

The New York Times**Arts**

To the Imperial Manner Born

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Published: June 29, 2003

CURZON

Imperial Statesman.

By David Gilmour.

Illustrated. 684 pp. New York:

Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$45.

"MY name is George Nathaniel Curzon, / I am a most superior person, / My cheek is pink, my hair is sleek, / I dine at Blenheim once a week."

Lord Curzon, the last Victorian viceroy of India, wasn't actually a weekly visitor at Blenheim Palace. But his conceited behavior inspired such stories. The unfortunate doggerel was composed by two Oxford contemporaries; and somehow, wherever he was the rhyme was sure to follow. Indeed, not since the grand old Duke of York -- who had 10,000 men, and marched them up to the top of the hill and marched them down again -- has a man's reputation been quite so damaged by a simple rhyme.

Admittedly, the charges against Curzon appear to leave nothing for the defense. It is de rigeur among students of colonial history to dismiss his seven-year tenure as viceroy as a failure for India and Britain. Among political historians, Curzon is the archrat: a turncoat and self-server who deserted his friends at the wave of an opportunity. And finally, among the world at large, he is a symbol of all that was wrong with British imperialism.

Curzon's overwhelming snobbery made him easy material for the vitriolic biographies that followed his death in 1925. Even his friends deplored his "enameled self-assurance." But in his preface to "Curzon: Imperial Statesman," David Gilmour makes it clear that his aim is to rescue Curzon from his critics. A person's lack of manners, he argues, should not condemn him to perpetual derision. Curzon was undoubtedly annoying, but he also restored India's greatest monuments; rationalized its police; reformed its currency, universities and railways; and reorganized its irrigation system. There is no question that he deserves a fresh appraisal, and in Gilmour, the author of a biography of Rudyard Kipling, he has a willing and an able champion.

The myths about Curzon begin with overblown stories about his privileged childhood. Born in 1859, the eldest son of the fourth Baron Scarsdale, he was heir to the magnificent Kedleston Hall and a substantial fortune. But the gifted and sensitive Curzon was bullied by his father and terrorized by his sadistic nanny. The precious elements of childhood -- playfulness, freedom, affection -- appear to have been withheld to devastating effect. By the time Curzon started boarding at Eton, his character had already been formed for the worse. Even teachers who recognized his intelligence were exasperated by his hard-edged arrogance. Handsome and charismatic, he possessed the traits to make him popular, and people wanted to be his friend -- until they spoke to him.

Although Gilmour does not comment, it is not difficult to imagine a brilliant little boy clinging to emotional survival by closing off all pathways to deeper feeling. Curzon lacked what is today called "emotional intelligence." He seems to have been incapable of true reciprocity, except when it came to sex. Even though Curzon remains unpopular with feminists because of his unyielding opposition to female suffrage, he preferred the company of women, and they adored him. Married women were wild for him, and by all accounts he was a virile and passionate lover. Considering that Curzon had determined on a glittering political career, his sexual recklessness is quite extraordinary. At least one irate husband threatened to name him in his divorce case.

In the decade after Oxford, Curzon distinguished himself everywhere, from the bedroom to the debating chamber. He secured one of the greatest matrimonial prizes of the day, the beautiful and wealthy American Mary Leiter. He entered Parliament at 27, and from the very beginning was spoken of as "the coming man." But Gilmour shows how different the real Curzon was from the pampered caricature. Not only was he hard-working and disciplined, he also relished adventure. Three long and grueling tours through Asia resulted in three acclaimed books: "Russia in Central Asia," "Persia and the Persian Question" and "Problems of the Far East."

By the time Curzon was 40, he knew more about the eastern reaches of the British Empire than any other man in or out of government. He had made himself into the natural choice to replace the retiring viceroy, Lord Elgin. But just in case the prime minister, Lord Salisbury, had failed to notice his suitability, Curzon sent him several letters in his inimitable style, pointing out all his qualifications. This was precisely the sort of behavior that made people long for his failure.

For the first few years, however, Curzon continued to walk along a golden path. Despite his extreme selfishness as a husband, Mary was a devoted wife and mother. Shielded from all domestic concerns, he could throw himself with unremitting zeal into solving India's problems, both real and imagined. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, later said, "Curzon will be remembered because he restored all that was beautiful in India." For the viceroy, the late-Victorian ideals of duty and self-sacrifice were almost religious tenets. Preserving India's history and culture, improving the lives of its people, unleashing its potential -- in Curzon's mind these were not platitudes but life-or-death issues. Far from

being all pomp and no circumstance, he was the first governor to speak out on behalf of the indentured laborer, and to enact laws that safeguarded the land of indebted peasants.

Although there were, of course, abuses committed within the imperial system, Curzon refused to accept them as the norm in India. Chief among his personal goals were honesty in administration and equal justice before the law. The gang rape by soldiers of a Bengali woman, for example, resulted in an entire regiment being penalized. The lenient sentencing of a British planter who had beaten a worker to death prompted Curzon to insist on longer jail time in such cases. "I have never wavered in a strict and inflexible justice between the two races," he explained to a colleague. "It is the sole justification and the only stable foundation for our rule."

How, then, did it all go wrong? Curzon was convinced that he had done everything right. "Let India be my judge" were his parting words, and Gilmour seems unwilling to challenge this assessment. But Curzon's frontier policies remain controversial at best. And even he was forced to admit that his division of Bengal into two separate entities, West and East Bengal, while logical, was utterly impractical. The separation caused rampant sectarian strife between the predominantly Hindu West and the majority-Muslim East. Bengali nationalism erupted, and the resulting violence and chaos forced the British to reunite the province in 1911.

After his return to London in 1905, Curzon experienced both public and private disaster. Mary died in 1906, her health shattered by India, and the expected accolades and political appointments that should have been his immediate reward never materialized. Instead, he spent the next 10 years on the fringes of government. The cause was partly his long absence, which had enabled his enemies to stiffen opposition against him. But Curzon's unerring ability to turn friends into rivals was equally significant.

ADMITTEDLY, he did not sit twiddling his thumbs. He married again (not happily), he became successively chancellor of Oxford and president of the Royal Geographical Society, as well as president of the anti-woman-suffrage National League. Nevertheless, it was as if a dark cloud had dissolved when Curzon finally re-entered active politics in 1916. During the next eight years he served three prime ministers, but the only person who thought Curzon ought to succeed the last, Bonar Law, was Curzon himself. While clearing him of opportunism and treachery, Gilmour concedes that Curzon's gifts lay in administration, not politics. Moreover, in the rapidly changing postwar years it was obvious even then that Curzon belonged not to the Edwardian but to the Victorian era.

Ideally, Gilmour's exhaustive analysis of the injustices committed against Curzon would have been paired with arguments in support of his policies. However, as an essay in rehabilitation, "Curzon: Imperial Statesman" makes a powerful case for its subject. This is a biography in the old-fashioned mode. Curzon's private life only rarely intrudes, Gilmour never delves into forensic psychology, and there is no attempt to spare the reader the intricacies of British party politics. In other words, this is a biography for adults. Curzon, who preferred facts to sentiment, would have been pleased.

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