

THE DESTINY OF AFRICA

AN ADDRESS

by

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to the Annual Meeting of the

ANTI-SLAVERY AND ABORIGINES PROTECTION SOCIETY

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The Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society
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THE ANTI-SLAVERY AND ABORIGINES PROTECTION SOCIETY
EXISTS TO FURTHER THE FOLLOWING OBJECTS

The total abolition of Slavery in all its forms.

The abolition of native labour systems analogous to slavery.

The removal of all racial discrimination on the grounds of colour.

The maintenance of justice for Aboriginal and Native races.

The promotion of the interests and well-being of those peoples who have not yet attained a full measure of self government.

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SIR REGINALD COUPLAND

I THINK for a Society like ours—I say ours because for twenty-five years and more I have been a member of the Society—this is a curiously interesting moment to hold our Annual Meeting.

One hundred and fourteen years ago Macaulay said in the House of Commons that he hoped one day India would be qualified to claim self-government. 'Whether that day will ever come,' he said, 'I know not, but if and when it does come, it will be the proudest day in English history.' That day has come—or within a few hours it will have come—because to-morrow the King will sign the Independence of India Bill. Now for a Society like ours, which is interested, not so much in international affairs in the narrow sense as in what might be called the inter-racial or inter-continental sense, this great historic event, the emancipation of India, is of special significance. It marks one of the great political changes associated with that critical period in the history of mankind which we have the good or ill fortune to be living through, a period as decisive for the future of the world as the age of the Renaissance or the French Revolution. One of the two or three dominant trends out of which the pattern of modern history has been woven has been the expansion of the dynamic Western European peoples over the rest of the world—over Asia, over Africa, over the Atlantic, over the Pacific—establishing in course of time their mastery direct or indirect, economic or political, over most of the globe. That has been one of the major themes of modern history, and it happens that in our own lifetime that process of European expansion has reached its climax and the counter-process has begun. I suppose, although we did not know it at the time, that the Russo-Japanese war of 1905 marked the turn of the tide. Since then, hurried on by two great wars—naturally hurried on because those two great wars were wars between tyranny and freedom and freedom won them—the ebb has gathered speed and volume.

To-day the Western peoples are in full retreat and it is, for the most part, a deliberate retreat. Realists accept it as a necessary concession to the facts of the post-war world. Idealists hail it as the fulfilment of the liberal ideals cherished by Macaulay one hundred years ago. Nor is it only in Asia that the European tide is ebbing. It has begun to ebb in Africa too. Egypt, it is true, is not really an African country, but the independence won by Egypt is already claimed in the Sudan, and wherever the growth of education has produced an African intelligentsia, there is similar talk of the coming of home-rule within measurable time.

To the older ones among us, this is a rather startling development, because right up to our own day the Continent of Africa has remained so backward. This backwardness has not been due—so far as scientists can tell us—to innate incapacity. It seems to be mainly the result of environment. For the progress of mankind has always been due to the intercourse of one society with another. It is by cross-fertilization of group by group that civilization advances. The completely isolated group stagnates and dies out, and, till relatively recent times, African life was isolated. It was isolated both internally and externally. Communities within Africa were isolated one from another by physical obstacles and Africa as a whole was isolated from the rest of the world. The easiest means of communication under primitive conditions have usually been rivers. Rivers spreading out into alluvial plains were the basis of the historic civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, India and China. But there are no such gently running rivers with great alluvial plains in Africa, because the centre of Africa consists of a great plateau, thousands of feet above the level of the sea, with the result that the rivers of the interior flow swiftly and dangerously and plunge from time to time down cataracts or rapids. Thus there was no easy communication by water from district to district through the jungle of primitive Africa. From the outer world Africa was similarly segregated. The northern coastland has never been part of Africa, it has been part of the Mediterranean world, swept by the great currents of history which have flowed down the Mediterranean from classical times to our own. Tropical Africa was cut off from this progressive world and its successive civilizations by one of the greatest natural barriers of the world—the vast Sahara where, even to-day, people can easily lose themselves and die of thirst, and the almost impenetrable swamps of the upper Nile. Nor was it easy to make contact with tropical Africa by sea. There are few good harbours on east or west and the river estuaries are mostly spoiled either by rapids not far up their course or by sandbanks at their mouth. The maritime belt, moreover, is small and unattractive—a jungly, prickly belt, highly malarious and dangerous to the newcomers before the days of modern science. ‘Beware and take care of the Bight of Benin, where one comes out and forty go in,’ was the old seaman’s song; and the East African coast was not so much healthier, if at all, than the miasmatic shore of the Gulf of Guinea. Thus for many long centuries, the Africans lived an isolated life, both internally and externally.

The first breach in this isolation, the first impact of the outer world on Africa, did not come from Europe but from Asia. Long before the Christian era, Asiatics were crossing the Arabian Sea from Arabia and India to East Africa; and in course of time, they established a line of little trading settlements all down the coast as far as the Zambesi. But this first Asiatic contact did nothing to promote African civilization. The Arab and Indian settlements were not colonies in the full sense. No attempt was made to develop the country except in the immediate neighbourhood of the sea-ports. And, though these coastal towns became in time so prosperous and powerful that their Arab rulers were able to free themselves from Portuguese control, their life remained purely mercantile, and it was only in search of African products for export that their merchants penetrated the interior. They found no manufactured goods there, no works of art or craft worth purchasing, for those are the

outcome of a relatively high degree of civilization. But they found two valuable 'raw materials.' One was ivory and the other the human being. Thus began the 'greatest crime in history,' the robbery of Africans from Africa. Although the number of slaves raped away from Africa year by year was probably at first only a few hundreds, it rose by the nineteenth century to ten thousand a year, and this steady drain, decade by decade, century by century, of men, women and children from tropical Africa amounted in the total to a vast number. And for these African products, human or elephantine, the Arabs and their Indian colleagues in business gave nothing of value in return. Except insofar as the coastland Africans mingled with the Asiatic 'colonists' and acquired something of their civilization, it may be said that the impact of Asia on Africa did more harm than good.

The next invasion in time came from the Mediterranean belt across the old caravan routes of the Sahara into the Western Sudan. Moslem Arabs and Berbers penetrated and occupied the country from Senegal to Chad. They did more than this. They established emirates and empires. They brought with them the fruits of Moslem civilization in the north—especially its code of law and its technique of administration. But this civilizing process was halted not far south of the Sahara: it never pushed through the forests to the sea. And within its area of operation it only benefited the ruling caste and those Africans who accepted its cult and its faith. For the 'pagan' tribes the *regime* was purely destructive. They were treated like wild game by the slave-hunters of the master race.

Lastly came the Europeans, the Portuguese in the van followed by the English, French and Dutch. Once more it was not a 'colonial' invasion. The Europeans did not come to Africa, as they came to America or Australia, to found colonies. At first, indeed, they took little interest in its inhospitable shores. They regarded Africa as no more than a crude, gigantic obstacle on the sea-road to India and they hurried round the Cape to tap the wealth of the civilized East. But, by a tragic coincidence, the first contact of Europe with the coasts of Africa coincided with a sudden demand for a strong and docile labour force, precipitated by the first contact of Europe with America; and at once that unattractive Gulf of Guinea became interesting, and immensely profitable, as the basis of a trans-Atlantic slave trade. So the crime begun by Asia was repeated by Europe on a far larger scale. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, the business of depopulating Africa to provide the labour for the economic development of the central area of the Americas steadily grew until at last as many as 100,000 Africans were being bundled overseas each year, the total rising to many millions; and for each African set to work on an American plantation, at least one other, probably more than one, was killed or died under the shocking conditions of the trade. Nor was depopulation the only injury which the slave trade inflicted on Africa. It made African barbarism yet more barbarous. It provided a new incentive to inter-tribal warfare: for chiefs now attacked their neighbours to obtain the slaves with which to buy the raw spirits and the firearms with which the traders tempted them. So far from breaking down the old isolation of Africa, the trade confirmed and perpetuated it. A country torn by slave raids was no place for peaceful exploration or for the development of 'legitimate' commerce. No

wonder that Livingstone thought it well-nigh impossible to expiate the evil wrought by the slave trade. No wonder that Pitt, in his famous speech in 1791, declared that it was our duty to make amends to Africa for the harm it had done.

That speech heralded the dawn of a new age. Within one century from 1791 the destiny of Africa underwent a greater change than any that had occurred in all the centuries before. At last the isolation of Africa was broken. African life was brought, at last, into helpful contact with the life of the outer world. Africans could share at last for good or ill, and more for good than ill, in its civilization. The story can be summarized in four chapters. First, the triumph of the humanitarian movement headed by our own country—a chapter with which the traditions of our Society are bound up—wherein are recorded the names of the great crusaders from Granville Sharp, Wilberforce and Clarkson on to Buxton and Livingstone and the foundation and achievements of the great missionary societies. Second, the beginnings of 'legitimate' trade in West Africa and, in one or two limited areas, the beginnings of European administration. Third, the chapter of the great explorers who, first in the West and then in East and Central Africa, broke through the veil which had hitherto shrouded in darkness the whole interior of the continent. Fourth and last, as the inevitable sequel to the work of exploration, the growth of new interest in Africa and especially in its wealth and the 'scramble' of the rival European Powers to obtain a share of it, until, with astonishing speed, within one or two decades, almost the whole of tropical Africa had been subjected in one form or another to European rule.

Thus, by the nineteenth century, African isolation was dead indeed. Africa had not merely been associated with her neighbour, Europe, but had been annexed by her. 'Whereas,' said the cynics, 'the old *regime* had been a process of robbing Africa of Africans, the new one was a process of robbing Africans of Africa.' But that, as you know, is not the whole story.

Broadly speaking, though with some serious exceptions, European Government in Africa was in touch with nineteenth century liberalism and more or less controlled by a more or less enlightened public opinion. Hence the propagation in this country at the outset of the present century, of the doctrine that our relations with Africa must rest, as our relations with India had long rested, on the principle of Trusteeship. That marked the opening of yet another chapter of African history; for the conception of Trusteeship was bound, sooner or later, in Africa as in India, to make its exponents look into the future. In normal usage Trusteeship is not a static permanent affair: it only lasts till the ward, so to speak, has come of age.

One of the most interesting of my own personal experiences was the gradual recognition that British Africa was on the same road as British India, the road that led, in the longer or shorter run, to freedom; that what Macaulay had said of India applied a century later to Africa. Thirty or forty years ago, partly because Africa had been so backward for so long, partly because its exploration and occupation were so recent, I doubt if many of us—did any of us?—realize that the sequel to Indian independence, now coming into view, would be African independence. Was it not generally assumed that the backward African peoples would remain for an indefinite time under our

paternal care? Was it not our task, it might almost be said, to govern them and lift them up *for ever*? At what time or for what reason the conviction was born in the minds of students of imperial affairs that Africa was committed to the same path of political advance as India, it is impossible to say. It was not Joseph Chamberlain who inspired it. Was it Lugard? For my own part the moment when I realized that the ultimate emancipation of Africa had become, as it were, a project of public and international policy was the moment when I first read the text of Article XXII of the Covenant of the League of Nations wherein the principle of Trusteeship was applied to ex-enemy territories 'inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves in the strenuous conditions of the modern world.' 'Not yet.' Clearly that meant that at some time they would be able. Clearly that implied the eventual emancipation of at least a section of backward humanity. And naturally it was soon recognized and explicitly admitted by our own colonial authorities that the principle of the mandate applied not only to one or two mandated territories which had once been German colonies, but to the whole colonial Empire. Before the second German war, the theory that all colonial peoples were at various stages of training for self-government had been firmly established; it only remained for the impact of the war itself to make this theory still more explicit—in the ideas of the Atlantic Charter, for example, and of the Trusteeship Chapter of the Charter of the United Nations Organization—and what was still more important, to create an atmosphere of urgency, to force on one's mind the conviction that the time for the final working-out of the theory in actual practice lay not so very far ahead.

We are living in an age of revolution. All over the world a process of transformation is at work, but is there anything anywhere more impressive than the change in the destiny of Africa—the astonishingly swift attainment by peoples, who not so long ago were cut off from the path of human progress, of a footing on that path which will enable them, if all goes well, and again in no very long time, to stand side by side and on equal terms with the other peoples of the world?

Let me close with one or two observations on this last phase. First let us realize that the process of transition to full freedom is not going to be perfectly smooth. There is bound to be some impatience on the part of educated Africans. Like the Indian intelligentsia of yesterday, they are almost bound to think that the time has come for complete self-government before their European rulers or advisers, however genuinely anxious they may be for the completion of the process, believe it to be wise, in the interests of the Africans themselves, to take the final step. Secondly, it is surely obvious that we must press on with our work of economic and social development *pari passu* with political advance. An underfed and uneducated people cannot effectively govern themselves. Thirdly, I believe that the process of emancipation cannot be continued for long on a basis of separate colonial units. The territorial set-up of Central Africa is quite unnatural and illogical. It is the result of the accidents of European occupation in the days of the scramble. The population of Central Africa, taken as a whole, is relatively homogeneous, more homogeneous than the population of India; yet across this homogeneous world run the artificial frontiers of three or four European colonies. Surely that cannot

last. Surely in all our preparation for African advance, whether economic or political, every possible effort should be made to operate on a regional and international rather than a colonial and national basis. Very welcome in that respect were the conferences held last spring, one in Paris and the other in Dakar, for discussing the common problems of the French, Belgian and British colonies in Africa—technical problems such as agriculture and public health, which obviously overlap the actual frontiers. But ought not statesmen to be thinking still farther ahead, thinking what kind of Africa they are going to leave when the day comes for its final emancipation? Can they leave it a replica of Europe? Most of us hope that some day Europe may unify itself in at least some loose form of federation, but no one can fail to recognize how difficult it is to bring about that amount of sacrifice of national sovereignty which even a loose federation demands. And supposing, when the time comes for African emancipation, the nations of Europe have not yet brought themselves to make that sacrifice, are the peoples of Africa to be left as disunited as they are themselves? Can Africa emerge into freedom as a patchwork of artificial ex-French, ex-English, ex-Belgian sovereign states? Ought there not to be a United States of Africa—to adopt a phrase coined by Lord Hailey in an address he gave a few months ago at the University of Johannesburg?

One last observation. . . The process of emancipation cannot, it need hardly be said, be carried through by the efforts of Europeans only. In the future, as in the past, the destiny of Africa will be greatly affected by non-Africans, whether living in Africa or living thousands of miles away in Europe. But if our twentieth century civilization holds on its present course the destiny of Africa will be determined in the long run by the Africans themselves.

For it is impossible for Europeans, whatever their material power and however benevolent their intentions, to do all that needs doing on their own. The emancipation of Africa cannot be 'put over' by foreigners. It requires the fullest African co-operation. And co-operation is, first and last, a matter of confidence. I believe that the main reason why we failed till the very end to obtain the co-operation of the dominant section of the Indian intelligentsia in the process of India's emancipation was that we failed to obtain their confidence. We failed to convince them that we genuinely intended India to be free. If that is true the lesson for the years ahead in Africa is plain enough. We must win the confidence of the Africans in the sincerity of our intention. And the way to do that is to be quite sure of it ourselves. If only Europeans can make it indubitably clear that they want to do all they can to help the Africans to 'stand by themselves' as soon as possible, there can be little doubt, I think, of their response. And given mutual confidence and co-operation the transition to freedom in Africa ought to be smoother and more peaceful than it has been in India, till on another proud historic day, the African peoples attain, as Livingstone believed they could and would, to 'an honourable rank in the family of man.'