

## ***“Encountering the Great Indian Mystery”***

by J. Enoch Powell †

Introduced and annotated  
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*Although in 1965 Enoch Powell garnered only 15 votes among his colleagues in the Conservative Party leadership election (as against 150 for Edward Heath and 133 for Reginald Maudling), many would claim that during that period his strength as a highly intelligent and articulate politician had put him in as good a position as any other to become leader—a position he was, however, never to hold. Those same observers would probably say that it was only his singular and staunch unwillingness to disguise his convictions, and his distaste for trading them in the political market place, that prevented him from progressing beyond the post of Minister of Health, which he held from 1960 to 1963—part of the time in Harold Macmillan’s cabinet.<sup>1</sup> His calling as a member of the Conservative Party can be said to have been a duty to uphold the integrity of the nation—a role traditionally seen by many as at the heart of Tory politics over and above pragmatic economic concerns. The following extract from a speech given to the Belfast East Unionist Association, indicates his position, as well as the one he held the Tory party to respect:*

The conflict of Northern Ireland is not about law and order; it is not about civil rights; it is not about peace and security; it is not about participation, community relations and all the rest of the newfangled claptrap expressions; it is not even about religion. It is about nationality; and unless it is understood to be about nationality, all discussion and contrivance and policy remain in the limbo of unreality and insincerity.<sup>2</sup>

Powell's forthrightness on many subjects, reinforced by what he would probably call his deeply-reasoned intransigence, especially in expounding his fears over immigration policy (the "rivers of blood" speech of 1968) and the possibility of Britain's losing her nationhood to Europe, was never fudged. It was therefore often too unpalatable to those with whom he rubbed shoulders, whether within his own party or on the opposite benches of the House of Commons.<sup>3</sup> His career as a Member of Parliament stretched from 1950 to 1987. He began it as the Conservative candidate for Wolverhampton South-West, but his differences with the party over European policy under Edward Heath obliged him in 1974 on his own account to sever his links with it. In that year he was adopted by the Ulster Unionists, for whom he represented the Down South constituency<sup>4</sup> until his eventual defeat in 1987.

Powell's political life, however, is only part of the story, even though it has become an historical monument, half-admired and half-reviled by the British public, as is the nature of politics. It masks a multifaceted individual who made his mark in many fields. By the time he eventually gained his place in Parliament, he had already accomplished, and curtailed a successful military career (in order to enter politics). He served during the Second World War, rising to become the British army's youngest brigadier in 1944, and then in the Indian Army, prior to Indian Independence in 1947. Even before this phase of his life, after studying at Cambridge University, he had set a new record by becoming the youngest professor in the Commonwealth, teaching classics at Sydney University, Australia. He published several studies of Greek Classics, including a lexicon to Herodotus. The latter,<sup>5</sup> completed at a time when such endeavours were not computer-aided, represented a work of superhuman application for which the index carding, he recalls, fitted several "coffin-sized boxes" placed side by side across his living room.<sup>6</sup>

Powell was also a poet:

Through all the burning summertime  
And through the day's decrease  
And through the months of mist and rime  
I saw and held my peace

But when the spring to hill and coomb  
Returned in warmth and rain,  
The torture of the trees in bloom  
Stung me to speech again.<sup>7</sup>

He was a student at Cambridge when he began this particular career, writing under the influence of the strict, well-organised verse of the great A. E. Housman,<sup>8</sup> as these few lines display. As part of his general scholarly

activities, Powell is also a great linguist, speaking several languages both ancient and modern, including Urdu. More recently, in the last decade, he has undertaken to learn Hebrew in order to pursue his interest in Biblical translation.

*The article here was written by Powell in 1993 and has remained unpublished up to now. It may be placed in a multifaceted context corresponding to that of its author. Powell, as a citizen of the nation he holds dear, is here observing an evolving political world. Despite the wistfulness, and even romanticism, which comes through, there is also a realisation of the inevitability of history, echoing sentiments expressed elsewhere:*

I admit I saw the nation in the framework of the British Empire. I had the misfortune to be born in an age when what we now see largely to have been the myth of the British Empire was at its height and I shall go to the grave with the idea at the back of my mind somehow that all over the oceans of the world there are those grey battleships which are invincible and the wireless message sent out from the admiralty with *(sic)* switch them to wherever they are needed.<sup>9</sup>

*From a more precise historical point of view, it should be noted that Powell served in India during the build-up to Independence as Secretary to the committee charged with reorganisation of the Indian Army in view of the great historical changes then in the making. Powell was only thirty-two and, as Cosgrave points out,<sup>10</sup> the post gave him on the one hand access to all the administrative detail of the relationship between Britain and India, and on the other, the opportunity to explore the length and breadth of the country which, as the article here shows, was to gain a place in his heart. In this respect, this article has its place in the current debate and discussion engendered by this year's being the 50th anniversary of Indian Independence. It evokes a British point of view of the closeness between the two countries which, in the present intellectual and political climate, may be held to be "politically incorrect" and is in consequence unlikely to get the hearing it deserves.*

† [Enoch Powell died on Sunday February 8, 1998 at the age of 85.]

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I stirred in my valise, on the platform at Central Station, Delhi. It was August 1943.<sup>11</sup> I looked around me. I also inhaled. Partly, it was the smoke from the *biri* which somebody not far away was puffing between his fingers and cupped hands. Mainly, however, it was the aroma of India, an aroma I was never to forget. The sensation was not unlike that of falling in love: I

must learn, learn, learn—everything there was to learn about this new sub-continent, into the possession of which I had entered unawares.

That possession, had I but known it, was an inheritance. My emotions were those that had been experienced before me over three centuries and more by successive generations of Englishmen. I had encountered the Great Indian Mystery. The mystery is the attraction which exists between the inhabitants of a small group of islands in the East Atlantic and those of the land which juts out—“a dark and thunderous ocean”, Lord Curzon<sup>12</sup> once called it—into the seas between Africa and South East Asia. The English never felt the same about any other country into which their naval and imperial adventures took them—never about Egypt, never about the Middle East, never about the East Indies.

From the start, the relationship was laden with paradox. How could it come about, let alone be explained, that a nation which at home was engaged in securing parliamentary control over its own government could undertake to govern so huge a territory and population at so great a distance, and a population moreover which never foreseeably and conceivably could be represented in Parliament?<sup>13</sup> England was to fight in the 18th century its only successful war<sup>14</sup> to prove that the inhabitants of the New World could not and would not be governed from London and Westminster. Yet here was the same England drawn deeper and deeper into the government of Hindustan<sup>15</sup>, an entanglement of which the wisest heads could not imagine the end or outcome.

The paradox was barbed and sharpened by the insatiable fascination which India cast like a spell over the English who came within its aura. Never did a European power in Asia or Africa offer to its servants such glittering prizes and prospects for acquiring knowledge of a distant possession. Unlike the French in Indochina, the English came without a *mission civilisatrice*; they came to become part of India. The Indian Army was what its name declared, not an extension or a detachment of the British Army, but an army Indian in composition, in language and in loyalty. To penetrate below the surface of that immense continent, to learn, to survey, to study, to administer, was the ambition which took hold unsought of the successive generations of English who passed their working lives in India. Burke<sup>16</sup> may have been right when he declared that the rarest sight in India was “the grey head of an Englishman”; but the “grey heads” were the grey heads of those who had dreamt the Indian dream.

It was a dream that the English were not alone in dreaming. The inhabitants of India dreamt it too, and found it no easier—right down to 1947—to imagine what Pierre Loti called “les Indes sans les Anglais”. The English had brought their paradox with them, and brought it in their own language. The self-perception of the inhabitants of India was irrevocably a self-perception in conceptual and linguistic terms derived from England—

or if from Europe, from a Europe transmitted and refracted through England.

There was something not just unnatural but magical about the mutual attraction of both these remote and improbable poles; and there is a curious feature about this. The improbabilities were more evident to those around the turn of the 19th century who took over control of Northern India from the Moguls.<sup>17</sup> As time went on, and particularly after the suppression of the mutiny of the Bengal Army in 1857,<sup>18</sup> the context began to change and the Indian Empire to be seen as what made Britain one of the world empires. This change, I believe, was the reflection in England of the discovery, in the second half of the 19th century, that Britain, thitherto alone and undisturbed in its oceanic immunity, was now flanked and overlooked by the great military empires of the Continent, empires which also aspired to carve out for themselves, in Asia and in Africa, a chunk of the globe. It would in retrospect have been unnatural for England to remain unaffected by this new environment in its perception of India and of the Indo-British connection.

“Connection” is the key word. There was an umbilical cord which linked London with Calcutta and later with Delhi.<sup>19</sup> So conscious and so manifest for so long was that link that still today, forty-seven years or two generations after the severance of 1947, British foreign policy remains rooted by it in the Middle East.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the English, in the years when it mattered, never realised that the Indian Empire was not forever.

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### **Bibliography**

The two most recent biographical studies giving a full portrait of Enoch Powell are:

- Cosgrave, Patrick, *The Lives of Enoch Powell* (London: The Bodley Head, 1989).
- Shepherd, Robert, *Enoch Powell, A Biography* (London: Hutchinson, 1996).

Enoch Powell’s most important and memorable utterances, in article and speech form, are gathered together in:

*Reflections of a Statesman—The Writings and Speeches of Enoch Powell*, selected by Rex Collings (London: Bellew, 1991).

## Notes

1. Macmillan was prime minister from 1957 to 1963. Powell served in his cabinet from July 1962 to October 1963.
2. June 2, 1972, quoted in Cosgrave, Patrick, *The Lives of Enoch Powell* (London: The Bodley Head, 1989) 349. Powell was still a member of the Conservative Party when he gave this speech.
3. See for example, his advice to the electorate to vote Labour in the 1974 general election, in protest against the Conservative Party's policy of integration into the European Economic Community.
4. The Down South constituency became South Down in 1983, with Powell continuing as its MP.
5. Published in 1938, available at Nantes University Library.
6. Conversation with the author, June 1993.
7. *Collected Poems* (London: Bellew Publishing, 1990). This poem was first published in *First Poems*, 1937.
8. Housman (1859-1936) was Professor of Latin at Cambridge University from 1911 to 1936; Powell was an undergraduate at Trinity College, Cambridge from 1930 to 1933, and a fellow from 1934 to 1938.
9. "Towards 2000", Radio Clyde, 1977, reproduced in *Reflections of a Statesman—The Writings and Speeches of Enoch Powell*, selected by Rex Collings (London: Bellew, 1991).
10. Cosgrave, Patrick, *The Lives of Enoch Powell*, *op. cit.* 90.
11. Powell had thus far been serving in North Africa, from where he was posted to India. In this year he was awarded an MBE.
12. Lord Curzon (1859-1925), Viceroy of India from 1899 to 1905.
13. The Civil War in England between Royalists and Parliamentarians took place between 1642 and 1652, while in India, colonisation had started in 1612 in Surat, continuing with trading posts being set up at Madras in 1639, and on the River Hooghly (becoming later Calcutta) in 1640; the British Crown took over Bombay in 1662.
14. The War of American Independence (1775-83).
15. Hindustan, literally "the land of the Hindus," in particular the plateau north of the Deccan, the name formerly used by Europeans to designate the Indian subcontinent irrespective of the religious connotation.
16. Edmund Burke (1729-97), the British Whig politician and political theorist, took great interest in Indian affairs, and especially in the corruption he believed to be practised by British politicians in the government of India. His most spectacular protests resulted in the impeachment of Warren Hastings, the governor-general of India, in 1775.
17. The last Mogul emperor, Muhammad Bahadur Shah, was dethroned and imprisoned by the British in 1857.

18. Although the mutiny was put down, it is important to note here that it resulted, the following year, in the British Crown's taking over the government of British India, which had hitherto been administered by the East India Company.
19. Calcutta was the seat of government of British India from 1773 to 1912, whereupon it was replaced by Delhi.
20. The Suez Canal was opened in 1869, providing the shortest sea route from Europe to the Orient. The subsequent squabbles between middle-eastern countries emphasised its value as an artery, and consequently enabled Egypt to become more influential, especially through the personality of Nasser, in the Arab world. The foreign policy of all interested nations has since been guided by consequent vicissitudes.