carefully and honestly without many attempts at sensationalism or significant descents into sneering. Occasionally French slides into ridicule, describing Younghusband in the 1890s as "capering about in the Himalayas" (p. 363). However, French bases most of his judgments and hypotheses solidly on an enormous amount of research. He has not only spent years in the archives but has also, where possible, retraced Younghusband's steps in India and throughout much of Asia. (He could not, because of political obstruction, follow the path through the Gobi, and he had to take a plane from Kabul rather than trek across Afghanistan.)

French argues that Younghusband's springs of action arose from the imperial culture of his school years at Clifton, where he was a contemporary of the poet Newbolt, the future Field Marshal, Douglas Haig, and the later literary critic, Arthur Quiller-Couch. His belief that the British had a civilizing and protective mission in India was fuelled in the sub-continent by opportunities that arose for spying against Russian schemers, from a desire to escape stultifying drill and to avoid the casual whoring of many of his fellow officers. Always ready to push himself to the limit of endurance, Younghusband set a world record—it was claimed by his friends in India—by running the 300 metre race in thirty-three seconds. Soon after he set out at twenty-four on his extraordinary quest across China and the Gobi. In 1904 the Younghusband expedition attempted to penetrate the secrets of Tibet—which, with its capital Lhasa, represented, in Buchan's words, "the last stronghold of the older romance". He was physically and often morally heroic in his Tibetan adventure, where he signed a shortlived treaty linking the mountain kingdom to Britain. He rightly came to feel a good deal of guilt at having shed some blood—although in a comparative sense it was nothing at all on the scale of the Chinese many decades later.

Younghusband was a short, slim man hardened to the most terrible ordeals in Central Asia—whether hunger, disease, cold and insects—who faced down savage bandits, Russian agents in Tibet and authoritarian senior British officers. As a player in the "great game" of spreading British influence in Central Asia against the equally imperialistic designs of Tsarist Russia, Younghusband was at once so successful that he became a national and

imperial hero and so unpredictable and unwilling to tug the forelock before conventional superiors that he never gained any high position and was repeatedly shunted aside. In that respect, his career resembles that of Richard Burton, relegated to the minor position of British Consul in Trieste for the last eighteen years of his life.

What Russell admired in Younghusband was his heroic dimension and the search for some deeper understanding of life than that offered by conventional religion. As Russell could appreciate the anti-rationalist T. E. Hulme because of his eagerness for a life of action rather than comfort, so also he found the courage of Younghusband enormously appealing. Looking for metaphysical answers, Younghusband in 1912 sought out Russell, G. E. Moore and his schoolboy associate from Clifton, Jack McTaggart. Pathetically untrained in formal philosophy, Younghusband was clearly out of his depth at Aristotelian Society meetings and other similar gatherings—and he got precious little time from Moore. Yet Russell was much taken by Younghusband and his first published venture into mysticism—*Within* (1912). As he wrote to Lady Ottoline, *Within* was

atheism implanted by a motor car.... It is a very amateurish book, but has a quality of simple sincerity which makes one like him. He goes on to build up a religion of atheism, interlaced with irrelevant things such as free divorce. (Quoted by French, p. 286)

In February 1914 Russell and Younghusband sailed together to America, allowing their friendship to deepen, for, according to the older man, they “talked together for the best part of five days.” The two of them, Younghusband observed to his wife, “differ profoundly on politics”, since Russell “is a socialist”. But the explorer, indicating that tolerance that was later to lead him to respect and understand the anti-colonial beliefs of nationalists such as Gandhi, explained that Russell “has a very deep and genuine sympathy with the labouring classes” (p. 288). Although they parted in New York—Russell to go to Harvard and Younghusband to go on a lecture tour—they met up again in Boston where Russell, Younghusband informed his wife, was in a “miserable” state, since the intellectual life at Harvard was “very poor” (p. 290).

With the coming of war in 1914 the paths of the two men diverged dramatically. Russell, we know, went off to become a leading activist against the war while Younghusband, seeking fellowship in high-minded organizations, founded “The Fight For Right” to crusade against the Germans. Yet such was his willingness to tolerate diversity that Younghusband consoled Russell on 11 May 1915:

I am so distressed at what you say about feeling a sense of isolation because of your views regarding the war. It should be all the other way round. You ought to be feeling the pride your friends feel in you for your independence and honesty of thought ... as regards the military attitude I know from experience how frightfully dangerous it is when you have the physical means of enforcing your own point of view—how apt you are to disregard anyone else’s. (P. 294 and quoted in *Auto*. 2: 47–8)

It was such support that led Russell to turn to Younghusband in a time of difficulty. In September 1916, as the War Office banned Russell from entering any “Prohibited Areas” in Britain, he prevailed upon his friend to try and get the order rescinded. To that end, Younghusband arranged to have Russell meet with him and that “Great Game” veteran and Director of Special Intelligence, General George Cockerill. Younghusband assumed that Russell wanted the ban lifted so that he could return to academic life; Russell wanted to use the occasion to try to humiliate Cockerill by entangling him in a logical impasse. That confrontation left Younghusband feeling betrayed and manipulated. Their friendship never recovered.

Younghusband lived on until 1942, founding new organizations, such as the Quest Society to promote Honour, Nature and the Ideal and the Religious Drama Society. In his search for sexual freedom, this shy, once deeply repressed man now wrote books advocating free love—works deplored by the Anglican Church and many of his friends and described as mostly “outlandish” by his modern biographer (p. xx). Although not a pacifist, Younghusband linked himself to many of the altruistic peace advocates of the interwar period, notably Bishop George Bell, Canon Dick Sheppard and George Lansbury. And until he died in the early years of the Second World War, like Bell and Vera Brittain, he condemned Arthur Harris’s area bombing campaign. His capacity to grow out of the carapace of late-Victorian imperialist stereotypes was nowhere more evident than in his attitudes to India: “Once a noted Curzonian imperialist, he became a supporter of the Indian National Congress and an advocate of immediate British withdrawal from India” (p. 346). Altogether, this is a remarkable first book by a young biographer.