

ELGIN IN CHINA

IMPERIALISM TODAY is emerging, freshly refurbished, as the progressive answer to problems of planetary disorder. Discarding conventional euphemisms, official ideologues and establishment media—from Blair's former factotum for international security in *Prospect*, to opinion-makers in the *Financial Times* and *Foreign Affairs*—now openly celebrate the return of Western empire across the world.¹ Devoted in the service of human rights and free markets, military operations proceed without compunction for their consequences. As bombs rain down on the civilian populations of Iraq, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, or Palestinians are buried in their homes, the drawl is at best of 'collateral damage'—which, indeed, one enthusiast has complained was 'almost pedantically avoided' in Operation Enduring Freedom.² By comparison with such contemporary sensibility, the frankly colonial warfare of the nineteenth century could at times hold a more honourable record. If its agents were equally certain in the moral superiority of their mission, a few, at least, were troubled by the misery they caused.

No tale is more instructive in this regard than the career of James Bruce, eighth Earl of Elgin and Kincardine. As British Plenipotentiary with the Anglo-French expeditionary force to China in the late 1850s—the man sent to bring the Qing dynasty to heel—Elgin found much of what he was called upon to do distasteful. If a combination of self-interest and imperial advantage nevertheless kept him up to the mark, his letters and diaries offer a commentary of unrivalled candour on the psychology of empire—and useful insight into one of the most important, but least known, British conflicts of the nineteenth century: the wars with China of 1857–58 and 1860.

'A line of English men-of-war are now anchored there in front of the town', Elgin wrote, on 22 December 1857, before the city of Canton:

I never felt so ashamed of myself in my life, and Elliot [the ship's captain] remarked that the trip seemed to have made me sad. There we were, accumulating the means of destruction under the very eyes, and within the reach of a population of about 1,000,000 people, against whom these means of destruction were to be employed! 'Yes', I said to Elliot, 'I am sad because when I look at that town, I feel that I am earning for myself a place in the litany immediately after "plague, pestilence and famine". I believe however that, as far as I am concerned, it was impossible for me to do otherwise than as I have done.'³

The bombardment of the city finally began at 6am on Monday, 28 December 1857; which, as Elgin pointedly observed, was 'the Massacre of the Innocents' in the Christian calendar. The shelling, he noted, continued 'without almost any reply from the town. I hate the whole thing so much that I cannot trust myself to write about it'.⁴ Others were not so scrupulous. *The Times* special correspondent with the expedition George Wingrove Cooke wrote enthusiastically of how the bombardment of the city's walls continued throughout the day: 'Then came the night—and such a night! . . . the city soon became like our own Shropshire iron counties at night—a plain of fire'. Shells and rockets from thirty-two warships battered the city walls without a break for twenty-seven hours, providing a spectacular display. 'By constant showers of rockets', Cooke continued, 'the flame was led up and down the city wall, and in an incredibly short time the long, thin line of fire shot high into the heavens'. Vengeful rockets 'came hurtling through the moonlight along the line of the eastern wall . . . They seemed to lead the fire about as a tame element.'⁵

The bombardment completely demoralized the city's defenders and, according to Elgin's secretary, Laurence Oliphant, killed some two hundred civilians, having a terrific effect 'upon certain parts of the city'. When Anglo-French troops stormed the walls on 29 December, they met

¹ Robert Cooper, 'The Next Empire', *Prospect*, October 2001; Martin Wolf, 'The Need for a New Imperialism', *Financial Times*, 9 October 2001; Sebastian Mallaby, 'The Reluctant Imperialist', *Foreign Affairs*, March–April 2002.

² Christopher Hitchens, 'The Ends of War', *The Nation*, 17 December 2001.

³ Theodore Walrond, ed., *The Life and Diaries of the Eighth Lord Elgin*, London 1872, p. 212; henceforward LD.

⁴ LD, p. 214.

⁵ George Wingrove Cooke, *China: Being The Times Special Correspondence from China in the Years 1857–58*, London, 1858, pp. 318–319.

only ineffectual resistance and suffered 'a trifling loss': the British had eight men killed and seventy-one wounded; the French, two and thirty. Oliphant watched the assault from Magazine Hill. What he found most striking was

that impressive silence, that absence of all movement on the part of a population of a million and a half that lay as though entombed within the city walls, whose very pulsation seemed arrested by the terrors of the night before, and whose only desire, if they could think at all, appeared to be that the bare fact of their existence should be forgotten by the conquerors.

The Cantonese had been successfully cowed. The whole exercise was, Oliphant felt, most satisfactory, and had made 'a deep impression upon a population whose habitual insolence to foreigners had rendered it extremely desirable that they should be made aware of the power we possessed'.⁶

A Peelite in Jamaica

What manner of man was the eighth Earl of Elgin, tasked with imposing British demands upon the Manchu Emperor? James Bruce was born in 1811, second son of the seventh Earl, Thomas Bruce—who, as ambassador to Turkey, had acquired the Parthenon Marbles. This had not only earned him the abuse of Lord Byron, who devoted his poem, 'The Curse of Minerva', to the man he described as 'a filthy jackal'; it also left the family deeply in debt.⁷ The Elgins had never been rich. The income from the family's Broomhill estate in Scotland was only £2,000 a year, 'a paltry sum for a man of his class and one which would scarcely have appealed to the plainest of Jane Austen's heroines'.⁸ By 1812 there were debts of over £120,000. After Eton and Oxford, where he took a first in classics and was elected to a Merton Fellowship, James devoted himself to restoring the family's fortunes by coal mining at Broomhill.

In 1839 a new pit was sunk at Wallsend, 'one of the largest and deepest in Scotland', and the family were employing over 600 miners, producing 60,000 tons of coal a year. They had continual trouble with their work-

⁶ Laurence Oliphant, *Narrative of the Earl of Elgin's Mission to China and Japan*, Edinburgh 1861, p. 130.

⁷ Sydney Checkland, *The Elgins*, Aberdeen 1988, p. 87.

⁸ William St. Clair, *Lord Elgin and the Marbles*, Oxford 1983, p. 143.

force, who had a propensity to unionization and strike action; as Elgin put it, 'colliers will always strike whenever the time is favourable . . . when their blood is up they are not accessible to reason'.⁹ The wealth of the man sent to make war on China derived from the exploitation of those toiling underground.

In July 1841 James Bruce was elected to Parliament for Southampton, standing as a Peelite Conservative; by now, with the death of his elder brother, he was heir to the Earldom. When his father died, in November 1841, he had to resign his Commons seat but did not go to the Lords, since his was a Scottish title. In April 1842, aged thirty-one, the eighth Earl of Elgin was appointed Governor of Jamaica. It was nine years since the abolition of slavery: the so-called 'apprentice' labour system that succeeded it—and which, along with substantial compensation for ex-slaveholders and the practice of flogging, was supposed to ensure the continuation of the planter economy—had been curtailed, after stormy protests, in 1838. Elgin confronted a situation in which, as he put it, 'the labourers stood in a relation of independence towards the owners of capital and land totally unknown to a similar class in any fully peopled country'.¹⁰ Put bluntly: how was the black population to be persuaded to work for their former owners? The answer, Elgin felt, should be not coercion but 'education', to disabuse 'the minds of all classes . . . of the impression that honest labour is in any wise inconsistent with the full exercise of the privileges conferred by freedom'.¹¹

Honest labour in this case was to be rewarded at a mere sixpence a day, while expenditure on education remained minimal. On racial questions, Elgin proved himself an inclusive liberal. Working with the reactionary and planter-dominated Assembly, on which wealthy coloured proprietors were also represented, he declared it 'the best expedient that can be derived for blending into one harmonious whole a community composed of diverse races and colours'.¹² His outlook was, however, solidly determined by class outcome, and in his four years in Jamaica he presided over a dramatic shift in the burden of taxation from the planters to the black population. This was to produce a serious tax

⁹ Checkland, *The Elgins*, pp. 101–2. For the Scottish miners see Alan Campbell, *The Lanarkshire Miners*, Edinburgh 1979. ¹⁰ LD, p. 14.

¹¹ J.L. Morison, *The Eighth Earl of Elgin*, London 1928, pp. 74–5.

¹² LD, p. 27.

revolt—the St. Mary’s riot—in 1849; but by this time Elgin had already returned to England (spring 1846) and had been appointed Governor-General of Canada.¹³

Saving Canada

Elgin was, with considerable justice, to regard the quarantining of Canada from the revolutionary contagion of 1848 as one of his most important achievements—boasting of ‘having carried Canada unscathed through a year of revolutions. If I had pursued any other policy than that which I have followed we should . . . either have been expelled from Canada or be in a most uncomfortable position, perhaps at war with the United States’. ‘It is’, he modestly observed, ‘something to have spared the Empire such a shock’.¹⁴

The political situation he inherited was the product of the British response to the Canadian Rebellion of 1837. John (‘Radical Jack’) Lambton, first Earl of Durham and Elgin’s father-in-law, had been sent in the aftermath of the Rebellion to report on the government of the colony. His celebrated ‘Durham Report’ had advocated the union of Upper and Lower Canada, to ensure British domination over the French; and the introduction of ‘responsible government’—an executive answerable to the elected assembly, rather than to the Crown. While an Act of Union was passed in 1840, responsible government remained a step too far. When Elgin arrived in Canada in January, 1847, it was with the explicit intention of vindicating his late father-in-law’s memory—with, of course, the full support of the Whig cabinet in London. Consequently, when the Reform Party led by Louis Lafontaine and Robert Baldwin won a parliamentary majority, Elgin asked them to form a government. This provoked outrage from their Tory opponents, who considered that he had handed the country over to rebels and traitors; but it kept the Reform Party safe from revolutionary contagion, something of considerable importance considering that, as Elgin wrote to Lord Grey, the Colonial Secretary, ‘one half of our population is

¹³ Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor and Politics in Jamaica and Britain 1832–1938*, Baltimore 1992, p. 205.

¹⁴ Checkland, *The Elgins*, p. 126. For an interesting general discussion of 1848 and the Empire see Miles Taylor, ‘The 1848 Revolutions and the British Empire’, *Past and Present* 166, February 2000.

of French origin, and deeply imbued with French sympathies'. Instead of having to campaign for 'responsible government'—with the danger of such a battle escaping moderate control, as happened in Paris in February, 1848—the Reformers had their ambitions satisfied by their Governor-General, on the Crown's behalf. Elgin was also concerned by the large Irish presence, both in Canada and across the border in the United States: numbers had been swollen by the Great Famine. Republican and Repeal fanatics in the US were, he wrote to Lord Grey, 'egging on their compatriots here to rebellion' and threatening invasion; Elgin proposed that any such incursion 'should be promptly met and effectually crushed'.¹⁵

While he successfully rode out 1848, Elgin met the full force of a Tory backlash the following year in the storm over the Rebellion Losses Bill. The 'loyalist' population of Canada had already been indemnified for their losses during the 1837 Rebellion; the Reform government now proposed to indemnify the 'disloyal' population—not the actual rebels, but French-speakers whose property had been destroyed. This provoked what Elgin himself described as 'the Canadian Tory Rebellion of 1849'.¹⁶ On 25 April, the day he signed the Bill, the Tories unleashed the Orange crowd in Montreal; led by the city's fire chief, they burned down the Parliament House. The following day, Elgin was stoned while the police stood by, and was forced to flee the city for his own safety. He refused to declare martial law, preferring to let the protests run their course; a decision that earned him a reputation for weakness in some quarters.

Elgin's eight-year period as Governor-General of Canada was crowned with a diplomatic triumph: the negotiation of a trade agreement with the United States. The Reciprocity Treaty was signed on 5 June 1854. Elgin gave up his post and returned to London at the end of the year, his colonial service having earned him a seat in the Lords. His standing was acknowledged by Lord Palmerston's offer of a Cabinet position—Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster; but while indicating that his political sympathies now lay with the Whigs, for the time being Elgin preferred to remain independent. It was the notorious *Arrow* Incident of 1856

¹⁵ LD, p. 53; Morison, *Eighth Earl of Elgin*, p. 101.

¹⁶ LD, p. 89.

which was to lead to his appointment as British High Commissioner and Plenipotentiary to the Manchu Empire.

Free Trade is Jesus Christ

The first Opium War (1839–42) had begun the process of opening up China, forcing a de facto legalization of the drug and ceding Hong Kong to the British. It is worth remarking the extent to which the nature of this conflict—it was indeed an opium war, fought to secure the fortunes of a trade that occupied a vital position in the economic life of the British Empire—is still either ignored or played down in otherwise reputable historical works. In a recent example—the prestigious *Oxford History of the British Empire: the nineteenth century*—opium barely makes an appearance in over 700 pages.¹⁷ This despite its economic importance—the drug is estimated to have been ‘the world’s most valuable single commodity trade of the nineteenth century’¹⁸—and the fact that it was the occasion of three wars, one of which brought about the downfall of the government of the day and caused a general election.

As Carl Trocki has insisted, the opium trade was ‘crucial to the expansion of the British Empire in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries’, both because of the high-quality revenues it produced and through the powerful network of narco-capitalists it created, ‘who profited from the trade, and whose influence buttressed the imperial lobby throughout the nineteenth century’. Opium was the British administration in India’s second most important source of revenue and, for the first two thirds of the nineteenth century, its most important export.¹⁹ John Wong has shown how it turned a British trade deficit with China into a substantial surplus, not only paying for British tea and silk imports, but also providing massive profits for London companies and substantial revenues for the state. The duty levied on tea imports into Britain was sufficient to finance a considerable proportion of the costs of the Royal Navy during the nineteenth century.

¹⁷ Andrew Porter, ed., *Oxford History of the British Empire: the nineteenth century*, Oxford 1999.

¹⁸ Frederic Wakeman Jnr, ‘The Canton Trade and the Opium War’, in John K. Fairbank, *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 10, part 1, London 1992, p. 172.

¹⁹ Carl Trocki, *Opium, Empire and Global Political Economy*, London 1999, pp. 10, 26, 73–4.

The ramifications of the opium trade were such that it had to be supported and protected, even if it meant war.²⁰

Even after their humiliating and costly defeat in the first Opium War, however, the Chinese continued to resist British efforts to incorporate them into their informal empire. Of particular concern in London was the Chinese refusal to allow access to the city of Canton, which increasingly came to be seen as the key to relations between the two countries. Chinese obduracy over Canton might, it was feared, lead them to make a stand against the British and attempt, once again, to put a stop to the opium trade. On the other hand, successful British entry into the city would both consolidate imperial domination and be the stepping-stone to the opening up of the whole country. What the British required was a pretext and the *Arrow* Incident—one of the most shameful episodes in modern British history; and there are, of course, plenty from which to choose—provided such a one.

On 8 October 1856 Chinese police in Canton seized a suspected pirate vessel, the lorcha *Arrow*, and arrested its Chinese crew. The British consul protested, alleging that the *Arrow* was registered in Hong Kong and had been flying the Union Jack, which the local police had forcibly lowered. He demanded the release of the crew and an apology. When the Chinese authorities refused, the Governor of Hong Kong, Sir John Bowring, responded with military action, sending British warships to destroy Chinese fortifications and to bombard Canton—despite the fact that the crew had by now been released and the *Arrow's* Hong Kong registration was found to have lapsed. Later still, Bowring would discover that she had indeed engaged in piracy.²¹ Nevertheless, it was asserted that an insult had been offered to the flag. Bowring was filled with righteous indignation. Men and women would die for this.

Bowring, it should be pointed out, was not some fire-breathing reactionary but one of the most notable liberal intellectuals of the time, a man with a European reputation. He had edited the *Westminster Review*, was a close friend of Jeremy Bentham (Bentham died in his arms) and, as his literary executor, had edited his eleven-volume *Collected Works*. A former

²⁰ John Wong, *Deadly Dreams: Opium, Imperialism and the Arrow War in China*, Cambridge 1998, pp. 411–12.

²¹ Wong has shown that Chinese protestations to the effect that the ship was not flying the Union Jack when boarded are almost certainly true. *Deadly Dreams*, pp. 9–10.

radical MP, Bowring had supported the People's Charter, opposed the opium trade in the 1840s, been a supporter of the Peace Society and a champion of liberal causes throughout the Continent. He was a noted linguist and a staunch non-conformist—and author of the hymn, 'In the Cross of Christ I Glory'. He had been a strong supporter of the Anti-Corn Law League and was wholeheartedly committed to the cause of free trade. Indeed, he combined his two passions to the extent of insisting on one occasion that 'Jesus Christ is Free Trade and Free Trade is Jesus Christ'—it was, of course, under the cover of free-trade principles that the design for war was to be advanced. Although he was regarded as something of a financial expert, it was his own monetary misfortunes that had landed Bowring in government service in China. He had become personally indebted to the great opium-trading house of Jardine Matheson, a relationship cemented by his son John's partnership in the firm. Many of Bowring's former radical associates and friends regarded him as having sold himself to the opium merchants.²²

The government in London had—as Wong shows—already sanctioned Bowring's exploitation of the first pretext for military action, with a view to opening up Canton and preparing the way for the revision of the Treaty of Nanjing. It was Bowring's failure to come up with a more convincing *casus belli* that was to bring down Palmerston's government and force a general election.²³ The British approach to relations with weaker states was perhaps best captured by Palmerston's assertion, in 1850, that the time was fast coming

when we shall be obliged to strike another blow in China . . . These half-civilized Governments such as those of China, Portugal, Spanish America, all require a dressing every eight or ten years to keep them in order. Their minds are too shallow to receive an impression that will last longer than some such period . . . they must not only see the stick but actually feel it on their shoulders.²⁴

There was, however, considerable opposition to this policy, both inside and outside Parliament, which became more vociferous as the situation

²² For a sympathetic account of Sir John Bowring see George Bartle, *An Old Radical and His Brood*, London 1994.

²³ See Wong, *Deadly Dreams*, pp. 9–10. For the traditional view see Douglas Hurd, *The Arrow War: An Anglo-Chinese Confusion*, London 1967.

²⁴ John K. Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast*, Cambridge, MA 1953, p. 380.

in China deteriorated. The *Arrow* Incident was widely derided as a pretext for war and Bowring came in for considerable criticism. The government determined to back him, even though its members themselves felt he could have chosen a better occasion for confrontation.

Barbarian insolence

Faced with votes of censure in both the Lords and the Commons, the government took the unprecedented step of seeking the advice of the Attorney-General, Richard Bethell, regarding the legality of its conduct in China. George Douglas, the Earl of Argyll recalled the occasion:

There were occasional passages in his statement which seemed to me to indicate a very strong feeling against the overzealous civilian in China who had got us into a most serious difficulty. Before closing what he had to say, I recollect that he shook his head ominously, and indicated his opinion that a very serious case against us on the points of international law could be, and probably would be, made out in the House of Commons . . . We all thought it very evident that, were it not for his office, it would give him immense pleasure to take the part of leading counsel against us.

In the event, the prevailing view—startlingly modern—was that international law was not applicable when dealing with ‘barbarous states’.²⁵

While the government survived the censure motion in the Lords, Richard Cobden’s motion was carried in the Commons on 26 February, by 263 votes to 247. Palmerston responded by dissolving Parliament and fighting a fiercely jingoistic general election. His widely circulated election address began, in best tabloid fashion: ‘An insolent barbarian wielding authority in Canton has violated the British flag’.²⁶ The result, in April

²⁵ The Dowager Duchess of Argyll, *Autobiography and Memoirs of George Douglas, Eighth Earl of Argyll*, vol. 2, London 1906, pp. 68–9.

²⁶ Wong, *Deadly Dreams*, p. 231. Justin McCarthy provides an interesting account of the Commons debate in his *A History of Our Own Times*, vol. 3, London 1908, p. 17: ‘There is not the slightest reason to believe that anything but a growing conviction of the insufficiency of the defence set up for the proceedings in Canton influenced the great majority of those who spoke and voted for Mr Cobden’s motion. The truth is that there has seldom been so flagrant and so inexcusable an example of high-handed lawlessness in the dealings of a strong with a weak nation. When the debate first began it is quite possible that many public men still believed some explanation or defence was coming forward, which would enable them to do that which the House of Commons is always unwilling not to do—to sustain the action

1857, was a landslide victory which swept away many of Palmerston's parliamentary critics—among them Richard Cobden, who wrote bitterly to his friend, John Bright, a few months later: 'I consider that we as a nation are little better than brigands, murderers and poisoners in our dealings at this moment with half the population of the globe'.²⁷ It was a sentiment with which the man sent by Palmerston to give the Chinese 'a dressing' would have had considerable sympathy.

Once appointed as commissioner and Plenipotentiary to China, Elgin sailed to Singapore via Ceylon where, appropriately enough, he joined a vessel carrying 1,500 cases of opium. It was in Singapore—where he visited 'some of the horrid opium-shops, which we are supposed to do so much to encourage'²⁸—that news reached him of the Indian Mutiny. Elgin ordered that the troops en route to China be despatched to help deal with the more pressing crisis; and, finding he could do nothing more himself there without military support, took ship to India to provide what aid he could for the embattled Raj.

The liberal temper of the man is best captured by a passage he wrote in Calcutta on 21 August that year:

It is a terrible business, however, this living among inferior races. I have seldom from man or woman since I came to the East heard a sentence which was reconcilable with the hypothesis that Christianity had ever come into the world. Detestation, contempt, ferocity, vengeance, whether Chinamen or Indians be the object. There are some three or four hundred servants in this house. When one first passes by their salaaming one feels a little awkward. But the feeling soon wears off, and one moves among them with perfect indifference, treating them not as dogs, because in that case one would whistle to them and pat them, but as machines with which one can have no communion or sympathy . . . When the passions of fear and hatred are engrafted on this indifference, the result is frightful; an absolute callousness as to the sufferings of the objects of those passions, which must be witnessed to be understood and believed.²⁹

of an English official in a foreign country. As the discussion went on it became more and more evident that there was no such defence or explanation. Men found their consciences coerced into a condemnation of Sir John Bowring's conduct. It was almost ludicrous when the miserable quibblings and evasions of the British officials came to be contrasted with the cruelly clear arguments of the Chinese.'

²⁷ Edward Steele, *Palmerston and Liberalism*, Cambridge 1991, p. 121.

²⁸ LD, p. 189.

²⁹ LD, pp. 199–200.

It is striking that such an indictment of the Imperial *mentalité* should be written by the man sent to make war on China, and who would later become Viceroy of India. Elgin regarded the *Arrow* Incident as ‘a scandal . . . and is so considered, I have reason to know, by all except the few who are personally compromised’. ‘Nothing’, he wrote elsewhere, ‘could be more contemptible than the origin of our existing quarrel’.³⁰ This was not to stop him doing his duty.

‘I am China’s friend’

The forces necessary for military action against the Chinese were not assembled until December 1858. The Canton city walls, as we have seen, were bombarded on the 28th and stormed the following day. The conduct of the British and French soldiers and sailors appalled Elgin. On 16 January 1858 he wrote that he was considering abandoning the city if discipline could not be enforced. He refused, as he put it, ‘to accept the office of oppressor of the feeble’. When the expedition finally left Canton, he congratulated himself on his efforts at ‘checking . . . the disposition to maltreat this unfortunate people’. Certainly his restraint outraged many within the British community. ‘The missionaries’, observed Oliphant, ‘grumble at our not having . . . given Canton over to pillage and slaughter’.³¹

Anglo-French progress to Beijing was held up at the Dagu forts guarding the mouth of the Baihe, and blocking the riverine route to the capital. Elgin attempted to engage in negotiations but when these came to nothing an assault was ordered. Once again, Chinese resistance was ineffectual and the forts were taken with only light allied casualties (the British had five killed and seventeen wounded; the French, six and sixty-one). The expedition occupied Tianjin at the end of May and the Emperor finally came to terms. The ‘Treaty of Tientsin’ concluded there on 26 June 1858 rewarded Britain with a £1 million indemnity, the opening up of the Yangzi River and five new treaty ports. The Emperor agreed to the appointment of a British ambassador to Beijing—the post was given to Elgin’s brother, Frederick Bruce—and, at last, to the legalization of the opium trade.

³⁰ Morison, *Eighth Earl of Elgin*, p. 212.

³¹ LD, p. 220, 224–5; Margaret Oliphant, *Memoir of the Life of Laurence Oliphant*, Edinburgh 1892, p. 135.

Elgin recognized that the negotiations at Tianjin were little more than an exercise in armed extortion. He described his diplomatic methods as ‘fighting and bullying and getting the poor commissioners to concede one point after another’. When the talks stalled at the last moment he sent his brother to tell the Chinese commissioners that ‘if they delayed or retreated, I should consider negotiations at an end, go to Peking, and demand a great deal more’. Nevertheless, he went on, though ‘I have been forced to act almost brutally, I am China’s friend in all this’. At the same time, he was writing home to his wife that ‘I have seen more to disgust me with my fellow-countrymen than I saw during the whole course of my previous life, since I found them in the East among populations too timid to resist and too ignorant to complain . . . I have an instinct in me that loves righteousness and hates iniquity, and all this keeps me in a perpetual boil.’ How did Elgin reconcile such sentiments with his predatory actions? On 6 November 1858 he explained:

I am sure that in our relations with these Chinese we have acted scandalously, and would not have been a party to the measures of violence which have taken place if I had not believed that I could work some good for them . . . anyone could have obtained the Treaty of Tientsin. What made it really meritorious was that it should have been obtained at so small a cost in human suffering.

What depressed him was that the Treaty was badly received by the British community in China, not because of its terms but precisely because it had been achieved ‘at so small a cost’, when what they had wanted was ‘misery and desolation’ imposed throughout the land.³²

Capitalizing on his success at Tianjin, Elgin next took ship to Japan. Although he sailed in a steam frigate, HMS Retribution, accompanied only by a gun boat, the Shogunate had been suitably impressed by the fate of the Manchus and, on 26 August 1858, Elgin signed the Treaty of Yedo, opening up a number of Japanese ports to trade. The treaty made no attempt to impose opium on Japan.³³

³² LD, pp. 252–3, 280.

³³ For Anglo-Japanese relations see in particular Grace Fox, *Britain and Japan 1858–1883*, London 1969; for Japanese determination to keep out the opium trade, see John M. Jennings, *The Opium Empire: Japanese Imperialism and Drug Trafficking in Asia*, Westport, CT 1997. As Jennings shows, once Japan had transformed itself into a modern imperialist state it too became involved in the narcotics trade.

Japan made a powerful impression on Elgin, who found there 'a kind of feudal system in vigour . . . A perfectly paternal government, a perfectly filial people; a community entirely self-supporting; peace within and without; no want; no ill-will between classes'. He feared what might become of this feudal utopia, once it was in enforced contact with the West: 'Twenty years hence, what will be the contrast?' Oliphant, if anything, was even more taken. The comparison with China 'was striking' and he retained 'not a single disagreeable association to cloud our reminiscences of that delightful country'. The education system was particularly impressive: 'a more widely diffused system of national education exists in Japan than in our own country; and . . . in that respect, at all events, if in no other, they are decidedly in advance of us'.³⁴

Returning to China, Elgin determined to carry out an armed expedition (five warships) up the Yangzi River, with a view to establishing British right of passage. While this had been agreed by the Manchu authorities, much of the river was in the hands of the Taiping rebels and Elgin was concerned to give them a demonstration of British power.³⁵ Restraint might have been in order when dealing with the Manchus, but there was no such inhibition when it came to 'those strange beings, the Chinese Rebels'.³⁶ Oliphant's account of the expedition would have provided excellent material for Joseph Conrad. On 20 November 1858 they were fired on by Taiping batteries, which had mistaken them for Manchus. Elgin decided to make an example of these rebel positions and resolved to revisit them the following day. His five warships poured, according to Oliphant, 'a storm of shot, shell and rockets into the batteries'. It lasted an hour and a half, during which time only one British vessel was hit by return fire, without suffering any casualties. From the topgallant crossrees, Elgin observed the defenders 'bolting like rabbits from some spot where a moorsum shell had just burst, scattering fragments and spreading dismay'.

The insurgents were not sufficiently chastized, however, and fired back on the British later the same day. Their battery was finally blown up

³⁴ LD, p. 271; Oliphant, *Narrative*, pp. 51, 179.

³⁵ The Taiping Revolution, still hardly known in the West, was the greatest revolutionary outbreak of the nineteenth century. For the history of the movement and documents see in particular Franz Michael's three volumes, *The Taiping Revolution*, Seattle 1972. Britain's relationship with and part in the suppression of the movement still requires considerable research, but see John Gregory, *Great Britain and the Taipings*, London 1969.

³⁶ LD, p. 282.

when a shell hit its magazine, 'to everyone's delight'. By this time a large crowd had gathered outside the walls of a nearby town to watch the proceedings. 'We sent them a ten-inch shell, just to give them some idea of our armament'.³⁷ Suitably impressed, the Taipings provided the necessary guarantees; indeed, they hoped to be able to ally with the British against the Manchus. But though they had once been sympathetically regarded in London, following the Treaty of Tientsin the rebels were increasingly seen as a problem that would, eventually, need to be dealt with.

Revenge for Dagu

Elgin returned to Britain in May 1859, his reputation considerably enhanced. He accepted the position of Postmaster-General, a Cabinet post, in Palmerston's government, was installed as Rector to Glasgow University and given the Freedom of the City of London. Back in China, however, his achievements were already beginning to unravel. This has often been blamed on the duplicity of the Manchus who, having had a treaty imposed on them by brute force, tried to avoid implementing it; while this would have been understandable, it was far from true. Frederick Bruce, the new ambassador to Beijing, insisted on travelling to the capital in triumph, up the Baihe, accompanied by a large military force. The Chinese proposed a more modest entourage and another route—scarcely an attempt to renege on the Treaty. The American ambassador John Ward, with an escort of twenty, made the journey with due concern for Manchu sensitivities and was received with 'high consideration and respect, with unceasing attention and courtesy'.³⁸ Bruce, however, not only refused to compromise but decided to teach the Chinese a further lesson. On 25 June 1859, he ordered Admiral Sir James Hope to clear the Baihe route.

In the ensuing engagement with the by-now restored Dagu forts, the over-confident British were routed: five British ships were sunk or disabled and when troops succeeded in landing for a frontal assault they were driven off with heavy losses. The 'Dagu Repulse', one of the most serious defeats in British imperial history, cost the lives of 519 British soldiers and sailors, with another 456 wounded. The shock

³⁷ Oliphant, *Narrative*, p. 317–18.

³⁸ Immanuel Hsu, *The Rise of Modern China*, Oxford 1983, p. 214.

was such that some of the British combatants refused to believe it had been inflicted by the Chinese. The young Jack Fisher (a future First Lord of the Admiralty) wrote home: 'I believe they must have been Russians; no Chinaman ever fought like those fellows did'.³⁹ Encouraged by this dramatic reversal of fortunes, the Emperor repudiated the Treaty. Elgin would have to return to rescue the situation and restore British prestige.

Elgin set out for China again on 26 April 1860, with instructions to occupy Beijing if necessary. En route, he found time to read *On the Origin of Species* and William Howard Russell's newly published account of the suppression of the Indian Mutiny, *My Diary in India*. Elgin was most impressed:

It has made me very sad; but it only confirms what I believed before respecting the scandalous treatment which the natives receive at our hands in India. I am glad that he has had the courage to speak out as he does on this point. Can I do anything to prevent England from calling down on herself God's curse for brutalities committed on another feeble Oriental race? Or are all my exertions to result only in the extension of the area over which Englishmen are to exhibit how hollow and superficial are both their civilisation and their Christianity?⁴⁰

Commanded by Elgin's brother-in-law, General Sir Hope Grant, the expedition that now assembled for the assault on the Dagu forts was considerably stronger—13,000 British and 7,000 French troops—than that of 1858. Grant took no chances. His assault on the northernmost fort, on 21 August, was preceded by a merciless artillery bombardment. The stronghold was rocked when a shell hit its magazine but the garrison fought on. It was finally carried by storm. British and French casualties were 360 men killed and wounded; the Chinese lost at least 2,000. The Reverend R. J. L. M'Ghee, chaplain to the expedition, wrote of the horrors to be seen inside the fort where the Armstrong artillery had performed to deadly effect: 'it was indeed an awful sight; limbs blown away, bodies literally burst asunder, one black and livid mess of blood and wounds'. He could only be thankful that 'since there were such weapons in existence, they were in our hands—ours, who would

³⁹ Gerald Graham, *The China Station: War and Diplomacy 1830–60*, Cambridge, MA 1974, p. 377.

⁴⁰ LD, p. 325.

use them more to preserve the peace of the world than ever to make an aggressive or unjust war'.⁴¹

Grant's use of artillery to ensure against defeat turned the campaign into a series of technological massacres, interspersed by periods of looting; but there was a general recognition that the Chinese troops displayed considerable courage in often hopeless situations. So impressed was one participant with the performance of the Dagu fort's defenders ('No men could have behaved better than they did') that he recommended recruiting Chinese troops to help garrison India, praising them as docile and amenable to discipline as well as intelligent and brave. At the very least, he recommended establishing 'an experimental Anglo-Chinese corps'.⁴²

British honour had been tarnished by the Dagu Repulse. It was now publicly restored. To this end, the storming of the fort was accompanied by the award of no less than six Victoria Crosses. British military prowess had to be emphatically re-asserted. A characteristic detail was the publicity given to an incident that occurred a few days before the storming of the fort. On 12 August, two British soldiers, a sergeant with the 44th and a private with the Buffs, had been seized by Manchu cavalry. When the sergeant was eventually released, he reported that Private Moyes had been killed by his captors for refusing to kow-tow. The unfortunate Moyes was proclaimed a hero and a martyr, although there was considerable scepticism about the veracity of the incident. According to one account, the two men had been rounded up while drunk, and the sergeant 'either from the effects of bad treatment or through a desire to screen his delinquencies, could not or would not give any connected account of his capture'.⁴³

⁴¹ Rev R.J.L. M'Ghee, *How We Got To Peking*, London 1862, pp. 114–15. The scene in the North Fort was photographed by Felice Beato, a commercial photographer, whose photographic record of the expedition has 'a consistent ideological point of view, one that celebrated the British as a colonial power': David Harris, *Of Battle and Beauty: Felice Beato's Photographs of China*, Santa Barbara 1999, p. 27. See also Isobel Crombie, 'China, 1860: A Photographic Album by Felice Beato', *History of Photography*, vol. 11, no. 1, January–March 1987.

⁴² David Rennie, *The British Arms in North China and Japan*, London 1864, pp. 122–4.

⁴³ Lt. Colonel Garnet J. Wolseley, *Narrative of the War with China in 1860*, London, 1862, p. 112.

Nevertheless, a hero was required and Moyes eventually found himself immortalized in patriotic verse by, among others, Sir Francis Doyle:

Today, beneath the foeman's frown,
He stands in Elgin's place,
Ambassador from Britain's crown
And type of all her race.⁴⁴

Elgin was now charged with the task of imposing British terms on the Manchus in a decisive fashion, while simultaneously ensuring that the dynasty remained strong enough to fight the Taipings. This led to a situation in which British and French troops were defending Shanghai on behalf of the Qing Emperor against a Taiping army led by Li Xiucheng at the same time as the Anglo-French expedition were attacking the Dagu fort.⁴⁵ This balancing act involved Elgin in repeated attempts to negotiate rather than advance on Beijing—attempts that failed because of the strength of the war faction at the Qing court. In the event, after Chinese troops captured a group that included Harry Parkes and Elgin's secretary, Henry Brougham Loch, while negotiations were still ostensibly underway, Elgin determined that there was no alternative to an assault on the capital itself.

At the Summer Palace

The Anglo-French advance was accompanied by the killing of prisoners, reprisals against the civilian population and widespread looting. Indeed, the deterioration of discipline was such that Elgin and Grant had their own personal wine stock (a mere fifteen hundred bottles) stolen by soldiers of the 60th Regiment. At last, on 5 October 1860, the allies arrived before the walls of Beijing. What followed was, in the words of one British officer, 'a memorable day in the history of plunder and

⁴⁴ Chris Brooks and Peter Faulkner, *The White Man's Burdens: An Anthology of British Poetry of the Empire*, Exeter 1996, pp. 204–5. Interestingly, though, the exploits of Elgin's expeditionary force did not automatically succeed in dominating the British press and capturing the public imagination; throughout this period, the *Illustrated London News* gave considerably more coverage to Garibaldi's exploits in Sicily, and to the part played by the British volunteers serving under him, than it did to the China War. Imperialism did not yet exercise the cultural hegemony it was to achieve in the 1880s.

⁴⁵ For an indictment of the British role in defending Shanghai see Augustus Lindley, *Ti-ping Tien Kwoh: The History of the Ti-Ping Revolution*, London 1866, p. 277–79.

destruction'. With the French leading the way, officers and men fell on the Emperor's Summer Palace—an extensive ornamental park with a Palace and some forty pavilions, outside the city.⁴⁶

Dunne of the 99th Regiment did his best to explain the pillage to his readers back home. 'People', he observed, 'don't plunder palaces every day'. He tried to picture the scene in a way his audience would understand: 'Imagine Christie's, Hunt and Roskell's, Howell and James's, half-a-dozen watch and clockmakers, two or three upholsterers and that fine fan-shop in Regent Street, all being under the same roof, and then imagine if you can what would be your sensations when told that . . . you might have your run of the place for just ten minutes'.⁴⁷ Elgin went to see for himself:

I have just returned from the Summer Palace. It is really a fine thing, like an English park—numberless buildings with handsome rooms, and filled with Chinese curios, and handsome clocks, bronzes, etc. But, alas! Such a scene of desolation . . . There was not a room I saw in which half the things had not been taken away or broken in pieces . . . Plundering and devastating a place like this is bad enough, but what is much worse is the waste and breakage. Out of £1,000,000 worth of property, I dare say £50,000 will not be realized. French soldiers were destroying in every way the most beautiful silks, breaking the jade ornaments and porcelain etc. War is a hateful business. The more one sees of it, the more one detests it.⁴⁸

Once again, though, his capacity for liberal regret was to be belied by his actions. On 18 October, in reprisal for the death of allied prisoners in Chinese hands—thirteen of the twenty-six British prisoners, and eight of the thirteen French, had died from ill-treatment, amounting to torture—Elgin ordered the destruction of the Summer Palace. Among those sent to carry out the work was Charles Gordon, later 'martyred' at Khartoum:

We accordingly went out, and after pillaging it, burned the whole place, destroying in a Vandal-like manner most valuable property which would not be replaced for four millions . . . You can scarcely imagine the beauty and magnificence of the places we burnt. It made one's heart sore to burn them; in fact, these palaces were so large, and we were so pressed for time,

⁴⁶ Rennie, *British Arms in North China and Japan*, p. 208; John Dunne, *From Calcutta to Peking*, London 1861, p. 128; for the Summer Palace see Carroll Brown Malone, *History of the Peking Summer Palaces Under the Ch'ing Dynasty*, Urbana 1934.

⁴⁷ Dunne, *From Calcutta to Peking*, p. 131.

⁴⁸ LD, p. 361–2.

that we could not plunder them carefully. Quantities of gold ornaments were burnt, considered as brass. It was wretchedly demoralizing work . . . Everybody was wild for plunder.⁴⁹

Gordon himself took possession of a throne which he donated to his regiment. It took two days to complete the destruction; ‘unhappily many of the peasants’ houses adjoining the contagious fire had caught and were fast being reduced to ashes’.⁵⁰

The French considered Elgin’s decision ‘a Gothlike act of barbarism’, but it broke the back of Chinese resistance. On 24 October Elgin entered Beijing in triumph, carried ‘in a sedan chair of large proportions, painted red, and hung about with long streaming tassels of many colours’. He was accompanied by a hundred cavalry and 400 infantry. As Colonel Wolseley observed:

A military procession is always an imposing sight [but] marching into a great city which had just capitulated to us, for the purpose of obtaining a public admission of our national superiority and a concession of all those demands which we had made . . . was a circumstance truly gratifying to all who took part in it, and a very just source of pride to every British subject.⁵¹

The Manchus were forced to ratify the terms of the Treaty of Tientsin together with an additional Convention of Peking, which increased the size of the indemnity, opened up Tianjin as a treaty port and ceded the Kowloon peninsula to Britain. And, while Elgin could not claim a trophy

⁴⁹ Demetrius Boulger, *The Life of Gordon*, London 1896, p. 45–6.

⁵⁰ Robert Swinhoe, *Narrative of the North China Campaign of 1860*, London 1861, p. 336.

⁵¹ Wolseley, *Narrative of the War with China*, p. 262. Wolseley was to go on to become the British Army’s Commander-in-Chief in 1895. He returned to the 1860 China campaign in his memoirs and, looking to the future, wrote: ‘There is no nation, numerically as great as China, whose customs and modes of life are so generally common to all parts of their vast empire. To me they are the most remarkable race on earth and I have always thought and still believe them to be the great coming rulers of the world. They only want a Chinese Peter the Great or Napoleon to make them so. They have every quality required for the good soldier and the good sailor, and in my idle speculation upon this world’s future I have long selected them as the combatants on one side at the great battle of Armageddon, the people of the United States of America being their opponents’: *The Story of a Soldier’s Life*, London 1903, p. 2.

as valuable as the Parthenon Marbles, 'the Summer Palace's robes and thrones were brought back to England where they grace that monument to English imperialism, the Victoria and Albert Museum'.⁵²

Elgin's triumph in China ensured his appointment as Viceroy of India in March 1862. He had, according to Lord Granville, 'become inevitable'. He saw himself as continuing Lord Canning's policies in the Subcontinent, 'filling up here a little hole, moving there a little bit of dust—all of it very humble and some rather nasty'.⁵³ Even in the short time he was Viceroy, Elgin had his own ('rather nasty') frontier war: the Ambela campaign, which cost the lives of over two hundred British troops. The liberal sensibility was still intact, though, as was shown by his refusal to reprieve a British soldier sentenced to death for murdering an Indian. The crime, Elgin declared, had been carried out 'under an impulse which would have been resisted if the life of the native had been estimated at the value of that of a dog'.⁵⁴ The decision outraged Anglo-Indian opinion. On 22 October 1863, however, barely a year after his arrival in India, Elgin suffered a serious heart attack; he died on 20 November. He was only fifty-two; there had been every reason to expect that a successful term in India would lead to the highest political offices in Britain: Foreign Secretary and perhaps even Prime Minister. His inevitability was cut short.

How did Elgin sustain the lifelong contradiction—in many ways so emblematic of liberal England—that left him lamenting in private actions which he relentlessly pursued in public, while simultaneously bemoaning the character of those who would benefit from his deeds? Partly it was self-interest. His impoverished (comparatively) aristocratic background made a successful diplomatic-political career an absolute necessity. He was also convinced that, however brutal the policies he implemented, he could, at least to some extent, moderate their effects. The road to Beijing was paved with such intentions. On occasions, he was certainly capable of unthinking brutality, whether in ordering the slaughter of the Taipings or the destruction of the Summer Palace. Moreover, Elgin's aspirations have to be set against the enduring realities of imperial war. His secretary on the second Chinese expedition,

⁵² Frederic Wakeman Jnr, *The Fall of Imperial China*, New York 1975, p. 162.

⁵³ Sarvepalli Gopal, *British Policy in India 1858–1905*, London 1965, p. 59.

⁵⁴ Mark Bence-Jones, *The Viceroys of India*, New Delhi 1982, p. 44.

Henry Brougham Loch, described the effects of the military occupation of the town of Pehtang in July 1860, which

necessitated the ejection of many of the inhabitants from their houses; this was done as kindly as possible . . . whole streets had to be pulled down; the people had nowhere to go, no money and no food; old women who for years had never been outside their door suddenly found themselves without a roof to cover them and wandered tottering along in helpless misery.

The town, Loch observed, had had 20,000 inhabitants: 'what became of a large majority of that population we could never ascertain'.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Henry Brougham Loch, *Personal Narrative of Occurrences during Lord Elgin's Second Embassy to China in 1860*, London 1900, p. 29.