

Wilfred Scawen Blunt: Britain's Imperial Destiny, 1896-1899

(Here, Blunt looks at the negative consequences of European colonial rule for the colonized peoples, but also for the Europeans themselves, and predicts a world war.)

9th Jan. 1896. The German Emperor has telegraphed his congratulations to Kruger [the Boer leader], and this seems to have produced great anger in England. We have now managed in the last six months to quarrel violently with China, Turkey, Belgium, Ashanti, France, Venezuela, America, and Germany. This is a record performance, and if it does not break up the British Empire nothing will. For myself I am glad of it all, for the British Empire is the greatest engine of evil for the weak races now existing in the world---not that we are worse than the French or Italians or Americans--indeed, we are less actively destructive---but we do it over a far wider area and more successfully. I should be delighted to see England stripped of her whole foreign possessions. We are better off and more respected in Queen Elizabeth's time, the "spacious days," when we had not a stick of territory outside the British Islands, than now, and infinitely more respectable. The gangrene of colonial rowdyism is infecting us, and the habit of repressing liberty in weak nations is endangering our own. I should be glad to see the end....

15th Oct. 1898. All this week has been one of excitement over the quarrel with France about Fashoda. A Blue Book has been published giving the English case, and, imperial plunder being in question, all parties, Tories, Whig, Radical, Churchmen, and Nonconformist have joined in publicly extolling English virtue and denouncing the French. For myself I see nothing in it more respectable than the wrangle of two highwaymen over a captured purse; morally both sides are on a level.

17th Oct. 1898. Arrived at Saughton. I have had it out with George [Wyndham, parliamentary under-secretary in the War Office] about Fashoda. He states the English case with brutal frankness. "The day of talking," he says, "about legality in Africa is over, all the international law there is there consists of interest and understandings. It is generally agreed by all the powers that the end of African operations is to 'civilize' it in the interests of Europe, and that to gain that end all means are good. The only difference between England and France is which of them is to do it in which particular districts. England intends to do it on the Nile, and it makes no difference what the precise legal position is. We may put forward the Khedive's rights if it is convenient or we may put forward a right of conquest, or a right of simply declaring our intentions. One is as good as another to get our end, which is the railway from Cairo to the Cape. We don't care whether the Nile is called English or Egyptian or what it is called, but we mean to have it and we don't mean the French to have it. The Khedive may be kept on for some years as a sort of Indian maharajah, but it will end in a partition of the Ottoman Empire between England, Germany, and Russia. France will be allowed Northwestern Africa. It is not worth while drawing distinctions of right and wrong in the matter, it is a matter entirely of interest."

15th June, 1899. The plot for annexing the Transvaal has taken a new development.

Chamberlain [the colonial secretary], to force the hand of the government, has published a despatch of Milner's [governor of Cape Colony] written on the 4th of May of the most aggressive kind, and the newspapers are full of flame and fury, the Daily News leading the chorus. They talk about Milner's "cool and impartial judgment" just as if Milner had not been specially selected by Chamberlain to put the job through. Milner was sent to Egypt ten years ago to convert English liberal opinion to the plan of remaining on there instead of withdrawing the garrison, and having succeeded in that mission he has been sent to the Cape to convert English liberal opinion to the idea of re-annexing the Transvaal. Milner, though an excellent fellow personally, is quite an extremist as an imperial agent, and his journalistic experience on the *Pall Mall Gazette* has given him the length of John Bull's foot very accurately, so that he is invaluable to the empire builders. Now there will certainly be war in South Africa. They have tried every kind of fraud to get their way, but old Kruger has been too astute for them, so they will try force. They seem to have squared the German Emperor, France is in chaos, they think their opportunity come. Chamberlain will not rest until he has Kruger's head on a charger.

The Boers, however, will fight, and there is some chance of a general war between the Dutch and the English in South Africa, which may alleviate the condition of the only people there whose interests I really care for in the quarrel, namely the blacks. It will also be a beautiful exposure of our English sham philanthropy, if at the very moment the Peace Congress is sitting at The Hague, we flout its mediation and launch into an aggressive war. Anything is better than the general handshaking of the great white thieves and their amicable division of the spoils....

22nd Dec., 1900. The old century is very nearly out, and leaves the world in a pretty pass, and the British Empire is playing the devil in it as never an empire before on so large a scale. We may live to see its fall. All the nations of Europe are making the same hell upon earth in China, massacring and pillaging and raping in the captured cities as outrageously as in the Middle Ages. The Emperor of Germany gives the word for slaughter and the Pope looks on and approves. In South Africa our troops are burning farms under Kitchener's command, and the Queen and the two houses of Parliament, and the bench of bishops thank God publicly and vote money for the work. The Americans are spending fifty millions a year on slaughtering the Filipinos; the King of the Belgians has invested his whole fortune on the Congo, where he is brutalizing the Negroes to fill his pockets. The French and Italians for the moment are playing a less prominent part in the slaughter, but their inactivity grieves them. The whole white race is reveling openly in violence, as though it had never pretended to be Christian. God's equal curse be on them all! So ends the famous nineteenth century into which we were so proud to have been born....

31st Dec., 1900. I bid good-bye to the old century, may it rest in peace as it has lived in war. Of the new century I prophesy nothing except that it will see the decline of the British Empire. Other worse empires will rise perhaps in its place, but I shall not live to see the day. It all seems a very little matter here in Egypt, with the pyramids watching us as they watched Joseph, when, as a young man four thousand years ago, perhaps in this very garden, he walked and gazed at the sunset behind them, wondering about the future

just as I did this evening. And so, poor wicked nineteenth century, farewell!