The Britain of the East

Liberalism, Darwinism, and
British Perceptions of Japan 1851-1914

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Chapter 1 – The View from the Summit

Of the many national triumphs celebrated by Great Britain during the reign of Queen Victoria, one of the greatest and most memorable occurred nearly at the midpoint of a century in which British power and the example of British institutions stood astride the world. The Great Exhibition of 1851, housed in the grandiose glass-and-iron Crystal Palace in London’s Hyde Park, ran from May to October and drew exhibitors and visitors from countries around the world. The Exhibition was many things – partly a personal achievement for Victoria’s husband, Albert; partly a showcase of imperial splendor; partly a trades exposition; and partly a prototype for the World’s Fair movement which would flourish for more than a century thereafter in cities around the world. In retrospect, however, it became something far more significant: a portrait of a nation and an ideology at their apex. As Prince Albert, the moving spirit behind the festivities, declared near the time of the Exhibition’s opening, it stood as an irrefutable token of his adopted country’s ascendancy, a “confirmation of the place England has taken in the world.”¹

Great Britain in 1851 stood at a place rarely, if ever, achieved in Europe’s history. Since the final defeat of Napoleon more than a generation before, no country had approached the level of continental hegemony aspired to by revolutionary France. France itself was recovering from an 1848 revolution which had demonstrated yet again what appeared to be its inherent political instability; still viewed from across the Channel as a latent rival, it had nonetheless fallen behind Britain economically. The Russian empire, despite its immense size and looming geopolitical menace, remained backward and almost entirely pre-industrial. Only Russia’s defeat in the Crimean War in 1853-1854 would be a major catalyst for its halting, painful process of modernization later in the century. Germany and Italy languished in political fragmentation,

while reactionary regimes in Vienna and Berlin evinced little interest in dislodging the status quo. Even the United States, which in later decades would loom as the greatest rival and partner of all for Britain, remained in the early stages of its headlong rush to industrialization. Still benefiting from the tremendous head start afforded by its status as the homeland of the Industrial Revolution, the Britain which hosted the Great Exhibition stood confidently without rivals in the economic world. With only two percent of the world’s population, Britain’s production and consumption of such resources as iron, coal, and cotton equaled or exceeded the combined total for every other nation.² Buoyed by this economic strength and the unquestioned supremacy of its navy, Britain had pulled safely free from the rivalries and dangers of European politics, embarked on what Lord Palmerston would later call its path of “splendid isolation.”³

The Exhibition’s organizers intended British ironworking, textiles, and locomotives to impress the country’s advanced economic development upon foreign visitors, but the displays were also intended as a powerful testament to the success of the nation’s liberal values. Liberalism never commanded an absolute consensus in Parliament or in the press, and its exact nature was as difficult to define in 1851 as it is now, but few observers at the time questioned that Britain was a liberal country, and a beacon to the rest of the world at that. In the aftermath of the 1848 revolutions – in which liberals and radicals throughout Europe had tried, and for the most part failed, to spearhead change towards constitutionalism and representative institutions – Britons could point with pride to their system of constitutional monarchy and gradualist reform. One newspaper account called the public behavior of Queen Victoria at the Exhibition a “magnificent lesson for foreigners.”⁴ Furthermore, the industrialists who displayed their wares at the Crystal Palace could point to their country’s economic magnificence as an eloquent argument

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⁴ Davis, p. 133.
for two other pillars of the liberal creed: individualism and free trade. It was private initiative (or
at least so the myth went) which had given birth to the innovations of the eighteenth and
nineteenth centuries, and it was the individual’s liberty from harassment by his own government,
the “rights of a free-born Englishman,” which had protected and incubated Britain’s vibrant
political and economic culture. International free trade, which Parliament had enacted at home
and the Royal Navy had enforced around the world, had provided the raw materials for English
factories and had spread the benefits of wealth around the Empire and the world. Many liberal
optimists like Richard Cobden were able to see the Exhibition as another manifestation of
Britain’s mission to enlighten the world through its progressive values. In the words of the
commentator William Forster:

We have the commission from that Providence, which made of one blood all the
nations of the earth, to soothe down national animosities, to draw closer together
national bonds, to interpret national interests, to forward national objects, and
make other people feel we consider their prosperity ours, and that what will
benefit them cannot be injurious to us.

This was liberalism at its most confident and utopian, a mood matching the serenity with
which Great Britain looked out upon the world. Without serious security concerns and without
rivals, Britain could afford the luxury of such principles, the conviction that the international
scene of the future would be dominated not by a zero-sum scramble for resources and survival,
but by a rising general prosperity that lifted all nations and redounded to the even greater wealth
of the home islands. There was another side to this outwardly magnanimous British view of the

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5 Cobden (1804-1865) was a leading mid-century political activist who, with his fellow liberal John Bright, served as
leaders of the Anti-Corn Law League, which successfully advocated for repeal of tariffs in favor of free trade.
6 Jeffrey Auerbach and Peter Hoffenberg, Editors, Britain, the Empire, and the World at the Great Exhibition of 1851
world, however; despite the international flavor of an event like the Great Exhibition, paternalism and insularity existed side-by-side with professions of international citizenship and optimism. Many British observers were disdainful of the presentations of other nations at the Crystal Palace, including those of the German states and the exhibits of the United States. Moreover, the rest of the world outside of Europe hardly had a place at the fair at all; the Ottoman Empire and China were among the few that participated, and even then their displays were often treated as no more than historical artifacts or “oriental” curiosities. The distorted, heavily Eurocentric picture presented to visitors at the Great Exhibition was no anomaly, of course – nor was it a manifestation of any explicitly racist agenda or premeditated discrimination. It was the consequence of the heavy imbalance of military, economic, and political power in the world of the mid-nineteenth century; just as importantly, it was the faithful reflection of a liberal ideology which posited a single road to progress and an unabashed hierarchy of backward and progressive nations.

One notable absence from the Exhibition, a country whose identity lent itself perfectly to prevailing theories of the wealth and progress of nations, was Japan. The Japan of 1851 was an almost perfect paragon of backwardness: feudal economy, arbitrary political rule, hostility to trade and the influence of Europeans – a country toiling in the perpetual night of the Middle Ages. So it seemed to a British public which had had virtually no contact with Japan since its legendary “closing” in the sixteenth century, and so, in many respects, it was. In 1851, Great Britain and Japan could hardly have stood farther apart from the perspective of a European observer – whether in power, wealth, or prestige. The portrait of the hierarchy of nations encapsulated by the summer’s festivities at the Great Exhibition in the very middle of the nineteenth century would not, however, endure into the twentieth. In the half-century that lapsed

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7 Ibid. p. 196.
between the Great Exhibition’s high-water mark of British pride and confidence and the death of Queen Victoria at the start of the twentieth century, a great deal of this British picture of itself – and of Japan -- would be transformed.

The rise of the Japanese Empire from relative obscurity to world power was one of the great international developments of the late nineteenth century. In the fewer than forty years that elapsed between the Meiji Restoration in 1868 and its stunning triumph in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, Japan achieved a thorough transformation: the emerging economic and military powerhouse of the twentieth century bore little external resemblance to the isolated, feudal kingdom which had had minimal contact with European nations for more than two centuries before being brusquely re-introduced to world commerce by Commodore Matthew Perry’s American warships in 1854. The pressures of contact with the West and fears of being overwhelmed by the economic might of foreigners helped force the restoration of imperial rule and the end of the country’s traditionalist feudal oligarchy. The Meiji government eagerly absorbed the lessons of Western-style modernization – American higher education, British naval science, German scientific proficiency – while forcefully defending (and in some cases exaggerating or exploiting) the country’s traditional cultural values. With its newfound industrial strength, modern oceangoing navy, and straightforwardly imperial geopolitical ambitions, Japan had forced its way into the first rank of world powers by the eve of the First World War – the first non-Western nation to do so in the modern world.

The club of Great Powers – Great Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and Austria – was slow to accept a rising nation like Japan into its fold, but by the eve of the First World War its progress towards elite diplomatic status was unmistakable. As late as the 1890s, a trio of European ambassadors retained the clout to force Japan to retreat from a portion of its conquests
in China; that intervention, however, was the last time that the West would presume to treat it as it had traditionally treated its non-Western friends and foes. By the turn of the twentieth century, Japan had joined the club; when the Powers marched on Peking in 1900 to thwart the Boxer Revolt, Japanese troops participated fully along with white Americans and Europeans. Japan impinged itself onto the consciousness of all the European powers, but it developed a particularly close bilateral relationship with Great Britain, with whom it concluded a military alliance in 1902. The Anglo-Japanese alliance was a key first step in integrating Japan into the global diplomatic equilibrium, but it was hardly sufficient to contain the first industrial Asian empire’s growth or solve the puzzle which its rise presented to the Western powers. Along with the United States, Japan represented a new variable on the European scene around the turn of the twentieth century, and its newfound global importance had implications which resonated far beyond the narrow diplomatic circles of Europe’s capitals.

Even as perceptions of Japan in the British official mind changed along with its rise to prominence, so did British views across the spectrum – from the lowest to the highest levels of society – evolve as well. In the High Victorian era, when the British picture of the world remained firmly dominated by the liberal framework of progressiveness and backwardness, and when representative institutions and embrace of economic free enterprise were taken as the twin hallmarks of modernity, expressions of admiration for a country such as Japan were a badge of dissent from the prevailing orthodoxy. In the 1850s and before, discussion of a country like Japan often took place along the lines taken by Montesquieu in his *Persian Letters* or by sixteenth-century commentators in eulogizing Native American societies; the country was representative of foreign simplicity, its “barbaric” customs contrasted ironically with those of the supposedly superior British. Such was the method taken by conservatives who lamented the
headlong rush to industrialization and atomic individualism taking place in the Great Britain of the middle nineteenth century. To the extent that Japanese society was admired in these circles, it was precisely for its stubborn traditionalism; British conservatives like Matthew Arnold pointed to the feudal “island empire” as a paragon of the cultural value of respect for the past. After the beginning of Anglo-Japanese trade relations in the 1850s allowed far greater opportunities for direct contact – and especially after the new Meiji government began aggressively cultivating Western ties – Japanese music, costume, and decorative arts became objects of great fascination in Britain.

It was only around the turn of the twentieth century, however, during the so-called “Edwardian Era” of British history, that Japan started to become something else entirely in British perception: a nation to be taken seriously, one whose political and social achievements could teach something to Great Britain – and even threaten its future well-being. On the simplest level, this seismic shift in perceptions of Japan can be explained as a predictable response to the new facts of Japanese growth. In another respect, though, the sheer magnitude of the change was symptomatic of a contemporaneous crisis in British self-perception which transcended any concrete geopolitical changes. Furthermore, the terms of the discourse used to describe Japan in comparison with Britain – race, hygiene, obedience and control, “national efficiency” – reflected the preoccupations of a British society whose elite had lost confidence in their country’s competitiveness.

This change in British self-perception – which in turn was mirrored by an entirely new appraisal of a foreign non-Western nation like Japan – had its roots in the intellectual developments of the period leading up to the Edwardian era. One of the most far-ranging shifts in British thought in the late nineteenth century – at least among an elite of political and social
thinkers – was the weakening of the traditional liberal worldview and its replacement by an ethos that owed much to social Darwinism. The seminal works of Charles Darwin himself, *The Origin of Species* in 1859 and *The Descent of Man* in 1871, set the stage for an acrimonious (and never fully resolved) debate in Britain over the scientific and religious implications of his natural selection thesis. It was the distillation of Darwin’s ideas into social theories, however, which presented the greatest danger to traditional views of society and international relations. “Social Darwinism,” from the very beginning, had multiple faces: Herbert Spencer cloaked his philosophy of *laissez-faire* individualism in Darwinian language, just as racial theorists like Houston Stewart Chamberlain and R. A. Fisher justified calls for eugenics and racial purity on the basis of nature’s inescapable struggle for survival.\(^8\) If Darwinism coarsened the domestic debate in Britain, it also played a fundamental role in the slow transformation of perceptions of the country’s role in the larger world. Britain’s imperial ideology had always contained a good deal of racism – both benign and virulent – but such thinking had frequently co-existed with the justifications of an ennobling mission and benevolent world leadership so deeply held by liberals. By the turn of the twentieth century, influential Britons of all public stripes – even those who would not have thought of themselves as such – had seen their thinking and their public language influenced by the idea that states, like individuals, were fated to struggle with one another in a zero-sum competition in which only the fittest survived. Under the influence of such a worldview, the health of the nation as a whole naturally took precedence over concern for the liberties of the individual, and other idiosyncrasies of British national life which had previously

\(^8\) Chamberlain, an Englishman-turned-virulent-German nationalist, was one of the forefathers of “Aryan supremacy” as a theme of German racism, and his ideas, most famously embodied in his 1899 *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, were popular among British scientific racists and white supremacists as well. R. A. Fisher was far more of a legitimate scientist than Chamberlain, but his support for eugenics made him one of the figureheads of a school whose belief in scientific breeding led them to much the same conclusion as the radical racial propagandists.
seemed historical strengths suddenly loomed as liabilities in the cold calculus of national efficiency.

Such “national Darwinism” was a double-edged sword. It could supply yet another series of ideological props for a nation still confident in its superiority, but it could just as easily become the focus of profound anxiety once such blithe confidence had begun to wane. Such was the predicament of many British intellectuals in the Edwardian Era. Supplied with a philosophy of international relations far bleaker, far less humane in its precepts, than the comfortable liberal ideology which had come before, they became frantic to diagnose and correct the flaws of a British state which they saw as falling behind its peers. The greatest catalyst for this crisis of confidence was the disastrous early defeats of British troops in the Boer War in 1899-1900; the shock helped usher in a decade which seemed doomed to be dominated by transition and decline. Coupled with the very real fact of Britain’s relative economic decline – by the middle of the decade, it had been surpassed by both Germany and the United States – such a military shock created an unshakeable impression that a turning point in the country’s fortunes had been reached. From the physical health of the nation’s inner cities and working classes, to the deficiencies of the educational system and the inefficiency of the government, political debate during the decade 1900-1910 was dominated by a series of critiques which ransacked British society for flaws which suddenly seemed far more dire than they had in decades past. This succession of miniature crises did not ultimately tear British society apart, nor did it create the political realignment many of the most ardent reform advocates hoped for, but it did bring together a diverse group of politicians and writers united not by any traditional party alignment, but by shared commitment to the urgent need to remake Britain as a more efficient, more controlled state.
Set against such a background, Japan, the ebullient newcomer on the world stage, offered fertile ground for comparison and undisguised admiration. For a broad-based group of British reformers and social critics, Japan by the 1900s had become the Britain of the East: a captivating dynamo of a nation whose aggressive growth mirrored that of Britain’s own early industrial golden age, at the same time as its radically different social organization seemed to position it as one of the powers of the future, better situated than a stagnant, declining Britain to compete in the Darwinian struggle for existence. The Japan that figured so heavily in the British discourse of the turbulent Edwardian era was more often a projection of domestic concerns than an objective reality; its example was co-opted by conservative imperialists, social Darwinists, and socialist reformers alike. Exploring the changed British views of Japan helps to throw light on a watershed era in British history, and it illustrates perfectly the influence of the intellectual trends which reached their culmination in the Edwardian Crisis.

A well-educated British observer at the turn of the twentieth century looked out on the world – and on Japan – through a prism far different than that which had colored the vision of even his or her immediate ancestors. The pervasive influence of Darwinism had replaced old concepts of race and ethnicity with new theories cloaked in the mantle of “science.” Perhaps even more importantly, many Britons by the 1900s had lost faith in the liberal institutions and political values which had once served as the pillars of national pride. It was only upon the contingency of these dramatic changes within Britain itself that such a dramatic reversal in perceptions of Japan could occur. Japan’s transformation from an object of paternalist condescension to a mirror of national soul-searching must be understood not only as a product geopolitical change, but also as the manifestation of profound domestic crisis.
This essay will track the separate paths of domestic intellectual development and perceptions of Britain’s standing in the world – using the remarkable story of Japan as a case study in the evolution of views – until the two narratives converge in the events of the “Edwardian Crisis” in the first decade of the twentieth century. Chapter Two explores the interplay between the emerging theory of social Darwinism and the dominant liberal worldview. Chapter Three, in turn, discusses the 1901-1910 Edwardian Era as an intersection of theory and reality – a period in which the social critiques of Darwinism and “national efficiency” came into their own. Finally, Chapter Four presents the radical changes in the British perception of Japan not only as the culmination of a distinct epoch in British intellectual history, but as a particularly acute portrait of the effects of a turbulent era on the most central elements of British identity.
Chapter 2 – The Evolving Darwinian Worldview

Section 1 – Darwinism and Liberalism

The second half of the nineteenth century was a time of profound social and political flux, both in the wider European context and within Great Britain. Some shifts manifested themselves as the continued unfolding of the consequences of earlier landmark events in the continent’s history – the industrial economy continued to mature, and with it striking demographic changes which went hand-in-hand with economic development. Other factors were more purely ideological, most notably the growth of the political left, fed both by maturing Marxist theory and by the underlying material changes which widened its constituency. Some motors of change in Europe – perhaps the most important of all – had their origins outside the continent. The second wave of imperialism massively expanded the political sway of the great colonial powers like Britain and France; revolutions in communication and transportation like the telegraph, telephone, and railroad continued to shrink the world and expand the wealth-creating possibilities of trade; and the rise of non-European powers like the United States and Japan finally began to threaten the continent’s absolute preeminence in world affairs. Such an eventful era practically demanded an intellectual framework with which to process its implications. Throughout Europe, but especially in Great Britain, the complex of scientific and social ideas known collectively as Darwinism took on an ever-increasing importance as the prism through which many observers – both intellectual and decidedly non-intellectual – viewed the world.

As is often the case with scientific achievements retrospectively hailed as revolutionary, Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection was neither entirely new nor initially accepted in the
scientific community. Even before the publication of his most famous work, *The Origin of Species*, in 1859, ideas of biological adaptation over time and of a natural “struggle for existence” had been broached for decades and had even gained some currency. The Chevalier de Lamarck, a French naturalist and one of the most prominent scientific theorists of the late Enlightenment, had provided a blueprint for an alternative vision of evolution with a series of massive studies, including his 1815-1822 *Natural History of Invertebrates*. Lamarck’s theory, which would prove to have surprising longevity even after the publication of Darwin’s works, consisted chiefly of two assertions: that the external environment could have a direct and immediate effect on creatures’ physical features, and that acquired characteristics – including even a taste for certain kinds of food or addiction to alcohol – were inherited by offspring. In England, Roberts Chambers’s *Vestiges of Creation*, though it posed nothing like the systematic theory provided by Darwin, was also an early statement of the concept of development over time. Such early efforts, however, were representative of decidedly minority views and served as the targets of heated invective both from the mainstream scientific community and from spiritual authorities. The dominant assumption, one which was deeply embedded in both mechanistic Newtonian cosmology and religious notions of the harmony of the universe, was that the earth’s species were more or less fixed entities and existed in a rational, pre-ordained hierarchy – the *Scala Naturae*, or the Great Ladder of Being. Even as the efforts of eighteenth-century science discovered a panoply of new species and the nascent science of geology began to

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10 Ibid. Lamarckianism, for instance, lay at the heart of much of the philosophy of social reform and social engineering in the early twentieth century (see ch. 3). True hereditary evolutionism when applied to humans, by contrast, lent itself to eugenics and selective breeding theories. It was thus ironically the generally more humanistic philosophies which owed their origins to the outdated theories inimical to true natural selection, while the trend in thought which proceeded from the correct understanding of Darwin led to the darkest social consequences.
12 Bannister, p. 20.
come to grips with the manifest changes in the physical earth over the long term, the idea of the 
fixity of nature was remarkably stubborn. Faced with this reality, William Paley was one of 
several early nineteenth-century figures whose works on “natural theology” were extended, 
belabored efforts to reconcile new discoveries with received biological wisdom.\(^{13}\)

At the same time, preconceived notions of a natural order of the biological world were 
also inextricably linked with prevailing ideas of race hierarchy and the stark divide between 
civilized and “primitive” which characterized early anthropology. In surveying recently-
discovered peoples in places like the South Pacific and the interior of Africa, opinion as to the 
place of such communities within human history was divided: some viewed primitive 
civilizations as the decadent remnants of peoples who had lost touch with the mainstream of 
human progress, while others viewed the discrepancy as little more than proof of the inherent 
differences between the earth’s races. While the former view coincided with emerging liberal 
(and evangelical) notions of the universality of potential for progress and with the legacy of 
Enlightenment ideals, crudely racist views had wide exposure in the 1840s and 1850s. In his 
widely-read 1850 book, *The Races of Man*, race theorist Robert Knox presented a fixed hierarchy 
of races – culminating of course in the Northern European/Anglo-Saxon type – which closely 
mirrored biology’s chain of species.\(^ {14}\) Race, for Knox, was an all-important fact in the 
understanding of world history: “Race is everything: literature, science, art – in a word, all 
civilization depends first on it.”\(^ {15}\) The author Thomas Carlyle, whose deep cultural conservatism 
went hand-in-hand with shocking racism, elaborated on the theme of the inherent inferiority of 
the non-white races in his now-infamous essay, “An Occasional Discourse on the Nigger

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\(^{13}\) E.g. his most famous works *Natural Theology* and *Evidences of Christianity*. Such Christian natural science 
maintained its popularity with a large segment of the public long after the scientific acceptance of Darwin, of 
course.


Question.”¹⁶ Upstart pseudo-scientific pursuits like anthropometry and phrenology – the study of skull size as a key to racial differences – became ammunition in a serious academic debate which called into question the ages-old idea of the unity of the human race. A school of “polygenists,” including a portion of the anthropological community, held by the time of Darwin that the gap between the races was not merely one of ethnicity, but of species. For proponents of scientific racism, it was the race of Europeans, unique among the representatives of the human species, which alone stood at the top of the biological ladder, and which alone had access to the higher fruits of civilization.

From their very outset, then, the theories of Darwin, encapsulated in even more controversial form in his 1871 work on human evolution, *The Descent of Man*, had implications far outside the self-contained world of professional biologists and naturalists. The doctrine of natural selection, as laid down in the *Origin*, contained three propositions: that species evolve over time, that individuals of a species are involved in what amounts to a struggle for existence, and that the best-adapted individuals achieve propagation of their characteristics through greater success in survival and reproduction.¹⁷ Many scientists were slow to embrace the specifics of Darwin’s theory,¹⁸ but the publication of his works marked an indisputable turning point in the acceptance of evolution as a general principle within the learned world. The impact of such a shift on the philosophy of science was nothing less than shattering – threatening, or at least gravely complicating, the picture of the universe as a beneficent, rational machine which had been the keystone of modern scientific thinking. In the words of the historian Robert Bannister,

¹⁶ Erik Schmeller, *Perceptions of Race and Nation in English and American Travel Writers 1833-1914* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004) p. 64. Carlyle’s basic thesis, offered in response to racial riots in the British protectorate of Jamaica, was that the black residents of that island were inherently incapable of exercising the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, and that previous decades’ British efforts at black emancipation had been misguided.


¹⁸ Even the man who would become perhaps Darwin’s greatest exponent in the British public debate, T.H. Huxley, did not immediately accept the *Origins* upon its publication.
“the Origin of Species, from the start, fatally undermined … the assumptions of harmonious, mechanical, self-regulating laws of nature, which in one form or another had dominated Anglo-American thought since Newton.” Evolutionary doctrine spread its tentacles into every scientific discipline, and it vitiated assumptions, both venerable and comforting, of humanity’s place in the natural world and the race’s place within the world of humanity. This loss of basic philosophical mooring had a powerful impact on the intellectual developments of the remainder of the nineteenth century and beyond.

The phenomenon of “social Darwinism” – the appropriation of themes of evolution or the struggle for existence for the analysis of human society – was no perversion of any original “purity” of the eminent naturalist’s theories. From the outset, Darwin’s work was widely understood to have immense social and political implications. In fact, a fierce controversy raged after 1859 in the British press, fought in both the pages of prestigious (and sparsely read) scientific periodicals and the mass-circulation newspapers and monthlies. While a large element of the scientific community took a stand against Darwin on grounds of methodology, either in defending the static model or the Lamarckian environmentalist approach, most of the popular controversy gravitated towards the implications for humans – the birth of the so-called “ape question.” Well before The Descent of Man formally laid out Darwin’s vision of the human pedigree, the religiously-minded exploded in indignation at the theological implications of evolution. The Catholic Dublin Review flatly disavowed any intent to debate the merits of the case, instead crying that “the salvation of man is a far higher object than the progress of science.”

The climax of the first wave of the debate occurred in a famous showdown at the Oxford Union in 1860; T.H. Huxley, newly converted to Darwinism, was widely perceived to

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19 Ibid. p. 9.
triumph over Samuel Wilberforce, the Bishop of Oxford.\textsuperscript{21} The theological debate was never
resolved to the satisfaction of the more religious members of the British public, including the
Anglican Church; the majority of the British public rejected the central thesis of \textit{The Descent of
Man} well into the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{22} Another element of Darwin’s theory, however – the much-
repeated theme of the “struggle for existence” – made deep inroads into to the consciousness of
both opinion-makers and public alike. In the words of the middle-of-the-road \textit{Saturday Review},
“So rapid has been the hold that it [\textit{The Origin of Species}] has taken on the public mind, that the
language incident to the explanation of the ‘struggle for life’ and the gradual evolution of new
forms consequent thereon, has passed into the phraseology of everyday conversation.”\textsuperscript{23}

It is important to remember, however, that social Darwinism in the 1850s and 1860s
lacked the sinister, anti-humanitarian cachet which it would acquire after the horrors of the
twentieth century. Quite the contrary, in fact. Rather than immediately overturning the confident
assumptions of mid-nineteenth-century British liberalism, Darwinism often served as its
handmaiden, lending the authority of “science” to the plain facts of British (and European)
ascendancy in the world. In part, this was due to a persistent misunderstanding of the nature of
the evolutionary “arrow” within the theory; rather than a random, value-neutral process of
adaptation, many liberals insisted on reading natural selection as a “natural law of progress” in
which “fittest” became interchangeable with “greatest” or “best.”\textsuperscript{24} Mostly, however, it was
simply an updating of the old Whiggish faith in the power of free institutions and individualism,
cloaked in language in which the modern, free-market, liberal society represented the highest

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid. p. 62. The Oxford Union is a prestigious debating society which, then as now, hosted guest speakers on
momentous public topics.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid. p. 31.
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Saturday Review}, April 11, 1868
\textsuperscript{24} Michael Biddiss, \textit{The Age of the Masses: Ideas and Society in Europe Since 1870} (New York: Harper and Row,
1977) p. 47.
stage of societal evolution. In the appraisal of T.H. Huxley, the new theory was “a veritable Whitworth gun” in the armoury of liberalism.” Karl Marx, who observed the Darwin controversy keenly while performing his research in London, noted to his chagrin that the theory was a powerful aid to the liberal worldview; his colleague Friedrich Engels agreed: “The whole Darwinian theory of the struggle for life is simply the transformation from society to organic nature of Hobbes’s theory…and the bourgeois economic theory of competition.”

More than any others, two mid-century intellectual figures spearheaded the assimilation of Darwinian thought into the prevailing liberal view of the nature of human societies; their writings are representative of the template by which foreign nations, including Japan, were viewed during the heyday of British self-confidence. The first was Herbert Spencer, a prodigious writer who was widely considered the greatest living British social philosopher, and a man who for modern readers often looms as the paragon of the “social Darwinist.” Though his primary reputation today is as a somewhat crude apologist for laissez-faire economics and brutal individualism, his views on economics were hardly more radical than those of his liberal peers. His life’s work, as he saw it, was the creation of a “synthetic philosophy,” the organizing feature of which was evolution, in all facets of life. His picture of evolution, though, remained stubbornly Lamarckian and teleological even as he mimicked Darwin’s language: progress was an almost universal feature of human history, driven inevitably by the continuing differentiation (liberalization) of society: “The increase in heterogeneity…must continue to go on; progress is

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25 A Whitworth gun being a breech-loading rifle which, at the time, was the most advanced available. Ironically, the guns were plagued by technical problems and soon became an embarrassment to the British army.
26 Ellegard, p. 2. (Westminster Review, 1850)
28 Spencer’s life’s work was the ten-volume System of Synthetic Philosophy, which appeared over 35 years between 1862-1897.
not an accident, not a thing within human control, but a beneficent necessity.”  
Such differentiation, of course, was that which most characterized the idealized industrial society, in which individual energies had been liberated from the retarding forces of tradition or coercion.

Walter Bagehot went even farther than Spencer in identifying progress with the particular cultural and historical features of Western societies. He, too, achieved his primary fame as an exponent of free-market economics; as an early editor of *The Economist* and as a popular analyst of the intricacies of the British constitution, Bagehot embodied the spirit of liberal British exceptionalism. Like Spencer, he sought in his most ambitious work to situate Britain within a comprehensive theory that explained its singular success in the world. In his 1872 book, *Physics and Politics*, Bagehot surveyed all of world history and concluded that the greatest jump in the story of civilization was the transition from the age of custom to the age of discussion – the growth of individual liberty, dependent on free governmental institutions for its exercise. “The change from the age of status to the age of choice was first made in states where the government was to a great and growing extent a government by discussion.”  
Practically speaking, such a leap had only occurred in a few nations of the West, and the barriers holding back the peoples of the “East” were, to Bagehot, nearly insuperable, to the point that the very idea of change or progress became inconceivable: “Their own life in detail being regulated by ancient usage, they cannot comprehend a policy which is bringing something new… what puzzles them is your [the Englishman’s] constant disposition to change – as you call it, improvement.”  
Although Bagehot, like Spencer and most liberals, continued to profess faith in the transformational potential of modernity to overcome such cultural obstacles even outside the West, he warned

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31 Ibid. p. 106.
British readers that progress in colonial projects like India would be slow, simply because centuries of evolutionary stagnation had woven deference and indolence into the Eastern character so deeply that generations would pass before learning by example could take root.\footnote{Ibid. Pp. 80-85.}

In its first, liberal, phase, then, the Darwinian worldview envisioned the evolution of societies as a sort of grand teleological procession in which Western values were almost entirely congruent with the universal criteria for progress. The path to modern civilization for non-Western countries was simple: importation, voluntarily or not, of Western forms and abandonment of stultifying tradition. Such paternalism – as old as Western civilization itself but cloaked now in “modern” Darwinian language – dominated the British discussion of Japan in the early years of that country’s course of modernization from the 1850s onward.

Section 2 – The Liberal View of Japan

More than nearly any other Asian nation, Japan remained a mystery to Britain until well into the nineteenth century. In the year 1600 the warlord Tokugawa Ieyasu consolidated his power over his rivals in the legendary battle of Sekigahara, ushering in the Tokugawa Shogunate which lasted the better part of three centuries.\footnote{Conrad Totman, \textit{Japan Before Perry} (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008) pp. 137-142.} Since that date, Japan had been ruled as a centralized feudal state under the control of an exclusive oligarchy of noble families. The shogun, the \textit{de facto} national overlord, held court at Edo (present-day Tokyo) and shared control with the heads of the leading \textit{daimyo} in an intricate hierarchical arrangement which balanced local and national power bases. On one hand stood the leadership clique around the shogun – the \textit{bakulu} – while large portions of the country were controlled directly by the \textit{han} – the heads of
the largest noble families. The Emperor, residing at the old capital of Kyoto, was a powerless figurehead, the object of religious obeisance but entirely cut off from the locus of real authority. After a series of bloody clashes with European traders and missionaries in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries excited widespread fears of barbarian encroachment, the Tokugawa government effectively closed Japan to outside contact, allowing only the Netherlands to conduct a token annual trade. Japan persisted in relative internal stability and isolation from the West for nearly 250 years; it remained a focus of speculation and exotic mythmaking, but in the eyes of nearly every foreign observer it was a land frozen in time. As such, it became an ideal subject for projection of traditional archetypes of the “backward, enchanted East” – and an object of fascination for Romantic-era writers to whom the country’s exoticism was a thing of grandeur rather than lamentable backwardness. Tales of Old Japan, usually featuring *samurai* romance or ritual suicide, were little changed in the early nineteenth century from the time of James I, when the skeptical king had heard them at court. One favorite was that of the “forty-seven ronin,” a squadron of warriors who committed *seppuku* in a public square after committing an act of retribution to avenge the death of their master. More serious commentaries on Japan, when they appeared, ritually prefaced themselves with laments on the lack of first-hand information on the country. In an article for the liberal *Edinburgh Review* published a mere two years before Perry’s voyage, Alexander Knox painted a picture of Japan which encapsulated this mixture of intrigue and frustration:

For upwards of two centuries, the internal constitution and social arrangements of the Japanese have been concealed in a well-nigh impenetrable veil by the jealous

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policy of their rulers, and the ready obedience of their people, this Interdict
against humanity…. Japan remains to us a vague and shadowy idea.\textsuperscript{37}

Starting in the 1850s, the reality of Japan began to change rapidly, even as perceptions
lagged considerably behind, emerging from medieval enchantment only slowly. As the
breakneck modernization of Japan gained notice in Britain, the Eastern empire lost a measure of
its exoticism as it opened itself up to ever-greater contact with foreigners and came to be seen as
a hopeful protégé of the West. The transformation began with the two voyages of Commodore
Matthew Perry of the United States Navy to Japan in 1852-1854; on his second voyage, after
threatening the use of force if his requests were not considered, Perry signed a treaty with the
Shogun’s government which authorized a trading relationship. This was the beginning of the
much-heralded “opening of Japan” – soon the other Western powers, including Great Britain,
were scrambling to secure comparable concessions. Mere months after Perry’s departure, a
British squadron had arranged a “Friendship Treaty,” and this was followed in more substantial
form in 1858 with the signing of a comprehensive Treaty of Amity and Commerce by British
emissaries under Lord Elgin.\textsuperscript{38} British subjects were allowed residence in certain coastal cities,
and traders labored – often with great initial difficulty – to open a Japanese market for their
exports. Accelerating diplomatic pressure throughout the 1860s led to ever-increasing demands
for treaty concessions from the beleaguered Tokugawa government, following a pattern set by
Western interactions with other weakening non-Western powers like China and the Ottoman
Empire in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{39}

While the abrupt end of centuries of isolation was a tremendous boon for the trading
powers, it set off a chain reaction of social unrest within Japan which would ultimately doom the

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
shogunate and the feudal system. The central government’s failure to prevent the Western onslaught – most appallingly the spectacle of so many foreigners trampling unhindered on Japanese soil – emboldened feudal rivals of the shogunal clan to open revolt. The bakufu faction struggled to stem the tide of discontent by undertaking any military reforms necessary to present a strong face to the outsiders, while han feudal lords in the provinces openly procured arms from Western sources in preparation for a bid to topple the shogunal government.  

The last shogun of the Tokugawa line, Yoshinobu, eventually resorted to the one source of authority which could compel national obedience: the long-neglected emperor. Yoshinobu tried in vain to preserve a modified role for the shogunate, but the rebel rival houses forced his hand, and the shogunate ended in 1868 with the restoration of full imperial authority. This epochal event, the so-called Meiji Restoration, was a turning point for Japan in more ways than one. In addition to marking an end to the country’s antiquated feudal government, it marked the transition to a wholehearted program of Western-style modernization, overseen by the young emperor and his advisory clique, the men who decades later would be known as the genro – wise old men.

The break with the past undertaken by Japan in the decades after 1868 was by no means smooth, but it was undoubtedly decisive. Perhaps the most momentous step of all was completed by 1871, when the emperor summoned the heads of the daimyo families to the new capital of Tokyo and formally abolished the system of feudal land tenure. This step – resisted fitfully by nobles and samurai – at one stroke opened the way for modernization of Japanese land use and felled the major obstacle to centralized, European-style cabinet governance free of provincial interference. For the first twenty years of the Meiji period, the Japanese government openly sought Western counsel, and representatives of the country abroad willingly presented

40 Anderson, p. 19.
42 Totman, History of Japan, p. 262.
themselves as eager protégés. Once formally the throne, his advisors had the Emperor proclaim his country’s readiness to learn in a “Charter Oath” whose language was squarely directed at foreign audiences; he promised to “conduct a search for wisdom throughout the world,” and to “discard the absurd customs of the past.” On one extensive fact-finding tour from 1871 to 1879, imperial representatives visited the United States, Britain, and the newly formed German Empire in their quest for guidance. The emissaries on this voyage, known as the Iwakura Mission, were deeply impressed by the wealth and industry on such ready display in both the United States and Great Britain – they drew great inspiration from the American higher education system especially – but they noted in letters to Tokyo their dissatisfaction and bewilderment with the unwieldy parliamentary politics of the two democracies. Much more to their liking was the centralized Berlin government with its strong bureaucracy and disdain for excessive legislative interference, and Japan followed the German blueprint in its two most important reforms of the 1870s and 1880s. In 1873, the emperor decreed universal conscription, and the Japanese army began the explosive course of growth which would culminate in its successful invasion of China in the 1890s. The so-called Meiji Constitution, promulgated in 1890, also owed a great debt to the Prussian model. The emperor held undisputed final authority, delegated in an informal cabinet responsible chiefly to the crown; the Imperial Diet (parliament) held an important, but only consultative, role. The series of dramatic administrative and constitutional reforms was accompanied by rapid economic growth, as a small elite of family-owned industrial firms – the zaibatsu – took the lead in kick-starting a

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43 Jansen, p. 67.
45 Ibid. pp. 296-313 (on Berlin)
46 Jansen, p. 75.
47 Ibid. p. 81.
manufacturing economy. The ruling slogan of the early Meiji era, repeated often in official pronouncements, was a succinct distillation of Japan’s status as a state in tutelage: the government promised *bunmei kaika*, or “civilization and enlightenment.”

Until well into the 1890s, the tone of published British accounts of Japan – from first-hand reports to travel narratives to newspaper editorials – reflected the predominant liberal attitude of mid-century. With the “opening” of Japan, of course, came a much greater flow of description and opinion. The most immediate impact of the renewed contact was a vogue for all things Japanese. The appearances of Japanese art at international exhibitions, London in 1862 and Paris in 1867, ushered in an aesthetic vogue, especially in Britain and France, known as “Japonism.” Japanese-style drawings, watercolors, and woodcuts, with their novel, clean lines and refreshingly foreign subject matter, became ubiquitous as decorative motifs. “Japonism” eventually fed into the Aesthetic Movement in late nineteenth century art, and with respect to Japan it was an essentially conservative phenomenon, akin to earlier decades’ romantic portraits of the country. As the art historian Elisa Evett points out, aesthetic appreciation for Japan was inseparable from the era’s broader paternalism; in her words, Japonism “perpetuated the vision of the Japanese as a simple, innocent, primitive people living in blissful harmony with nature.”

Among other things, the fad provided the inspiration for Western musical offerings such as *Madame Butterfly* and, in Britain, the hugely popular 1885 Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *The Mikado*, which played for a then-record 672 performances in London over two years.

The tone of coverage of the transforming society of Japan itself was far less uniformly enthusiastic: outright condescension and sardonic paternalism continued to coexist with praise

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48 Totman, p. 298.
50 Ibid. p. 18.
for the country’s material achievements. The single criterion for the vast majority of British commentators on Japan – the one factor which distinguished progress from backwardness – was the country’s success or failure in emulating the British model as laid down by Spencer and Bagehot: private industrial enterprise, parliamentary government, and a culture of individualism. Opinion varied on the extent to which Japanese assimilation of such lessons was possible, and the extent to which cultural particularism was to play a role, but the goal of “modernity” remained present always.

In the pre-Restoration era, the years immediately following the first British treaties with Japan, British opinion turned decisively hostile on reports of anti-foreign violence against Western legatees and trade representatives. In 1861, a secretary to the newly-established British mission in Japan was attacked and killed on the road by a gang of bandits who were linked to the hereditary Lord of Satsuma, one of the chief daimyos in the realm. 51 Other attacks followed, including some on Americans, and the struggling shogun replied to official complaints with protestations of his inability to control the feudal lords. In a scene the basics of which were played out countless times around the world in the nineteenth century, British gunboats shelled the daimyos’ possessions and forts with impunity, taking the upholding of treaty obligations and British “honor” into their own hands. 52 The British press responded with denunciations of Japan’s “barbarism,” citing the violence as further proof that Japan shared in the characteristic Oriental attitudes of hostility to the forces of change and progress. In an editorial entitled, “What Are We To Do With Japan?,” the Times of London 53 opined that Japan, like a typical “Asiatic despotism,” would only learn its lessons and start upon its evolutionary track the hard way,

51 “The Outrage in Japan,” The Times (28 September 1862)
52 “Japan,” The Economist No. 1052 (October 24, 1863)
53 Then, as now, the British newspaper of record, representing an establishment, moderately conservative viewpoint.
through a brute display of superior British force.\textsuperscript{54} The \textit{Economist}, another bastion of centrist British wisdom, went so far as to wonder aloud whether the project of civilizing Japan was doomed to failure, considering the obviously “semi-civilized” state of the country: “It may have been the better part of wisdom… to have abstained from forcing our unwelcome presence upon them.”\textsuperscript{55} The impact of the initial outbreak of anti-British violence eventually faded, but the dismissive tone taken even by positive coverage of Japan remained for years. The short-lived satirical magazine \textit{Japan Punch}, published by expatriates in Tokyo as a daughter publication to the famous London periodical, perfectly captured the prevailing attitude – paternalist indulgence, mixed with deep skepticism at the country’s projects. In an 1862 cartoon, a comical samurai struts awkwardly in his new Western-style suit, exclaiming, “I like only civilization!” The image was apt: Japan seemed to resemble nothing so much as a child, or an ape-like creature of a lower species, trying on for the first time the clothes of his betters.\textsuperscript{56} The \textit{Times} also resorted to the use of terms which mixed the near-universal use of evolutionary language with simple, casual racism, proclaiming that the British people “really have no other than purely benevolent wishes towards these odd creatures, the Japanese… We will do our best to make a Japanese Prince as much like a Manchester mill owner as circumstances will allow.”\textsuperscript{57}

In the years following 1868, after signs of very real Japanese progress became unmistakable – flying in the face of so many earlier prognostications – the tone of the discussion began to become indulgent in tone rather than dismissive. Just as the 1870s saw increased European contact with Japanese representatives at exhibitions or on diplomatic tours, so the decade also saw a great increase in the availability of first-hand reporting from Japan by British

\textsuperscript{54} “What Are We To Do With Japan?” \textit{The Times}, Lead Editorial (June 29, 1863)
\textsuperscript{55} “Dangers and Difficulties in the Far East,” \textit{The Economist}, Issue 1027 (May 2, 1863)
\textsuperscript{56} Nish, \textit{Contemporary European Writing on Japan}, p. 60.
\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Times} Editorial, June 11, 1862.
writers. Correspondents like Rutherford Alcock of the *Times* (who wrote in his capacity as British Minister to Japan) and A.B. Mitford of the popular periodical *Cornhill* enabled the reading public for the first time to attain something approaching real insight into the internal life of Japan; their enthusiasm for their subject often made them unwitting accomplices of Tokyo’s publicity campaign. Mitford was pleased to report Japan’s great progress in eliminating the specter of violence against foreigners; he exhorted his readers to cast away their misconceptions of the inherent “otherness” of the Japanese. Indeed, their habits of thought were growing closer to the British model with every passing year: “It is astounding to find how the minds of men have hit upon the same expressions of thought… It may be that the Old Japanese, such as he was and had been for centuries when we found him … will have become extinct.”

Alcock, for his part, repeatedly marveled at the breakneck speed of Japanese change in which the country had “leapt five centuries at a bound,” looking back in 1874 on “the twenty years’ struggle in which all the ancient landmarks of Japanese policy, statecraft, and administration have been thrown down.” In line with his confidence in the trajectory of Japan’s development, Alcock perceived in what he was observing a close parallel of Europe’s own past; in other words, Japan was simply following a staggered evolutionary path, in much the manner described by Bagehot and Spencer:

> Anyone familiar with the history of the Middle Ages in Europe, and more especially perhaps in France, from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries, while the feudal system was in full development and formed the chief characteristic of the

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period, cannot fail to be struck with the curiously identical forms developed in
like manner and during the same ages in these isolated isles.60

There is more at work, of course, than simple historical observation in such passages. They illustrate a liberal worldview not only comfortable with the language of social evolution, but often unable to escape the habit of seeing the non-West as a mere reflection, whether pale or vivid, of the master template provided by the Western, specifically the British, experience. The continued evolution of Japan in a direction compatible with British tastes was also, as The Economist bluntly reminded its readers, good business as well. When the editors proclaimed, “It is probably the destiny, it is even now the function, it is certainly the interest, of the English family of mankind, to guide and urge and control the industrial enterprises” of rising powers like Japan, it was merely restating the happy coincidence of economic self-interest and enlightening mission which characterized liberal optimism.61

A separate window into Japan for British readers was provided in these decades by the growing body of travel literature on the subject. Though a visit to the Far East remained a prohibitively expensive luxury, the opening of Japan had at last made travel there possible for a wealthy private citizen; the exotic glow which continued to surround Japan in the public mind furnished a hunger for first-hand accounts. British travel literature, even within the chauvinistic context of the genre throughout Europe in the nineteenth century, was exceptional in its insularity and cultural imperialism.62 British travelers in Italy and France became famous for their smugness, and this characteristic was only amplified when they moved further afield to the heretofore inaccessible Far East. In his 1866 Travel Sketches, Anthony Trollope poked fun at

61 “The Economic Value of Justice to the Dark Races,” The Economist 1163 (December 9, 1865)
what was already a well-established comedic theme: the English traveler with his mixture of myopic patriotism and naive wonder at the marvels of the wider world.\textsuperscript{63} Even Charles Darwin, in his own travel narrative of \textit{The Voyage of the Beagle}, indulged himself in the thought of his ship as a vessel of the “march of improvement” bringing enlightenment to backward regions of South America and the Pacific.\textsuperscript{64} Although late-nineteenth-century British travel writing on Japan was seldom as overtly racist as the accounts of the past – in fact, writers were often at pains to emphasize the extent to which they were pleasantly surprised by the reality of Japan – it was nonetheless the product of observers confident in their cultural superiority. Far more than enthusiastic newspaper correspondents, travelers expressed skepticism at Japan’s Westernizing project; the firsthand experience of jarring cultural differences made Tokyo’s strenuous efforts seem comical, if nonetheless valiant.

One of the most widely read travel authors of the 1880s and 1890s was Isabella Bird, a woman who inspired widespread wonderment for her insatiable appetite for exploration and her unwillingness to abide restraint or chaperoning. Like the maverick Englishwomen in Forster’s \textit{A Passage to India}, desperate for a taste of the “real India,” Bird consistently sought to escape the usual tourist path and revel in the deeper exoticism of her destinations. When in the United States, she insisted on hiking the then-wilderness of the Rocky Mountains unaccompanied; on her several visits to Japan, she spent significant time on the isolated northern island of Hokkaido. Though Bird considered herself an admirer of Japan, she nevertheless resorted to descriptions typical of the liberal Darwinist perspective. The ethnic minority Ainu people of the north she casually labeled “complete savages” -- “stupid” on the whole and untutored in modern ways,
despite their unusually large brain size. When appraising Japan in its entirety, she saw a people struggling mightily to rid themselves of cultural baggage, an effort that produced strains throughout society. The modern school system was impressive, but it was handicapped in instilling free thought by the children’s habits of “unquestioning obedience at home.” In observing the aftermath of the country’s recent wholesale adoption of Western business dress, she saw the results as a comical metaphor for the difficulty of Westernizing the East: “Each garment is a misfit, and exaggerates...the national defects.”

Rudyard Kipling, a man even more blunt in his cultural judgments than Bird, was another frequent visitor to Japan; his stature as a writer lent his travel musings a still greater audience. Like the newspaper reporters and government officials, Kipling perceived in Japan an unusually apt and rapid mimicry of the ways of the West. More than the others, he, with his highly attuned aesthetic sensibility, noted the visual incongruity of such rapid change set against the background of such a deeply-rooted culture. To Kipling, the dominant visual metaphor of Japan was its tiny, highly landscaped bonsai trees; Japan was a pygmy country, a “fragile and precious land,” whose centuries of isolation had made it into a kind of atrophied, but fetching, evolutionary relic. In a patronizing, heavily ironic declaration of dissent from the prevailing wisdom, Kipling intoned: “Japan, whence the camphor and the lacquer and the shark-skin swords come... [is] a nation of artists. The Japanese should have no concern with business – it doesn’t become them.”

Kipling’s aesthetically-rooted conservatism, harkening back to flattering portraits by Carlyle and other Romantic writers, was an exception to the dominant tone. By the 1880s, much of the mystery of Japan had been erased from its prevailing British perception, replaced by a new

66 Ibid.
67 Ibid. p. 15.
68 Rudyard Kipling, *From Sea to Sea* (New York: Doubleday, 1927) p. 292. (originally published 1899
69 Ibid.
image: Japan as the initially reluctant but precocious pupil, in which the abrupt imposition of Western influence had accelerated the evolutionary process by centuries. It was a perception in which two strains existed in tenuous balance, revealing the contradictions inherent in the liberal worldview. On one hand stood the national and racial self-confidence of British observers, who processed their view of Japan through the lens of obvious, even comical, national differences which placed the Japanese people at a safe distance on a lower plane. Correspondents might be nearly unanimous in praise of the work ethic and frugality of the Japanese – might even detect in them, as the expatriate paper *The Japan Times* did, many “characteristics of the sovereign Aryan race” – but the fundamental gulf nonetheless remained.70 On the other hand, however, stood the prescriptions of liberal ideology. Liberalism, though it had assimilated Darwinian language to describe its particular brand of teleological historicism, theoretically offered an avenue to progress which was race- and culture-blind. As a matter of faith, liberals were committed to the proposition that Japan could, and eventually would, succeed if it continued on the correct path. It was this tension, as well as the transitional state of Japan itself during these decades, which gave Japan what historian Toshio Yokoyama called its ambivalent, “magical” place in the British mind. Straightforward praise of its development and genuine curiosity in its culture never wholly overcame the racial complacency which existed beneath liberal bromides.71

The discussion of the proposed Japanese constitution in the 1880s well illustrates the dual nature of views of Japan. While noting with regret that the legislature’s powers were still not “sufficiently strong to exercise any control over the executive,” *The Times* nonetheless hailed the Meiji constitution as a definite step in the right direction.72 Alcock perceived telltale signs of

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70 Nish, *Contemporary European Writing on Japan*, p. 59.
progress towards parliamentary government: formation of parties, greater local government initiatives, a greater spirit of government responsibility.\textsuperscript{73} There was nothing inherently comical in such developments or the coverage they received; nonetheless skepticism remained that such changes were mere affectation, that Japan was too alien for such Western niceties to ever fully take root. H. M. Moore, offering British reviews a survey of Japanese politics in the \textit{New Review}, concluded that “Too much… must not be expected of the Japanese immediately.”\textsuperscript{74} F.V. Dickins, another freelance traveler to Japan who observed the country on the eve of the proposed changes, confidently asserted that the country would always be “in reality, in form a simple despotism,” in which “vast numbers of men merely fulfill the functions of beasts of burden.”\textsuperscript{75} Against such obstacles, the liberalizing intent of the emperor and his cabal would scarcely suffice.\textsuperscript{76} Kipling related that every time he encountered discussion of sweeping political reform, he “grieved afresh that such a people should have a ‘constitution’,,” so incongruous seemed the idea.\textsuperscript{77} British views ranged across the spectrum from sly derision to paternalistic pride but seldom strayed from the larger framework which assigned Britain and Japan separate places in the world. \textit{The Economist} took to listing Japanese market prices and banking figures along with those of the European powers and the United States, but discussion of Japan the country rather than Japan the emerging economy never crossed the formidable psychological barrier which divided Britain and its select European peers from the other nations of the world.

\textsuperscript{73} “Japan and Her Foreign Relations,” \textit{The Times}, May 31, 1882.
\textsuperscript{75} F.V. Dickins, “Narrative of a Visit to Japan in 1879,” \textit{Quarterly Review} 150 (October 1880) p. 323.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., p. 316.
\textsuperscript{77} Kipling, p. 311.
Section 3 – The *fin-de-siècle* and Degeneration Anxiety

While British views of Japan continued to reflect a worldview born of the heyday of liberal self-confidence, the 1880s and 1890s were a time of transition in European thought. To the extent that it reflected changing political reality on the Continent, the intellectual ferment of the era owed much of its origins to the phenomenon often known as the “social problem.” The maturing of industrial economies in much of Western Europe had led to explosive population growth and a syndrome of rising political and economic expectations which threatened the fabric of elite control which had underpinned even the most egalitarian proclamations of liberals. As the enfranchisement of the working classes proceeded – often as a prophylactic measure by conservative governments to forestall unrest – liberalism began to lose its status as the voice of the people. The increasing polarization of politics along economic lines left the purely political (in Marxist terms, bourgeois) aspirations of liberalism appearing irrelevant and the old liberal optimism for harmonious social relations based on personal liberty increasingly suspect. Even as the liberal intelligentsia lost some of its political footing, cultural elites projected their own anxiety that the bourgeois, materialist culture of the Industrial Age threatened the survival of traditional Western culture.78 The term *fin-de-siècle*, used to define the cultural output of this period, functions as a figurative as well as literal description of the end of an era, a pervasive sense of impending decay.

The term “degeneration,” which became one of the signature concepts of the *fin-de-siècle* era, began its life in this cultural context, to describe a society whose collective intellect was either stagnating or under threat of being overwhelmed by the crass desires of the numerically-

78 See Elie Halevy, *Classes and Elites In Democracy and Democratization*, and Michael Biddiss, *Age of the Masses: Ideas and Society in Europe since 1870*
superior lower orders. In an intellectual environment inundated with discussions of biology, and
in which the language of evolution proved its remarkable versatility in attaching itself to nearly
every social scientific field, many commentators began to refer to the possibility of a
degeneration that was physical as well as cultural. In continental Europe, especially France, the
Lamarckian doctrine of evolution as driven by external environment had never been displaced by
the true Darwinian theory of natural selection; though intellectuals all across Europe freely
appropriated terms like the “survival of the fittest” and the “struggle for existence,” these terms
often bore little relation to the scientific theory, or to any legitimate science at all. In such
pseudo-scientific prognostications, the overcrowding and appalling hygiene of the cities’ lower
classes would result in physical and mental deterioration which would propagate itself through
the generations. Moreover, the depraved moral habits of the lower orders such as drunkenness,
licentiousness, and miscegenation – natural responses to the poor environment though they might
have been – would nonetheless result in racial decay over time. Not only was the industrial
environment uniquely productive of such dangers, but the new political potency of the working
classes threatened that the elites would not only be displaced from power, but submerged in a
mass of humanity which was degenerating in every sense of the word. One of the most popular
exponents of such theories was the German author Max Nordau, whose manifesto *Degeneration*
was widely read both in Britain and continental Europe. The degenerates, he said, betray their
affliction in their very physiognomy, and what does not show on their faces shows in their
amoral behavior: “That which nearly all degenerates lack is the sense of morality and of right
and wrong. For them, there exists no law, no decency, no modesty.”79 Anatole Durkheim’s
studies on *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893) and *Suicide* (1897), accorded greater
academic respect than the polemical works of Nordau, presented further arguments that

European society was suffering from a wasting pathology whose symptoms were readily apparent in the decay of its civilization and of its people’s physique.\textsuperscript{80}

Even in Great Britain, where liberals had heretofore pointed with pride to the country’s success in mollifying the social pressures of industrialization through gradual reform, the advent of mass politics placed strain on the old faith in individualist doctrine and perpetual progress.\textsuperscript{81} The Reform Act of 1884, passed with considerable bipartisan support by William Gladstone’s Liberal government, was the third in a series of constitutional reforms which had gradually expanded male suffrage in Parliamentary elections, and the most sweeping in extent. Like the Acts of 1832 and 1867 before it, it was motivated partly by the interests of partisan maneuvering and partly to assuage working class interests. It produced no revolution in British politics; the dynamics of Liberal and Conservative party conflict in the House of Commons continued much the same for the next two decades. Its passage, however, coincided with a period of renewed labor unrest which shattered the relative calm which had prevailed in class relations since the 1840s. Major unemployment riots rattled London opinion in the mid-1880s, followed by dock strikes in London and the North in 1889. The labor constituency, politically dormant since the Chartist movement’s failure early in the century, began to organize into parties: first the Marxist Social Democratic Federation in 1881, followed later by the Independent Labour Party. The Fabian Society, organized in 1884, became the leading intellectual voice of left-wing ideology in Britain and at the same time maintained social respectability through its non-revolutionary politics and its elite membership.\textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{80} Chamberlin, \textit{Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress} (New York: Columbia, 1985) pp. 60-64.

\textsuperscript{81} The letters of Arthur Balfour are a good illustration of a liberal politician’s slow journey from traditional faith in progress to pessimism over the course of a political lifetime. Arthur Balfour, \textit{Arthur James Balfour as Philosopher and Thinker} (New York: Longman, 1912) esp. pp. 90-120.

\textsuperscript{82} Greta Jones, \textit{Social Darwinism and English Thought}, p. 54.
Perhaps the most important consequence of this gradual political realignment occurred not in the world of party politics, but in the intellectual sphere, as the heretofore strong link between social Darwinist thought and individualist liberalism began to disintegrate. The traditional liberals of the 1850s and 1860s, who had confidently asserted a Law of Progress based upon the model of gradualism and individual liberty, were thrown on the defensive by the possibility that a future mass political society, driven by demagoguery and the interests of class warfare, would be unable to sustain such values. Classical liberalism had always been ambivalent, at best, towards the creeping advance of democracy in Britain; in the 1880s many of the radicals of previous decades became de facto conservatives, warning that democratization or socialism could sow the seeds of the decline of British greatness. John Stuart Mill, the most famous British champion of individual liberty,\(^3\) made the elitism which undergirded his brand of liberalism more clear in his writings later in life. Striking a new variation on the theme of degeneration, he warned that blind “majoritarianism” (what many British authors referred to as the American Model) would erase the laborious progress that Britain had achieved. The liberal state, he intoned in language which evoked the scientific concept of entropy, was a fragile entity, subject to decay if its standards were relaxed: “We ought not to forget, that there is an incessant and every-flowing current of human affairs towards the worse, consisting of all the follies, all the vice, all the negligence, indolence, and supineness of mankind.”\(^4\) Darwin’s old friend and supporter T.H. Huxley elaborated on the theme of entropy in a famous Romanes Lecture at Oxford, delivered in 1893. Society’s eternal fight against the decay of its proper values, he said, was like that of the “gardener’s struggle against encroaching weeds.”\(^5\) Herbert Spencer, as committed to individualism as ever, warned that capitulating to labor demands would turn the

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\(^3\) His On Liberty was published at the height of the liberal ascendancy, in 1859.
\(^4\) Chamberlin, p. 183.
\(^5\) Bannister, p. 138.
evolutionary clock backward; in an 1884 speech he lamented that the Factories Act – a scrupulously nonintrusive piece of regulatory legislation which did no more than mandate basic safety standards – was an “apostasy” from the liberal faith. Any kind of state welfare at all, he warned, “tends to arrest the increase of the best, to deteriorate their constitutions, and to pull them down towards the level of the worst. Few, if any, liberals were as doctrinaire as the aging Spencer. Many coalesced, like the Tories had done decades before them, around a kind of rearguard reformism which made some concessions to the idea of greater government interference in the economy without abandoning the core ideology of liberalism. The Birmingham industrialist Joseph Chamberlain, one of the rising stars of the Liberal Party (see Ch. 3), described the Liberal platform of the 1880s as “the ransom property must pay in exchange for security.”

Collectivist theories, whether of the political right or left, increasingly challenged the ascendancy of liberal individualism in British thought. Many critics of traditional liberalism buttressed their cases by relying on a new formulation of social Darwinism which stressed the collectivity of the state rather than the individual as the key variable which determined national progress or decay. For a classic liberal like Spencer, or utilitarian economists, “society” had been little more than an aggregation of individual interests -- in Spencer’s memorable phrase, a collection of “bodies dispersed through an undifferentiated jelly.” The progress paradigm held that the advance of society was merely a convenient collective term denoting the advance of its individual components. Collectivist theorists, however, took advantages of the changing emphasis of social science at the end of the century which increasingly stressed the

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87 Chamberlin, p. 58 (Spencer’s italics)
88 Jones, p. 54.
89 Ibid. p. 60.
interconnectedness of individuals; biology, too, was moving away from the individualism of the early Darwinian analysis of natural history. The biologist Leslie Stephen’s work *The Science of Ethics*, published in 1882, was a landmark text in this developing trend.\(^90\) Just as the jargon of biology and evolution had so readily attached itself to the dominant liberalism of mid-century, so did Darwinian language lend itself readily to political theorists with a radically different, distinctively anti-individualist agenda. The dominant rhetorical device was what subsequent historians have called the “organic analogy:” the anthropomorphization of the state as a living being, which had its own health, its own diseases, and its own evolutionary fate quite apart from, and above, the life outcomes of its citizens. The Fabian Society, the dominant intellectual voice of collectivism in Britain, utilized the organic analogy as a running theme of its earliest manifesto, the *Fabian Essays in Socialism*. Writing in the 1880s, Sidney Webb, one of the society’s co-founders, reported: “It was recently discovered that a society is something more than an aggregate of so many individual units… the new scientific conception of the Social Organism has put completely out of countenance the cherished principles of the Political Economist and the Philosophical Radical.”\(^91\) Webb went on to declare the old liberal optimism hopelessly out of date:

> Fifty years ago, it would have been assumed that absolute freedom in the sense of individual or “manly” independence, plus a criminal code, would spontaneously result in such an arrangement [social progress]; the effect was the philosophical

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\(^{90}\) Jones, p. 58.

apotheosis of *laissez-faire*. Today, every student is aware that no such optimistic assumption is warranted by the facts of life.  

The Fabians’ point, repeated throughout their literature, was that the organic whole of society needed to be tended through measures such as the creation of a national minimum of well-being, systematized state education, and national economic control. The old nostrums of economic liberty and non-interference simply would not suffice; what Britain needed was a radical social rearrangement.

The new collectivist strain of social Darwinism also lent itself to reappraisals of the kinds of philosophical sketches of Britain’s place in the world offered in the previous generation by Bagehot or Kipling. Rather than presenting Great Britain as the model end-state of the evolutionary arrow of progress, the new generation of social Darwinists painted a significantly darker picture. Benjamin Kidd, a sociologist and evolutionary theorist, published his most influential work in 1894’s *Social Evolution*, a popularization of his evolutionary notions which was widely read in Britain and subsequently translated into nearly every European language. In Kidd’s interpretation of history, evolutionary success was achieved not by societies which discovered the keys to differentiation and toleration, but by those whose citizens were most willing to subsume themselves in the larger interests of the group. For most of European history, the motivating force behind such self-abnegation had been religion, but Kidd perceived that an increasingly post-Christian British society faced a dangerous inspiration deficit. *Laissez-faire* individualism, of course, was positively destructive of the interests of social evolution. Echoing Marx, he saw in urban Britain the “degeneration of the working classes even as wealth and science have steadily advanced.” Unlike Marx, he saw socialism – even Fabian-style moderate

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92 Ibid.
socialism – as nothing more than a craven surrender to the selfish interests of the lower classes. Progress, he insisted, was only possible through the efforts of “those who are a little superior in some respects to their fellows, asserting their superiority….It seems impossible to escape the conclusion that the progressive peoples have everywhere the same distinctive features: energetic, vigorous, virile life.”

Kidd’s brand of social Darwinism was entirely shorn of the moralistic tone of its liberal predecessor: the world of nations was little different than the primordial world of nature, “red in tooth and claw.” Progress, for the new social Darwinists, had become devoid of its normative content, signifying nothing more than greater control, greater national cohesiveness, and greater evolutionary success. Charles Pearson, another amateur biologist and racial theorist, published one of the crudest statements of this philosophy in his 1894 book *National Life and Character*. Whereas Kidd had located the secret to national success in submission to higher authority, Pearson described the criteria, in Nietzschean terms, as possession of a catalogue of masculine virtues. The European nations had been great once, he announced, but they had lost their virility through a combination of racial and ideological degradation. Over-population had sapped the West’s strength, while countries like Britain – once so aggressive and daring in the Elizabethan age – had become “bulbous, heavy-witted, and materialist.” Equal damage had been done by the emasculating doctrines of liberalism, which had duped the British leadership class into sincere belief in international harmony and blinded them to the reality of the unceasing international struggle for existence. “The danger,” he warned, “is that, while the lower races are

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94 Ibid. p. 59.
raising themselves to the material level of the higher, the higher may be assimilating to the moral and mental depression of the lower.”96

The arrow of progress, once so confidently thought to point resolutely towards Britain and the liberal paradigm of modernity, had all but disappeared. By the 1890s, the paradox of the liberal worldview had reversed itself in a way that was profoundly disconcerting for British elites who took such thinking seriously. At one time, liberals had proclaimed the possibility of progress irrespective of cultural differences, even as their racial and cultural assumptions left little doubt of Britain’s safety at the top of the world hierarchy; the second generation of social Darwinists disclaimed the existence of any single morally-infused evolutionary path, while the unspoken conviction of Britain’s possession of the secret to success, whatever it was, waned significantly. Social Darwinist theory was endlessly versatile, and by the end of the nineteenth century it presented a double-edged sword: it could grant pseudo-scientific legitimacy to the self-congratulations of a confident world power, but it could just as easily cast a grim aura of evolutionary inevitability over the anxieties of a nation which perceived itself to be in decline.

By the late 1890s, concern over domestic problems had been augmented with anxiety – fueled by the language of evolution and degeneration – over the precariousness of Britain’s privileged position in the world. Such elite preoccupations were juxtaposed with a broader public discourse which in some respects reached new heights of self-congratulatory patriotism. While liberalism as a philosophical worldview encountered increasing intellectual resistance, largely inert doctrines of political liberalism continued to dominate a British scene which continued on tracks laid down much earlier in the nineteenth century. The last government of the elderly Liberal icon William Gladstone was followed in close succession by the Conservative government of Lord Salisbury which continued for nearly ten years; the parties differed more in

96 Ibid. p. 101.
rhetoric than reality, and the same issues – trade, imperial policy, Ireland – which prevailed in the late 1890s had dominated the debate decades earlier. Though intellectuals fretted that demographic and social pressures could result in the decay of the British body politic, the rhetoric of politicians betrayed little such worry. Joseph Chamberlain, the often-bombastic liberal politician, told a raucous crowd of businessmen in 1897 that “the tendency of the time is to throw all power into the hands of the greater empires, and the minor kingdoms – those which are non-progressive, seem to be destined to fall into a secondary and subordinate place.”97 After that ambiguous Darwinian note, however, he re-affirmed, in classic liberal style, his belief that Britain was just such the model of a “greater empire” whose continuing destiny was to be assured by the strength of its values. Reviewing with satisfaction the history of Britain’s role in the world, he repeated that “in almost every instance in which the rule of the Queen has been established and the great Pax Britannica has been enforced, there has come with it ever greater security to life, liberty, and property.”98

Precisely that message of universal beneficence was one of the great themes of Queen Victoria’s lavish Diamond Jubilee in 1897, celebrating Britain’s achievements in her sixty years on the throne. As it turned out, the Jubilee was one of the last and largest outbursts of classical British self-confidence, and even it was not without its discordant notes. Rudyard Kipling, the most popular poet of his generation and a man not always averse to such expressions of national pride, composed his poem *Recessional* as a counterpoint to the celebrations of the Jubilee. Kipling used the traditional moral language of warning against overweening pride and the transience of glory, but his message was strikingly close to that of the social theorists and the Darwinists – perpetual progress was not to be the rule of the future for Britain:

98 Ibid. p. 139
Far-called, our navies melt away;
On dune and headland sinks the fire:
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!
Judge of the Nations, spare us yet,
Lest we forget – lest we forget...
If, drunk with sight of power, we loose
Wild tongues that have not thee in awe,
Such boastings as the gentiles use,
Or lesser breeds without the law –
Lord of hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget – lest we forget.99

It was only when the latent anxiety of the 1880s and 1890s matured into perceptions of an imminent crisis that the liberal worldview would begin to weaken, and narrative of decline would supersede that of progress. And it was only under the influence of such a shift in perceptions that a newly industrialized and aggressive Japan could emerge as a potential equal – even a model – for British observers. The Britain of the Edwardian era in the next decade experienced this catalytic crisis of elite perceptions, a crisis which was ushered in by the events of the country’s traumatic transition to the twentieth century.

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Chapter 3 – The Edwardian Crisis

Section 1 – The Boer War and the Passing of an Era

The full implications of the revolution in social and political thinking sparked by Darwinism, coupled with the cumulative effect of the country’s relative decline in geopolitical position, manifested themselves in the decade which marked the “Edwardian Era” in British history. The decade from 1900 to 1910 was not, in superficial terms, a time of tremendous social crisis in Great Britain. The British empire retained its grandeur and even increased in size; the country experienced no catastrophic economic decline or sudden loss of absolute material strength; the specter of class conflict, an ever-present concern of British elites in the not-too-distant past, remained firmly in the background as the rising Labour Party began the process of peacefully integrating itself into the Parliamentary system. Nonetheless, beneath the surface of a national life which seemed to persevere – even to flourish – in the status quo, however, a sense of profound anxiety exploded into the consciousness of a significant portion of Britain’s elite intellectuals, writers, and politicians. In simplest terms, the Edwardian Era produced a crisis of national self-confidence, when Britain’s future as a great, imperial power – even its survival against rising foes, real and imagined – seemed suddenly less assured. Troubling questions about the soundness of institutions which had once served as pillars of national identity – the army, the education system, the Constitution – reached a pitch which would have been unthinkable even decades earlier, while anxious discussion of the physical condition of Britain’s lower-class population and the crowded cities which they inhabited became couched in the Darwinian language of genetic “degeneration” and the national struggle for survival on the world stage. Edwardian soul-searching was hardly a universal phenomenon, but for a vocal and largely self-
appointed elite, the crisis was real indeed, and it was triggered by two traumatic events which symbolically ushered in the twentieth century: the death of Queen Victoria and the fiasco of the Boer War.\textsuperscript{100}

Queen Victoria died at her country home on the Isle of Wight on January 16, 1901, only days into the new century. She had reigned for sixty-four years and given her name to an era of unparalleled British ascendancy in the world, and by the time of her death she had become, quite literally, the matriarch of Europe. Her deathbed was attended by a devoted contingent of descendants from Britain and abroad, and her subsequent funeral served as a reunion for Europe’s royalty, nearly all of whom could count each other as blood relatives through their joint descent from the dead Queen. The days of such intimate familiarity between the aristocratic elites of Europe – as well as the long century of unquestioned British supremacy symbolized by Victoria – were coming to an end, and contemporary observers detected a sense of passing and transition the significance of which greatly transcended the public’s mourning for a beloved, aged mother figure. In the words of one observer of the Queen’s funeral possession, the novelist Elinor Glyn, “It was impossible not to sense, in that stately procession, the passing of an epoch, and a great one; a period in which England had been supreme, and had attained to the height of her material wealth and power… I felt I was witnessing the funeral procession of England’s greatness and glory.”\textsuperscript{101} In the House of Commons, the Conservative leader Arthur Balfour – a man not given to sentimentality – was voluble in expressing his sense of transition tinged with foreboding: “Grief affects us,” he admitted, “not merely because we have lost a great personality,

\textsuperscript{100} The South African conflict of 1899-1902, though known by many modern historians as the “Second Anglo-Boer War” (the first was in 1879-1881) to avoid terminological Anglocentrism, was known almost universally at the time – and remains so known in contemporary culture – as simply the “Boer War,” and for that reason I will refer to it as such throughout. Though only one of a series of seemingly interminable colonial conflicts in the region, it played by far the biggest role in British history and had an outsized impact on public opinion and national collective memory.

but because we feel that the end of a great epoch has come upon us.”¹⁰² For British subjects of all
classes, Victoria represented remarkable continuity and had persevered as a living symbol of the
Pax Britannica which had characterized the mid-nineteenth century. Her son Albert Edward,
who took the throne as Edward VII, survived only for a short reign, one which coincided almost
exactly with the century’s first decade. His accession was a potent symbol of change, but the
most important catalyst for Edwardian anxiety had occurred two years earlier, when the shocking
news of the Boer’s War’s “Black Week” reached Britain from South Africa.

The outbreak of war between British South Africa and the two Boer republics of
Transvaal and the Orange Free State had been anticipated for some time in both London and the
Cape Colony by 1899. When outright conflict finally began in October of that year, it marked a
final failure (or unwillingness) to resolve the seemingly intractable tensions between the Boer
inhabitants of the two republics – whose ruling class consisted of the descendants of the region’s
original Dutch, Flemish, and German colonists – and the encroaching ambitions of the British-
governed Cape Colony. Ever since the heavily mythologized “Grand Trek” migration away from
British control by some 14,000 Boers in the 1830s, the history of South Africa had been marked
by a series of clashes over land and resources, both between the European settlers and against
resisting indigenous African nations.¹⁰³ The discovery of diamond fields in disputed territory
provoked one round of conflict in the 1860s, and another was sparked in the 1880s by the
discovery of the massive Rand gold fields in the very heart of the Boer Republic of the
Transvaal. A loose coalition of British business interests – first among them the De Beers

¹⁰² United Kingdom, Proceedings of the House of Commons (Hansard): Official Report, Volume 89 (January 25,
1901), col. 10.
against African resistance was the so-called “Zulu War,” including the disastrous British defeat at Isandlwana in
1879. Though the defeat was written off in most circles as a mere momentary setback on the path to
overwhelming victory, it was an early clarion call for alarmists at British military readiness.
diamond firm headed by the irrepressible Cecil Rhodes – began applying pressure to the Transvaal government for monetary concessions.

When Transvaal president Paul Kruger proved unyielding, and the Boer majority’s refusal to grant political rights to the newly-arrived British immigrants in the two republics provided an added pretext for outrage, both the Boer governments and the British began to view armed conflict as inevitable. In London, Lord Salisbury, the Conservative Prime Minister, and Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain came around to the view that the only way to pacify South Africa was for Britain to re-assume sovereignty over the two Boer Republics. Accordingly the government dispatched 60,000 troops to the Cape Colony and brushed off the Boer ultimatum calling for demobilization. Salisbury, Chamberlain, and South African Governor Alfred Milner took the Boers (who were, after all, of European descent) seriously as a fighting force, especially considering that memories of the setback inflicted on imperial forces in the first Boer war of 1879-1880 – when the Transvaal had re-secured its sovereignty – were still humiliatingly fresh. Nonetheless, few in London or Cape Town were prepared for the ferocity of Boer resistance or the military disasters that struck at the heart of the Empire’s self confidence.104

In one week in early December 1899, the over-confident British invasion force suffered near-simultaneous defeats in three pitched battles against Boer forces; it was a sequence of disasters which went down in British history as “Black Week.” A stunned British public, including a mortified Queen Victoria, read humiliating newspaper accounts of thousands of casualties (including a great number of officers from the flower of the upper classes) and key strategic cities such as Kimberly and Ladysmith left wide open to Boer advance. After further defeats in the opening weeks of 1900, it seemed for some time as if the entire Cape Colony could be overrun by the seemingly invincible enemy. The danger of final defeat was never great – a

104 Ibid. pp. 35-55
steady stream of British reinforcements soon stemmed the initial tide, and the nation’s widespread panic subsided by late February 1900. Nevertheless, the tension produced at all levels of British society by the war’s unexpected early setbacks, as well as the strain of continued heavy casualties throughout the campaign, were manifest in the outburst of cathartic celebration that greeted news of the relief of Mafeking in May 1900. The ordeal suffered by that tiny frontier outpost, which had been besieged since Black Week, had become a focus of a great deal of newspaper attention, especially in the pages of working-class organs such as the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Herald*, and its final delivery from danger became cause for celebration in cities throughout England: “Liverpool was alive with parading crowds… Birmingham spread the news like wildfire from its theatres…the Yorkshire dales reverberated with the sound of strangely blown mill and factory sirens.”

Popular jingoism aside, however, not even the conclusion of the conflict in 1902 – with an armistice that marked a nominal British victory – could erase the lasting effects of the war, especially for those who witnessed the British performance firsthand. In language which was surely a conscious echo of the eponymous Kipling poem, *Times* war correspondent Leo Amery declared the war to be “the nation’s Recessional after all the pomp and show of the year of jubilee. It has transmuted the complacent arrogance and contempt of other nations begotten of long years of peace and prosperity to a truer consciousness…of our defects.” Predictably, the initial criticism of the nation’s “defects” focused on the weaknesses of the British army laid so humiliatingly bare by the first months of war; this, too, was cued by passionate eyewitness accounts. The most common critique was of the Army’s unreadiness for modern warfare -- its

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reliance on outdated traditions of parade-ground formations and poor combat training. Winston Churchill, then a young war correspondent for the *Morning Post*, described the vivid contrast between British infantrymen and their enemies: “The individual Boer, mounted, in a suitable country, is worth four or five regular soldiers. The extraordinary mobility of the enemy protects his flanks... Are all the gentlemen of England off fox-hunting?”107 Writing for the *Times*, Leo Amery made much the same point, albeit in less Romantic language: “All I saw during these weeks left on my mind an ineffaceable impression of the incapacity of our senior officers, the uselessness of our army training for the purposes of modern war... above all, the need of complete, *revolutionary* reform of the Army from top to bottom.”108 In one of his earliest ventures into direct political commentary, the novelist and polymath H.G. Wells submitted to the critical firestorm a magazine piece, “The Cyclist Soldiers,” in which he viciously parodied a military culture so bureaucratic, so wedded to tradition, that it could not even assimilate the lowly bicycle into service without tying itself up in knots.109 Such hand-wringing about the fighting capacities of the British Army was far from unprecedented; in fact, it was merely the continuation of a long tradition of national *post mortem* dialogue in the aftermath of past setbacks such as the American Revolution, the Afghan Campaign, and the Crimean War of the 1850s. In fact, domestic outrage over the failures of the field hospitals – in which hundreds of soldiers died under poor conditions – mirrored the uproar which had given rise to the Red Cross movement in the Crimean era.110

Where the aftermath of the Boer War differed from all past crises, however, was in the presence of a Darwinian master narrative of national degeneration which gave entirely new

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107 Judd and Surridge, pp. 129-133.
weight to discussions of British military failure. The embarrassments of the Crimean War, despite the outcry they produced at home, came near the absolute apogee of British material supremacy and self-confidence, a mere three years after the triumphant Great Exposition which had showcased Britain’s unparalleled economic might to the world. By 1900, however, the double-edged sword of the Darwinian worldview had made great inroads into British social and political thinking. Just as Chamberlain and Rhodes had almost seamlessly integrated the language of the international struggle for survival into triumphalist accounts of Britain’s unique world-historical trajectory, so now could the gathering evidence of the erosion of Britain’s position in the world feed speculation that the nation had become degenerate: that it was falling behind in the fierce global competition for survival. For some political radicals, the remnants of the coalition of Nonconformist liberals who had supported Gladstone’s moralist foreign policy in the 1870s and 1880s, Britain’s degeneracy was of a strictly moral character. Indeed, the second phase of the Boer War, in which the Army’s frustration with the guerrilla tactics of the Boer resistance had led to the confinement of civilians in camps and several atrocities, supplied ample fodder for a critique of the moral compass of the Empire. Henry Campbell-Bannerman, the leader of the opposition Liberal Party in Parliament, famously denounced his country’s “methods of barbarism” in an election speech. Such sentiments, however, were strikingly out of touch with the tenor of the times. The anti-war wing of the Liberals – soon derisively labeled the “pro-Boer” contingent in the press – could count on no more than forty votes in Parliament;

111 Nonconformist, in this context, refers to the non-Anglican protestant sects which had traditionally been driven by a dissenting, evangelical spirit and had been extraordinarily vocal in politics. Whereas the Conservative party counted on a primarily Anglican base, Liberals attracted the majority of Nonconformists.
112 The origin of the term is disputed, but it is likely that the term “concentration camp” dates to the British internment camps of this stage of the war.
moreover, the Conservatives’ exploitation of popular jingoism in calling a general election soon after combat ended ensured an electoral landslide for pro-Imperial, pro-war candidates.

Such rejection of “quaint,” pre-Darwinian moralism was hardly confined to the voting public; in intellectual circles as well as for the man in the street, the crisis induced by the Boer War was not one of conscience, but of strength. Writing for the periodical *Nineteenth Century*, the imperialist booster Harold Wyatt emphasized that in struggles like the Boer War, just one small theater in the global, zero-sum great power game, “the choice has not lain between the extension of our dominion and the maintenance of the status quo, but between such an extension and the *abandonment* of the regions concerned to a foreign rival.”114 As the purest possible clash of rival powers, matching strength for strength, system against system, on the battlefield, war was “God’s test,” the all-important tipping point which separated the rising powers from the static, the static from the declining.115 The Boer War was just such a tipping point in the minds of many observers; the Edwardian decade would be dominated by efforts to reverse the perceived incipient slide both at home and abroad. Even the socialist Beatrice Webb, nominally a pacifist and anti-imperialist, endorsed the conventional wisdom arising from the “lessons of the war,” confessing to her diary that such a sobering wake-up call, “to a ruling race, is the hardest hit of all… If we found ourselves faced with *real* disaster, should we as a nation have the nerve and the persistency to stand up against it? That is the question that haunts me.”116

Protecting the nation from foreign peril had been an afterthought through much of the nineteenth century, but the consequences for Britain of a potential great war between the European powers became the focus of preoccupation both within the army and without. The renewed sense of danger was not merely a fantasy creation of Darwinian ideology: by 1900,

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Britain had lost much of its margin of security over European rivals. The root cause, of course, was the acceleration of Continental Europe’s industrialization in the late nineteenth century. Once the producer of over half the world’s industrial output, Britain had seen its lead steadily decline and then disappear. By the first decade of the twentieth century, Imperial Germany had drawn even with Britain in economic might; a few years later, the United States had raced past both countries and taken its place as the world’s greatest industrial power. At a time in which raw manpower was still considered as the final arbiter of military potential, Britain’s demographic stagnation was real and troubling, as well. The home islands’ population had nearly stopped growing, while Russia, Germany, the U.S.A., and even Italy experienced continued expansion. Only France, another power written off by many as hopelessly “decadent,” had undergone similar population stagnation.\footnote{Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, pp. 195-210.}

Armed with evidence of these alarming trends, advocates of military reform waged vigorous battle on Britain’s entrenched traditions of a volunteer army and minimal defense spending. The Elgin Commission, deputized by Parliament to report on the Army’s organizational failures, returned its judgments in 1902, nearly all of which were widely accepted.\footnote{Ian F. W. Beckett, “The South African War and the Late Victorian Army,” Government of Australia: Armed Forces Historical Documents <http://www.defence.gov.au/ARMY/AHU/docs/The_Boer_War_Beckett.pdf>}

The armed forces were “modernized” with the addition of a general staff structure, while a quasi-governmental Committee on Imperial Defense was created to provide for greater strategic planning.\footnote{Denis Judd, *Balfour and the British Empire: A Study in Imperial Evolution 1874-1902* (London: Macmillan, 1968) pp. 42-48.} For many of the most enthusiastic imperialists, however, the solution to the long-term problem lay not in the defense of Britain itself, but in the reconstitution of the Empire as a worldwide commonwealth and bulwark against foreign powers. Building on the “Anglo-Saxonist” rhetoric which posited a natural, indissoluble blood connection not only among the
dominions of the British Empire, but between Britain and the United States as kindred nations, many imperialists promoted the creation of greater ties of racial brotherhood outside the political bounds of the empire. Cecil Rhodes devoted much of the later portion of his life to the promotion of Anglo-Saxon unity, always with the implicit message that only through racial unity would the Anglophone peoples survive the coming global struggle; the Rhodes Scholarships of Oxford University owe their origin to his attempt to further Anglo-American brotherhood.

Joseph Chamberlain, one of the most charismatic politicians of the age and an ideological chameleon whose allegiances shifted several times in his career, was nonetheless consistent throughout his life in harping on the theme of the English-speaking world beyond the sea as the ultimate salvation of his people’s small, surrounded island. In a speech after the Boer War, he warned his audience that “the tendency of our times is to throw all power into the hands of the greater Empires, and the minor nations – those which are non-progressive, seem to be destined to fall into second place.” With imperial unity, however, he projected a sunny future in which the stagnation of England itself would be perpetually rejuvenated by its younger, healthier offspring; with unity, “the world will not be big enough for British trade and the British flag – the operation even of conquering the moon and the planets is only something which is yet to be known.” In 1903, Chamberlain launched a campaign to bring racial unity to fruition through “imperial preference” – a scheme to abandon Britain’s long-held free trade dogma in favor of preferential tariffs creating an Empire economic bloc. This proposed return to the mercantile age never

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120 In this context, of course, the only relevant nations were the “White Dominions” — namely, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the new Union of South Africa which arose from the conclusion of the Boer War. India, with its tremendous manpower, often played a large role in schemes of imperial self-defense (and contributed greatly to the war efforts of both the First and Second World Wars), but was not considered eligible for a future post-imperial commonwealth of the kind envisioned by Rhodes or Chamberlain.


123 Ibid. p. 142-143.
caught on with the Liberal Party’s rank-and-file, nor did it inspire much enthusiasm from the
dominions themselves. An imperial conference in 1902 made it clear that Canada, Australia, and
New Zealand desired more, not less, economic independence from the mother country. Though
agitation for greater economic and political unity in the Edwardian era ultimately came to
naught, intellectuals and politicians of all persuasions (socialists included) continued to cherish
the latent potential of Britain’s empire as its greatest geopolitical asset.\footnote{124}

Anxiety over Britain’s future security was by no means confined to the hand-wringing of
elites and military planners. The decade was rife with war scares real and imagined, and foreign
policy crises from Morocco to the Sudan to the Far East were breathlessly reported and
magnified by such staples of the yellow press as the \textit{Mail} and \textit{Herald}. As the decade wore on, the
focus of anxiety increasingly became the British navy, the nation’s only line of defense against
Continental powers whose armies were many times larger than anything Britain could muster for
its defense. From the time of the first naval scare of 1903 onward, ambitious, rapidly arming
Wilhelmine Germany loomed ever larger as Britain’s likely antagonist in Europe’s next great
war. Advocates of naval expansion, chief among them Admiral James Fisher, masterfully
manipulated popular fear of the German navy to set Britain on course for a naval building race
which led admiralty spending to increase by an unprecedented fifty percent in little over a
decade.\footnote{125} In popular culture, the decade’s security fears were distilled into an outburst of novels
and articles in a genre which experienced its greatest popularity since the time of Napoleon:
invasion fantasy literature. Often imagined as retrospective histories of the decline and fall of the
British Empire or as suspense novels of a race against time to thwart a sinister foreign plot, such

\footnotetext[124]{Bernard Porter, “The Edwardians and their Empire,” \textit{Edwardian England}, Edited by Donald Read (New
Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1982) pp. 128-142.}
\footnotetext[125]{Ibid. p. 150.}
works featured one dominant theme: the danger of a nation falling behind in the evolutionary race, an England gone soft.

The most widely-read and impactful of invasion fantasies was Erskine Childers’s 1903 *Riddle of the Sands*, in which seafaring British young men discover a German navy amassing for invasion after they had strayed too far from the English shore. The heroes’ ingenuity and courage (perennial English virtues) save the day, but the book nevertheless paints a picture of latent danger from a nation colder, more austere, more ruthless than vulnerable Britain.\textsuperscript{126} Childers’s characters chide their nation for forgetting its ultimate vulnerability, and the virtues which had once made it great: “We’ve been safe so long, and gotten so rich, that we’ve forgot what we owe it to.”\textsuperscript{127} Guy du Maurier, a former army officer who had seen the Boer War firsthand, tried to influence an ongoing naval spending debate in 1909 with his play, *An Englishman’s Home*, which drew upon the same psychological vulnerability. The play opens with a small English town suffering invasion at the hands of the tall, muscular, fanatically efficient troops of the “Empire of the North” (a thinly disguised Germany), only to be driven off, as in nearly all such books, by a belatedly mobilized British public. In reviewing the work, the *Times* spoke for much of the intellectual establishment by disparaging the crassness of the play’s expression while at the same time affirming the reality of the national danger to which it pointed: it was “startling testimony to the hold which the great National Defence question has taken of the thoughts and imagination of the English public…what is significant is that the thing should have been [written] at all.”\textsuperscript{128} Whether analyzed as mere popular hysteria or a deeper cathartic expression of top-to-bottom national anxiety, the era’s invasion literature reflected with startling clarity the

amorality of a world scene viewed through the ever-present Darwinian prism. The “villains” of such works are seldom the ascendant foreign powers – Childers’s characters refer to the Kaiser as a “splendid chap” – but the unprepared British themselves. That a younger, stronger power such as Russia or Germany or Japan should invade and conquer was only natural; the moral condemnation, such as any existed, was leveled at the weak and unwilling rather than the strong and rapacious.

Section 2 – The Co-Efficients and the Reform Movement

The Boer War served as a catalyst for a reassessment of British society which extended far beyond the country’s external affairs. The most profound crisis of the Edwardian era, in fact, was the transformation which became increasingly apparent in elite thinking about a range of domestic social and political issues. After all, the same all-embracing – sometimes crudely vulgarized – “national Darwinian” worldview which posited a global struggle for existence also lent itself to a strong ideological analogy between evolutionary fitness in individuals and “national fitness.” This figurative personification of national welfare had been decades in the making, of course, but with the onset of the twentieth century came a seismic shift in the tone of the discussion. Just as the particular greatness of elements of the British national character had been read into the concrete successes of the nation in the mid-nineteenth century, so did national health become the object of concerned scrutiny once the material bases of British power began to deteriorate and the events of the Boer War had tipped the balance decisively against the country’s former smug self-confidence. Writing in the 1880s, Rudyard Kipling could see the “genius of the Anglo-Saxon” at work in such characteristics as his stubbornness and courage – in
a word, his individualism: “When he stands like an ox in the furrow with his sullen set eyes on your own / my son, leave the Saxon alone.”

In the years after the Boer War, commentators were far more likely to chide Britons for their national traits rather than salute them; if the race was indeed on the path to degeneration, then it was all too easy to see the nation’s adherence to tradition as destructive stubbornness and its characteristic individualism as a lamentable barrier blocking the way to what Beatrice Webb called “the higher freedom of corporate life.”

The Edwardian discussion of the supposed defects of the British state was dominated by a single term which became one of the decade’s watchwords: efficiency. The term owed its origin – and its unique currency in the era – both to the simplistic Darwinian analogy of the state to the organism and to the prevalence of theories of “scientific management” in business and government. If the world arena was indeed marked by a struggle for material supremacy – and if the greatness of nations, like that of corporations or electrical generators, could be measured solely by output, then it was clear that what was wanting in Britain was a thorough reorganization, a clean slate, which stripped away old and inefficient ways of conducting the nation’s business. “After all,” as the Liberal leader Lord Rosebery intoned in 1900, “the State is in essence a great joint stock company…as in a business, too, a periodical stock-taking is necessary in a state.” The term “efficiency” came to connote far more than its commonplace, innocuous meaning; it became inseparable from the milieu in which it was most frequently used, frequently with a mix of both scientific and business jargon. In an anonymous article in

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130 Webb, Our Partnership, p. 222.
131 G.R. Searle’s The Quest for National Efficiency is the definitive work in describing this discussion, and the political re-shuffling which it created. Though it focuses almost entirely on the political aspects of this phenomenon, it also acknowledges the influence of Darwinism on the tone of the discussion, if not in much detail. Searle’s work also gave me my first indication (in passing) of a possible connection between the thoughts of the “efficiency group” about domestic British issues and perceptions of foreign countries like Japan.
132 Searle, p. 87,
*Fortnightly Review*, provocatively entitled “Will England Last the Century?”, one author gleefully pursued this scientific metaphor, asserting that Britain must be “re-engined” or else suffer consequences of the “ruinous decadence” towards which it was plainly headed. H.G. Wells was even more blunt, reminding his readers that the horizons of social reformers and visionaries had trimmed and re-oriented in a post-Darwinian age; no longer did the path to national greatness go through the kinds of historical virtues enumerated by Macaulay or through pie-in-the-sky dreaming, but through rigorous construction of a rational, efficient state. “The utopia of a modern dreamer must needs differ in this one fundamental aspect from the nowhere and utopias men planned before Darwin quickened the thought of the world.”

One of the works which did the most to set the tone for the efficiency movement – and one which, despite its often crude radicalism, reached probably the largest general audience – was journalist and provocateur Arnold White’s 1901 polemic, *Efficiency and Empire*. White deplored the spirit of “lassitude” which had come over the country, threatening not only the international supremacy represented by global empire, but its national security itself. In a brief tour of recent history, he compared Britain to a nation asleep and catalogued the ideological follies which have historically stood in the way of the realization of the efficiency imperative:

> The British administrative system is like that of a prosperous man in advanced middle age who eats and drinks to repletion, takes no exercise, and is content to enjoy life while he may. We have had a start of eighty years in the international race to prosperity…material wealth has poured into the country… we present profound temptations to better armed and educated nations to strike a blow at our heart. Since the fall of Napoleon, and during the reign of machinery, the cult of

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133 H.G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (Lincoln: NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1967) p. 5. Wells’ *Modern Utopia* was also his primary blueprint for a society which mirrored that of the “New Japan” (see Ch. 4).
unfitness under the shibboleth of free trade… the public has watched the
decadence of our administrative system, under the influences of Party, Society,
and a false view of education.\footnote{Arnold White, \textit{Efficiency and Empire} (London: Methuen and Company, 1901) pp. 24-25.}

White’s book is partly a sustained, highly personal polemic against individuals in the Tory administration at the turn of the century, but it also helped create the template for future discussions of reform for national efficiency, which would focus throughout the decade on three themes: social hygiene, education, and government reform. \textit{Efficiency and Empire} concludes on a note which serves as a nearly perfect encapsulation of the Darwinian ethos which underlay the Edwardian debates on social reform: “Efficiency is the basis, and probably the reason, of all moral law… Facts dispel tranquility.”\footnote{Ibid. p. 309.}

In some respects, White stood on the very fringe of respectable political debate in Britain; his alarmism was excessive, and his calls for the comprehensive gutting of British society along efficiency lines went too far for all but a few outcasts and utopians. Nonetheless, the battle cry of efficiency exerted a powerful effect on politics, and it transcended traditional party divisions for a diverse group of elites and intellectuals who shared the same concern for the nation’s decadence and goals for its ultimate revitalization through efficiency. In the aftermath of the Boer War, calls for “regeneration of the race” emanated from press sources both respectable and “popular,” and from a bipartisan (tri-partisan, including the nascent Labour Party)\footnote{The British Labour Party, which won its first Parliamentary seats at the turn of the century, emerged through sponsorship of Trades Union Congress candidates by members of smaller, more elite organizations, chiefly the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and the Fabian Society. Though not necessarily so in official doctrine, the Parliamentary party was from the beginning non-Marxist and non-Revolutionary.} group of political figures and writers. In the short term, the most concrete expression of this widespread dissatisfaction was an all-purpose revolt against the political status quo – both the Conservative
government under Lord Salisbury and Arthur Balfour and the Parliamentary Liberal leadership under the ineffectual (and worse, anti-imperialist) Henry Campbell-Bannerman. The revolt by the majority of the intellectual leaders of the Liberal Party led to widespread conviction that the old party was moribund, and to the formation of a separate association – the Liberal League – and a separate political organ – the *New Liberal Review* – from which to advocate the gospel of efficiency at home and revitalized empire abroad. In a widely-noticed speech which was taken to inaugurate an official schism in the party, Lord Chesterfield in December 1901 called for a new start, a party which emphasized remedying “defence, commerce, and industry, but with special reference to the physical degeneracy of our race.”

For this *ad hoc* coalition of disaffected liberals – a group whose notable members included Leo Amery and Winston Churchill (both back from their reporting stints in South Africa), Sir Edward Grey, H.H. Asquith, and Richard Haldane – the ideology of efficiency was not only an imperative for the salvation of Britain, but for escaping their own party’s ideological dead end, what Grey himself called its “nightmare of futility.” In the words of the historian H.G.C. Matthew, efficiency was “a criterion for assessing national and imperial needs and for developing a positive, rather than a negative, liberalism.”

A clean new political start for the nation seemed to demand at its head a fresh leader, untainted by the morass of the two-party status quo; moreover, the ideology of control embodied in “efficiency” and national Darwinism seemed to call for charismatic, focused leadership unhindered by the obligations of deference to fussy party hierarchy and Parliamentary

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138 Ibid. p. 85.
maneuvering. “What the empire needs,” said Cecil Chesterton,140 “is not a politician and a talker, not a middle-aged gentleman without the zeal and courage of a reformer, but a man, if possible, who has thought, who has seen, who knows – a man with an iron will.”141 For several years, Lord Rosebery provided just such a hopeful figure in the minds of many efficiency advocates. Briefly Prime Minister in the 1890s, Rosebery had artfully cultivated an aloofness from party life, and it was this characteristic, more than any truly charismatic qualities on his part, which endeared him to even a critic as radical as Arnold White.142 In the end, though, Rosebery refused to openly challenge the Liberal Party leadership, and his waffling on Chamberlain’s tariff reform crusade and other hot-button issues had irreparably damaged his credibility as a decisive leader by 1903.143

As the idea of a true “efficiency party” headed by a figure like Chamberlain or Rosebery faded in the face of the entrenched two-party system, a group of dedicated reformists strove to fill the gap through informal associations which rose above petty party distinctions. The most famous such grouping was the so-called “Co-Efficients Club,” founded upon the initiative of the Fabian socialists Sidney and Beatrice Webb in November 1902.144 A club composed of liberal imperialists, reformist conservatives (like former South African governor Alfred Milner) and socialists alike, it included such leading intellectual figures as Halford Mackinder,145 Bertrand Russell, George Bernard Shaw, and H.G. Wells. It was, in the words of Leo Amery, above all a “brains trust,” a kind of blueprint for the technocratic government by experts so fervently desired by nearly all its members. Indeed, such a coalescence of superficially incompatible political

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140 Brother of the more famous liberal figure G.K. Chesterton  
141 Searle, p. 94.  
143 Matthew, p. 55.  
144 Amery, My Political Life, p. 223.  
145 Famous as a political theorist at the time, specializing in the then-popular discipline of “geopolitics.”
backgrounds was possible only by a shared faith in a future which belonged to efficient
government and extra-political expert control; nowhere was such elitism more nakedly avowed
than in the Fabian movement represented by Shaw, Wells, and the Webbs. From its very
inception, Fabian socialism had been a curious anomaly among the parties of the European left –
a hybrid of genuine economic leftism with a characteristically English utilitarian background.
Staying true to the Darwinian language of their seminal manifestos in the *Fabian Essays* and
disdaining the humanitarian, emotive justifications for reform advocated by Christian socialists
or genuinely working-class movements, Fabians tended to approach the question, in good
Darwinian fashion, “scientifically.”146 As Sidney Webb said in an article advocating poor law
reform, “We may…consider the nation simply as a number of associated industrial units whose
highest good lies in the achievements of their maximum productive capacity;” on another
occasion, he denounced poverty on the grounds that it “wasted potential citizens.”147 In other
words, the Fabian Society’s socialism was of a variety perfectly in tune with the intellectual
climate of the decade, enabling them to find common ground with reformists from outside the
Left on a great variety of issues, including the need for elite leadership. The importance of the
welfare of “the people,” such as it existed for the efficiency movement, was as a variable, a key
indicator of national welfare. It was with this goal of the ideal, rational, efficient future Britain in
mind that many of the reform efforts of the 1900s were pursued.

The first reform preoccupation of the Edwardian era was one which touched most closely
of all on the Darwinian “organic analogy”: the physical condition of the British population,
particularly the working classes in the cities. Like so much else, this movement received its

146 See ch. 2.
Poor Law was Britain’s antiquated system of public welfare, which had last been overhauled in 1834. Under its
provisions, “indoor relief” was provided to the unemployment only on the fulfillment of frequently-humiliating
requirements which often included poor house residency.
greatest impetus from the shock of the Boer War, when medical examination of recruits from urban areas such as Liverpool and Manchester revealed many to be in poor fighting shape. In reality, the physical condition of the working classes in Britain – including such variables as infant mortality, calorie consumption, and life expectancy – had improved steadily through the late nineteenth century, despite the persistence of economic inequality and the wretched living conditions of many northern industrial slums.¹⁴⁸ Alarmism was widespread nonetheless; the specter of the physical degeneration of the British race was one of the most frightening of all elements in the national decline narrative. A Royal Commission on Physical Degeneration was speedily formed, spurred by such publications as George Shee’s fear-mongering article, “The Deterioration of the National Physique.” In it, he purported to draw on Boer War data and the philanthropist Seebohm Rowntree’s groundbreaking 1901 study of urban poverty¹⁴⁹ to claim, among other things, that the British working classes were becoming physical “pygmies.”¹⁵⁰ This anxiety about national health led, on one hand, to revived interest in the pseudoscientific field of eugenics, which reached its height of respectability in the early twentieth century.¹⁵¹

Most observers, however, subscribed to the more mainstream view that it was the physical environment, and not breeding, which presented the gravest threat to the country’s health – a revival in simplified form of the Lamarckian doctrine of inheritance of acquired characteristics. In 1905, Cecil Chesterton, who by then had cast his lot with the “Co-Efficients” group, expressed the widely-felt sense of urgency: “In the last resort, all progress, all empire, all

¹⁴⁹ Though Rowntree, a famous candy-maker turned Quaker humanitarian activist, was a humanist reformer in the traditional mold, his data were mined widely by Shee and other “efficiency” activists.
¹⁵¹ The journal of the British Eugenics Society, the Annals of Eugenics, saw increased circulation.
efficiency, depends upon the kind of race we breed.” Later in the decade, a Parliamentary report struck the omnipresent Darwinian note, warning that “no country, however rich, can permanently hold its own in the race of international competition, if hampered by an increasing load of so much dead weight.” It was the Fabian socialists among reformists who spearheaded the drive for a solution to the perceived physical crisis, in the form of a comprehensive National Minimum, including reform of Britain’s antiquated Poor Law, national health insurance, and in some cases, national military service. Though the cautious Liberal governments of the middle of the decade managed to resist pressure for such far-ranging reform, measures such as the School Meals Act of 1906, the School Medical Service Act of 1907, and the Children’s Act of 1908 bear the imprint of reformist activism. Fabian pressure bore its most wide-ranging fruit under the more radical Liberal governments after 1909, when the Cabinet’s turn to populism combined with the logic of efficiency to drive Lloyd George’s National Insurance program. Advocates of social welfare legislation, of course, came from a variety of philosophical backgrounds; some were humanitarians or temperance advocates like Rowntree, and others were unapologetic political populists like the fiery Liberal leader David Lloyd George. For a significant group of efficiency enthusiasts, however, improving the lot of the masses was hardly a human calculation at all, but rather a means to halt the physical degeneration which threatened the health of the body politic.

If the health of the working classes was a necessary provision for the satisfaction of the nation’s “raw materials” in the minds of many of the Edwardian reformers, then education – especially higher education – became all the more vital for the production of a true, efficient

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152 Searle, p. 61.
national elite. Even before 1900, many British pundits had looked with alarm on the rapidly
developing German technical education system of the 1880s and 1890s; by the 1900s, it was a
widely held assumption that German and even American universities provided a far more
practical, modern education than their ancient counterparts at Oxford and Cambridge. In
*Efficiency and Empire*, Arnold White reserved some of his most potent scorn for the
“degenerate” ruling classes graduating from Britain’s venerable institutions:

> Wealthy young men, who have been tended and valeted from their youth up,
> waited on by servants, driven by coachmen, and fed on dainties, sleeping on soft
> beds under watertight roofs all their days, learning the world mainly through
> books, which are but the reflection of other men’s ideas, can never become real
> men, or the *efficient* rulers of real men…No one can deny the charm and grace of
> the finished product of our universities. The dead languages and the higher
> mathematics of the mind are to the modern statesman what masts and sails are to
> the modern naval officer…The failure of modern education to give us an efficient
governing class has been revealed in the failures of the Boer War.\(^\text{155}\)

Few other public figures shared in White’s call for a Spartan, physically-based education
for the upper classes, but Fabians and reform Liberals alike agreed that higher education must be
re-engineered to produce a self-consciously elite governing class capable of forming the
vanguard of a new “government of experts.” Of the Webbs’ circle, no one was more vociferous
in calling for a new philosophy of education than Richard Haldane – a man who was first and
foremost a military expert and who would become War Secretary later in the decade. Haldane
agreed with White’s conclusion that “the courage, energy, and enterprise taught to British middle
and upper classes were hopelessly out of date compared to the more scientific virtues of the

Americans and the Germans.”¹⁵⁶ What was needed, instead, was emulation of the technical sciences training given in Germany, and perhaps even more urgently, training in the kinds of “scientific management” principles which had become prevalent in American business circles.¹⁵⁷ In what was surely their greatest collective achievement, Beatrice and Sidney Webb contributed greatly to the realization of this vision with their founding of the London School of Economics, intended as a showpiece alternative to abstruse Oxbridge learning. The goals of efficiency in national education naturally extended beyond the universities to comprehend elementary and secondary education reform as well -- uniformity, secularism, and rigorous training in proficiency in modern skills being essential for the working classes as well as the new aristocracy.

The battle-lines which formed around one of the greatest political controversies of the decade, the fight over the 1902 Education Act, demonstrates the distance that reformist Liberals, especially, had travelled from their nineteenth century roots. The Act, sponsored by the Tory government, sought to rationalize the tangle of British educational authorities by consolidating schools under regional government authority and bringing Anglican and Catholic schools under the umbrella of government sponsorship.¹⁵⁸ Such implicit sponsorship of special privileges for the Church of England was anathema to the tradition of the Methodists, Baptists, and other Nonconformists who had made up the historical Liberal base, and indeed there was an outcry from the party’s rank-and-file in 1902, one of the last such manifestations of the “dissenter spirit” which had fueled so much reform in previous generations. For the new progressives, however, such confessional passions were little more than embarrassing relics of the past; for the rigorously secular Fabians, indeed, religious education would be better done away with entirely,

¹⁵⁶ Matthew, p. 228.
¹⁵⁷ ibid. The “Scientific Efficiency” doctrine of Frederick W. Taylor being the most prominent example
¹⁵⁸ Webb, pp. 252-255.
representing as it did a serious obstacle to efficiency. Beatrice Webb noted from her study of the United States that the massive network of Catholic schools in that country had produced “both teachers and schools disastrously below any decent standard of efficiency.”

Almost all of the Co-Efficients – Rosebery, Haldane, Wells, and Webb included – supported the Conservative bill as a key step, albeit modest, in breaking away from the encumbering baggage of Britain’s past.

The final great object of attention for Edwardian reformers was the British constitutional system itself. The nation’s parliamentary government was (and is) notoriously historically contingent in its origins and conspicuously anti-rational in its structure; it represented the accretions and legacy of centuries of development, revolution, and piecemeal reform. For a different generation of British intellectuals, of course, Britain’s unwritten constitution, its tradition of “muddling through” across the generations, was one of the nation’s most endearing assets and one of the greatest sources of its historical strength. Set against the craze for rationalism and business-like efficiency in all facets of national life, however, such a patchwork constitutional system became the crowning embarrassment for a nation whose indebtedness to the past was leaving it behind newer, more energetic nations. The idea that the government system was fundamentally flawed had deep origins in the thought of the Fabian society since the 1880s. As a young socialist, H.G. Wells himself had pondered the dilemma that all reform would necessarily be limited and imperfect as long as it was driven through the unwieldy Parliament, with its windy posturing and narrow, Oxbridge, patrician perspective on the country’s problems: “Who is competent to speak for England?...having regard to the fact that we are no longer in a

\[159\] ibid. p. 254.
horse-and-four world, the proper administration in a modern socialized community must be 
*altogether* different in extent.”

In the view of Wells and others, there were two overriding structural problems with the parliamentary system. The first, simply put, was the House of Lords, that bastion of dilettante, philistine conservatism, and the degenerate hereditary aristocracy which it represented. In an article which appeared in the journal *Nineteenth Century* just before the outbreak of the Boer War, Harold Wyatt went so far as to compare the pernicious influence of the landed families of Britain to the historical forces which had caused the decline of that evergreen paragon of degeneration, the Ottoman Empire. The Turkish aristocracy, once a “race of soldiers,” had become idle and useless, and the decay in the system’s heart eventually dragged down the fighting power of the empire as a whole; the same could easily happen in Britain if it continued to coddle its aristocrats. Reformists finally saw their campaign against the Lords partially vindicated when the Upper House’s Tory majority overplayed its hand in trying to block Lloyd George’s welfare plan in 1909. Even King Edward VII stepped in to threaten punitive measures against the recalcitrant conservative “backwoodsmen,” and the Lords’ power was dramatically curtailed. The other great problem with parliamentary governance, however, was far less easily solved, for it was embedded in the very nature of the institution. Enthusiasts for reform like Milner, Wells, and the Webbs were continually frustrated by compromise, endless discussion, and deal-making embedded in the representative bodies; decisive reform by independent experts was possible in some limited spheres such as the Army and the Civil Service, but politics itself stood unhelpfully in the way of their ideal style of leadership, enough so that some longed for a return of the King’s authoritarian powers. In his novel *The Invisible Man*, H. G. Wells presented

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a thinly-veiled fable of his country’s national tendency to talk, and fret, and negotiate, rather than act.

Section 3 – The Edwardian Crisis in British History and Historiography

That the entire constitutional framework of the nation could suffer such withering scrutiny from reformists – and that observers like H.G. Wells could in all seriousness perceive a “cancer” eating at the heart of the state – underscores the grave seriousness with which advocates of efficiency viewed the Edwardian crisis. From the outset, however, such a perspective has had to compete with an alternate narrative of British life during the era, one in which the brief interlude between the death of Victoria and the outbreak of the World War was no new epoch or turning point, but an “Indian summer” – the twilight glow of the glorious Victorian age. Such a telescoped view of the past became almost inevitable after the trauma of World War I cast a long shadow onto what had come before, bathing the previous decade and its preoccupations in a nostalgic glow. Indeed, outside the narrow and anxious world of the pundits, the nation’s cultural life, together with its variegated class hierarchies and social traditions, was marked more by continuity than sudden change. If anything, the life of bourgeois Britain was marked by a sense of impending change: not just in increasing military tensions with Germany, but also in the class system flux allegorized in Howard’s End and other Edwardian novels.

This partially distorted view of the time backward through the prism of the War has become a staple of social histories of the Edwardian era. Foreign Minister Edward Grey’s famous remark in August 1914 that “the lights are going out all over Europe” has frequently served as a template for wistful historical depictions, comparable to the treatment given by
American social historians and novelists to the antebellum South.\textsuperscript{162} Andre Maurois’s history, published in the 1930s, was one of the first such accounts, and a host of retrospectives and memoirs painted much the same picture.\textsuperscript{163} Even more recent histories have fallen into the trap of approaching the era from the point of view of the tranquil but endangered upper classes; Samuel Hynes’s 1968 \textit{The Edwardian Turn of Mind}, while noting the presence of strong forces of change under the surface, continued to play with the Indian summer theme: “It is easy to feel nostalgia for that leisurely time, when women wore picture hats and did not vote, when the rich were not ashamed to live conspicuously, and the sun really never set on the British flag…certainly it must have seemed like a long garden party on a golden afternoon – to those who were inside the garden.”\textsuperscript{164}

Among more serious political histories, there has been no consensus on whether the time was characterized more by its series of changes and reform efforts, or by its essential continuity. The prolific British historian Martin Pugh has consistently taken the latter view, rejecting the view that British society was in any meaningful sense falling apart or suffering from a systemic crisis in the years before the First World War; in his account, the conflicts of the era were “coincidental controversies rather than symptoms of a common malaise.”\textsuperscript{165} A more common view, however, is that the long decade was a kind of turning point in the country’s political evolution – the age when the mass electorate first made its weight truly felt and organized labor began to find its voice through the growing Labour Party. It was also the stage for the beginning of the collapse of the Liberal Party, an organization which had lost its most vocal constituency, its unique voice, and its ability to speak for Britain’s working class; it was a decline postponed,

\textsuperscript{163} Andre Maurois, \textit{The Edwardian Era} (New York: Appleton, 1933)
\textsuperscript{164} Samuel Hynes, \textit{The Edwardian Turn of Mind}, pp. 4-5.
\textsuperscript{165} Martin Pugh, \textit{State and Society}, p. 144.
but not ultimately prevented, by the populist movement represented by David Lloyd George and other “radical Liberals.” The definitive description of the political transformations of the time remains George Dangerfield’s classic, *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, an elegiac description of the death throes of old political institutions and habits. Liberalism, as he intoned, was dying:

[England] was about to shrug from its shoulders – at first irritably, and then with violence – a venerable burden, a kind of sack. It was about to get rid of its liberalism. Liberalism in its Victorian plenitude had been an easy burden to bear, for it contained-and who could doubt it? -- a various and valuable collection of gold, stocks, bibles, progressive thoughts, and decent inhibitions. It was solid and sensible and just a little mysterious; and though one could not exactly gambol with such a weight on one's shoulders, it permitted one to walk in a dignified manner and even to execute from time to time those eccentric little steps which are so necessary to the health of Englishmen…. But somehow or other, as the century turned, the burden of Liberalism grew more and more irksome; it began to give out a dismal, rattling sound….As for the Liberal Party, it was in the unfortunate position of having to run, too. It was the child of Progress, which is not only an illusion, but an athletic illusion, and which insists that it is better to hurl oneself backwards than to stand still. By 1910, the Liberals had reached a point where they could no longer advance.\(^{166}\)

The crisis of liberalism identified by Dangerfield was very real, but for the conservative, reform liberal, and socialist elites who had subscribed so fully to the Darwinian ideology of national efficiency, the crisis extended far beyond party politics. G.R. Searle’s *The Quest for*

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National Efficiency and David Powell’s The Edwardian Crisis are important efforts to amplify and extend Dangerfield’s thesis of political crisis by locating it in the broader context of intellectual and social history. What Powell sought, in his words, was to “systematically re-examine the Dangerfield/Halevy thesis167… in relation both to the short-term and the longer term perspectives of British history in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”168 From the perspective of a modern historian, the self-proclaimed crises of the era’s politicians and pundits – even their widespread subscription to radicalized Social Darwinism – stand in context as part of a continent-wide process of elites struggling to come to grips with the implications of the “rise of the masses” – the delegitimization of first the aristocratic, then the classic liberal meritocratic, principles of rule. Such context becomes clear in the efforts of many reformers to present “expert rule” as the coming of a new caste, a new means of legitimization; many, like Wells and Haldane, were entirely unafraid to revive the term “aristocracy.” To return to Arnold White’s words: “The price of privilege [will be] efficiency. It is not only inevitable but desirable that real power shall rest in the hands of a few.”169

For such men and women, of course, the larger context of their deeply-felt efforts was largely irrelevant. For them, the crisis was entirely real, and for many – even those who remained “Liberals” in name – it entailed the rejection of the old liberal worldview entirely. Individualism, the sanctity of private property and personal liberty, religious non-conformism at home and religiously-infused moralistic foreign policy, free trade, and above all Whig optimism – all were buried or relegated, rendered obsolete by the urgent imperatives of the new era. “Their principles were fresh once… but Adam Smith is dead, and Queen Anne, and even Sir Robert Peel; while as

167 Referring to Elie Halevy, a postwar French historian who made a similar approach to the problem in works including his Elites and Masses.
168 Powell, The Edwardian Crisis, p. viii (preface).
169 White, p. 29.
to Gladstone, he is the dearest of them all.” The new-age apostles of efficiency, those for whom the Britain of Gladstone seemed a distant memory, surveyed the rest of the world through radically different eyes than had their antecedents, and they formed their opinions of the rising power of Japan through a new lens – one which had shed the facile assumptions of liberalism, even as it acquired an entirely new set of illiberal prejudices and distortions.

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Chapter 4 – The Britain of the East

Section 1 – Japan on the World Stage

Japan’s rise to prominence as a focus for admiration and comparison with Great Britain was enormously assisted by its wide-ranging exploits on the international stage in the first decade of the twentieth century. Having handily defeated China in a war of expansion over the Korean Peninsula in 1894-95, Japan further enhanced its international standing with three diplomatic initiatives: in 1900, the Japanese army was an early and enthusiastic participant in the international expedition to relieve the besieged legations in Peking from the Boxer Rebellion; in 1902, Japanese diplomats secured a prestige-enhancing military alliance with Great Britain; and in 1904-1906, the Japanese armed forces secured a surprising victory in the Russo-Japanese war – the first time in which a non-European nation had defeated a traditional European power in a pitched conflict. In purely geopolitical terms, the victory over Russia confirmed what had begun to be apparent since the 1890s: that Japan was powerful enough to wield independent authority on the world stage, even to assert regional dominance over rival European powers. This explosion of military capability had been fueled since the 1890s by a government-led heavy industrialization program which, in the words of the historian Paul Kennedy, “proceeded with a dirigisme and commitment which makes the efforts of Colbert or Frederick the Great pale by comparison.”¹⁷¹ The most salient feature of the Japanese advance in terms of its effect on international politics – and the factor which most motivated Britain to seek an alliance – was the nation’s suddenly formidable navy. In 1880, Japan possessed virtually no modern ships; by 1910 the imperial navy’s Pacific fleet was a state-of-the-art, battle-tested unit, and in the ensuing

decade Japan’s naval strength doubled again.\textsuperscript{172} Though its economy remained heavily
dependent on imports of high-technology goods and on Western capital investment, the Japanese
government’s guided development and generous military spending ensured Japan an unusually
rapid rise to the upper echelons of world politics and a correspondingly greater visibility on the
front pages of European newspapers and periodicals.

Japan’s foothold in the British public mind, in particular, was enhanced by the new
diplomatic contacts which grew out of the 1902 alliance. Soon after the conclusion of the Russo-
Japanese war in 1906, the Garter Mission, led by King Edward’s son Prince Arthur, made a
highly-publicized journey to Tokyo to award the Japanese Emperor the Order of the Garter, a
gesture intended to connote a new measure of official respect for Japan as an equal and ally.\textsuperscript{173}
The following year, the Japanese Crown Prince embarked on an equally lavish return visit to
Britain, giving the British public their first up-close view of the legendarily remote and
mysterious Japanese imperial family.\textsuperscript{174} In the summer of 1910, the Japan-British Exhibition, a
project heavily promoted both by the Tokyo authorities and British supporters of Japan ranging
from enthusiastic newspaper columnists up to King Edward VII, opened to large crowds in
Shepherd’s Bush outside of London. The Exhibition, intended by both governments as a
showcase of Japan’s new industrial capacity and the potential benefits to the British people of
continued alliance and economic partnership, presented a vivid illustration of the changes which
had taken place in Japan’s status in the sixty years since the Great Exhibition. Once both unable
and unwilling to participate in a congregation of the world’s industrial nations, Japan by 1910
was eager to publicize itself abroad; moreover, Japanese industry, Japanese craftsmanship, and
Japanese military might had grown to the point that such ambitious self-promotion was seen not

\textsuperscript{172} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid. p. 354.
merely as the vain pretense of a developing state, but also as display of legitimate pride in undeniable material progress. The *Scarborough Post*, a northern regional newspaper, spoke for many other mouthpieces of public opinion throughout Britain when it exclaimed in the summer of 1910: “We, for our part, have certainly learned to *respect* the Land of the Rising Sun.”

Japan was thus bound to loom larger in British consciousness than it had in the past by the sheer force of its own development. British interpretation of the nature of Japan and the significance of its rise to prominence, however, did not follow such a neat trajectory. Japan in the first decade of the twentieth century was seen through the prism of the Edwardian crisis. The beleaguered standard-bearers of traditional liberal sensibilities, while gradually coming to grips with the reality of Japan’s new role, continued to view the Eastern Empire as fundamentally a land apart, judged according to its progress towards approximating the traditional political and philosophical standards of the West. For more traditionalist liberals, despite their creed’s pretensions to universality and the level playing field, Japan never escaped the invisible stigma which marked it as an Oriental land; paternalism, though less overt than in the days of Queen Victoria, was never far from the surface of such discussions by traditional liberals – and traditional nationalist Tories, as well. The tone of the coverage given by bastions of the old-school sensibility such as the *Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, and the *Economist* to Japanese issues in these years illustrates the attitude of middle-brow liberals. An examination of newspaper and periodical coverage reveals, above all, a growing ambivalence about the implications of Japanese growth. Once ardent enthusiasts of a nation whose rapid development along Westernizing lines flattered the liberal worldview and seemed to promise the bright future of a friendly, free-trading

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Far East, liberals by the 1900s perceived potential menace as well. Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany spoke for many of Europe’s unapologetic conservatives and chauvinists when he bemoaned the possibility of a Japanese “Yellow Peril” in the aftermath of the Boxer Revolt, but the sentiment was hardly confined to the ideological fringes. The image of Japan as eager Western protégé increasingly contended with the threatening specter of Japanese “otherness” whose impact suddenly became more pronounced with the country’s startling military successes.

Japan itself contributed to the atmosphere of uncertainty in mainstream liberal opinion by consciously and publicly distancing itself from the Western blueprint it had embraced in the early Meiji era. As the old generation of *genro* leaders – including Ito Hirobumi, the guiding spirit behind the 1890 Constitution and a voice of moderation – died or retired in the 1900s, they were replaced by a new cohort of decidedly more nationalistic, more politically ambitious imperial advisors. 176 The new attitude bore fruit in Japan’s confrontational stance towards China and Russia but also in a renewed emphasis on “traditional” (non-Western) values. In his later years on the throne, the Meiji Emperor was made the centerpiece of a revitalized system of *Shinto* worship which was to serve as a focus of patriotic sentiment. In a further effort to drive home the uniqueness of Japan’s historical path, textbooks in the national school system were re-written to place greater emphasis on the uniting role of the imperial family and the glorious history of the armed forces. 177 Though Japan continued to rely on both Western technical expertise and European capital, the Tokyo leadership was anxious to make clear that Japan had become neither a mere “developing state” nor a pupil at the feet of Western educators; at the

London Exhibition of 1910 and in the numerous diplomatic contacts between the two nations, projecting an image of equality and independence was a paramount concern.\(^{178}\)

Many mainstream discussions of Japan hovered between continued assessments of Japan’s “progress” and more abstract speculations about its potentially illiberal trajectory. In a series of articles concerning the ongoing – and slow – transition to more genuine party government in the Japanese parliament in the years 1901-1904, *Times* correspondents exemplified the fine line between approval of tentative steps towards liberalization and growing skepticism that the Japanese environment was congenial to true parliamentary democracy. In July 1901, the *Times* noted with disapproval the resistance to popular government by members of the parliamentary upper house but gave its blessing to the efforts of the newly formed Katsura cabinet to overcome such obstructionism from entrenched interests.\(^{179}\) By January 1903, the editorial opinion had taken an even graver tone; though describing Japan, in classic liberal terms, on the path towards “evolution of constitutional government,” the *Times* noted with distress the country’s authoritarian tendencies:

> In Japan the transition from bureaucracy to party government is far from complete…. Half a dozen years ago it would have scarcely been true to say that conservatism was strongly represented in Japan. But to-day it certainly is true, in the sense that many men of education and position wish to postpone to the last possible moment the transfer of governing power to politicians whose character they distrust and whose administrative qualifications they deem far inferior to those of their own “elder statesmen.”\(^{180}\)

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\(^{178}\) *Japan-British Exhibition*, p. 77.

\(^{179}\) “Evolution of Constitutional Government in Japan,” *The Times* (July 11, 1901)

\(^{180}\) “The Political Situation in Japan,” *The Times* (January 28, 1903).
Notice of progress mixed with implicit alarm in other areas as well. Regarding education, a Professor Wertheimer from Bristol noted with some alarm in a letter that not only had Japanese technical education caught up with that of Great Britain (a result of “following the wise example of the Americans”), but that there were probably more active vocational students in Tokyo alone than in all the United Kingdom.\(^{181}\) As for the moral implications of the Japanese triumph over the Russians, old-fashioned belief in the moral power of Westernization was often outweighed by frank discussion of the racial elements of the conflict and the alien culture of the Japanese. An editorial in 1905, after the major victories of the Russo-Japanese war, rhetorically asked: “To the extent to which the qualities referred to [Japanese military discipline] may be attributed to contact with the Western nations, may we not regard them as the expression even of Christian sentiment?”\(^{182}\) The dominant tone struck in the aftermath of the war, however, was one of unease. The victory of an Asiatic power over Russia – even as illiberal and unpopular as the Tsar’s government was – was not an omen to be taken lightly.\(^{183}\) The *Daily Telegraph*, whose editorial opinion was still more traditional than *The Times*, advised the Russians to “swallow the unfathomable truth” and sue for peace – and it predicted that the “clan spirit” of the Japanese would introduce a new element to international warfare.\(^{184}\) Many government officials, as well as editorialists, were especially troubled by the riots which followed the announcement of armistice terms, as demonstrators on the streets of Tokyo and other cities showed a rare public rage that the peace had denied Japan the full, sweeping fruits of its victories. The vehemence of the reaction surprised reporters habituated to the image of the docile Japanese citizenry, and it seemed to signal that nationalism and anti-Western sentiment could grow out of hand.

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\(^{181}\) “Commercial Education in Japan,” *The Times* (March 10, 1902)

\(^{182}\) George Williams, “Japan’s Young Men,” letter to *The Times* (July 14, 1905).


The Economist, perhaps the most unapologetic of major British periodicals in its traditionalist liberalism, was even more skeptical in its stance towards Japan, though it, too, had once shared in the general liberal enthusiasm of the 1860s and 1870s. On news of the alliance treaty with Japan in 1902, The Economist intoned: “Our countrymen are, we think, a little hasty in the enthusiastic welcome which they have given to the new alliance.” The editorialist did not question that Japan had acquired the military strength necessary to be a worthwhile ally; it was the moral significance of the move for Britain, as a white power, which rankled: it represented the abandonment of “the unwritten alliance of white nations against coloured…the homogeneousness of the white races has been an important factor in world history.” By the time of Prince Fushimi’s ceremonial visit to Britain in 1907, the paper was ready to admit that its worst fears about the “yellow peril” represented by Japan had been unjustified: “It had been feared that the Japanese were still barbarians, that they would dominate China, would organize the Yellow Peril, and that Great Britain would be constrained to assist them, and to turn traitor to Western civilization…Prince Fushimi’s visit makes us realize how completely such fears have been exaggerated.” Neither the traditionalist liberals nor any other serious observers doubted the achievements of Japanese developments or denigrated its growing importance on the world stage; for a large segment of British opinion, however – from the staid pages of The Economist or the Times to the works of bigoted alarmists like the author Meredith Townshend – Japan’s racial and philosophical differences with Britain rendered it at best an aspiring work-in-progress, and at worst, a threat.

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185 See Ch. 2
186 “The Treaty with Japan,” The Economist (February 15, 1902)
187 Ibid.
188 “The Consolidation of the Far East,” The Economist (May 11, 1907)
189 His 1904 book Asia and Europe was a restatement of the “Yellow Peril” thesis
As far as public opinion from the first decade of the twentieth century can be gauged, it appears that popular views on Japan – those held by the large majority outside the political and journalistic classes – continued to hew to a curious skepticism about the exotic Far Eastern nation. In his survey of late Victorian public attitudes towards Japan, the historian Toshio Yokoyama describes how the “fantasy Japan” of the Mikado and travelers’ tales enjoyed a long life even as Japan itself steamed headily into modernity.\(^{190}\) As was generally true of popular perceptions of non-European peoples in the period, the “commonsense” view retained the subtle paternalism of the liberal worldview while largely disregarding its loftier beliefs in progress.\(^{191}\) The Japanese success against Russia muddled this picture somewhat – one writer in 1905 described the “universal wave of admiration for Japan” among the British people for their swift success; respect for Japanese proficiency, however, never erased the intangible reality of its foreignness.\(^{192}\) If anything, the continued popularity of Japanese aesthetics in the arts in this period, which was actively encouraged by Japan’s efforts at self-promotion in the 1910 Exhibition and elsewhere, only reinforced the perception of a cultural chasm between East and West.\(^{193}\) The key divide which emerged between conventional opinion and elite thought – between liberal assumptions and illiberal alarmism – was in the evaluation of a Japan which seemed to have struck out on its own course. The average Englishman of 1910, like the mainstream newspapers and periodicals which buttressed his worldview, was likely to view Britain’s ally in the Far East with some mixture of frank admiration and lingering racial anxiety. Regardless of whether he considered Japan as a valued ally or a potential foe – or whether he

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\(^{191}\) The growing evangelical community, with its missionary idealism, presents a different face than typical attitudes towards non-Westerners.

\(^{192}\) Williams, ibid.

followed the news of Japan at all – he was likely to approach the subject with a worldview which was still more firmly rooted in traditional political and cultural assumptions than was that of many elements of the intellectual class.

Section 2 – “Learn from Japan”

It was for a distinct segment of the British elite, however, that Japan assumed an outsized role as a model, the screen upon which their preoccupations with the deficiencies and potential degeneracy of Great Britain were projected. Starting in the late 1890s and accelerating throughout the Edwardian era, an outpouring of commentaries on Japan demonstrated a transformed view of the country. No longer a junior power or pupil, it was celebrated as a civilization *sui generis*, one whose cultural traditions and systems of social control had garnered for it a strong position in the international struggle for survival and dominance. The remarkable characteristic of the “learn from Japan” movement, as it may loosely be called, was the identity of its most vocal proponents: almost without exception, they were drawn from the same stratum of British society which had abandoned traditional liberalism, and which gave weight to the second generation of social Darwinist theories which warned of a struggle of anthropomorphized nations and the possibility of national degeneration. They were drawn from the same coterie of politicians and intellectuals who saw in the Edwardian crisis a consummation of Darwinian anxieties about Britain’s future and who called urgently for a new national order based on efficiency. These reformists looked elsewhere for inspiration as well – primarily to Imperial Germany and the United States, the other rising giants of the world stage – but Japan had a special hold on the imagination precisely because it was so relatively new, so culturally
foreign. At a time when the exponents of Darwinian efficiency were almost desperate to cast away the stultifying elements of Britain’s historical inheritance, Japan offered fertile ground for counterfactual fantasy, the blueprint of a new power chained to an entirely different past and possibly bound for an entirely different, and brighter, future. Japan in this context was an image rather than a reality – albeit an image powerfully informed by Japan’s real-life development. As such, the cult of Japan which developed during the Edwardian era must be understood primarily as one of the more peculiar culminations of the same intellectual trend which had seen the decline of liberal confidence and the rise of Darwinian pessimism since the late Victorian era.

The beginnings of the new perception of Japan which would underlie this movement first became apparent in the 1890s in a new sensibility among travel writers and correspondents. The earlier generation of commentators on Japan -- even those, like Rutherford Alcock or Isabella Bird -- who counted themselves great enthusiasts of the country and its charms, nevertheless presented a narrative of a land overcoming its past in the rush to modernity. For Kipling, such an effort was vaguely comical; for other correspondents it was inspiring; in either case, writers focused on the transition rather than the continuity. As doubts both within and without Japan about the desirability of pure Westernization began to take hold, some British commentaries on Japan began to reflect the new tone by describing Japanese civilization to their readers as an intact whole rather than a shattered remnant.

The foremost of such writers was Lafcadio Hearn, an Irish emigrant whose all-consuming interest in Japan led him to spend the later portion of his life dedicated to an exploration of the country; by the time of his death, he had published fourteen major works on the subject of his adopted home. His reflections, read widely in both the United States and Britain, tapped into a

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194 Searle, pp. 35-40.
rich vein of public curiosity. Hearn had little interest in modernization, constitutional theory, or trade patterns; instead, he sought to immerse himself in a search for the “deep roots” of what he considered a uniquely powerful culture, a “civilization of genius.” Unlike earlier Romantics and peddlers of exotic tales, however, Hearn approached his subject as one to be taken entirely seriously – his volumes on mythology and fairy tales were his own attempt to raise Japanese folklore to parity with the better-known European legends of the Greeks or the Norse. Whereas the liberal model had consistently downplayed the width of the divide which separated Britain and Japan, Hearn positively celebrated it, and he openly speculated – in keeping with the intellectual angst of the times – whether it was not the West, after all, which represented the deviant historical path: “I live a life that forces one sometimes to doubt whether the course of our boasted Western progress is really in the direction of moral development.”

Hearn’s friend and mentor, Basil Hall Chamberlain, a professor at Tokyo’s Imperial University and another respected authority on Japan at the turn of the twentieth century, followed a similar course in treating Japan as a self-contained civilization. In his popular one-volume encyclopedia, Things Japanese, which went through several editions and served as one of the basic sources for the Japan craze of the 1900s, he praised Japan’s unique evolutionary position; it was a country which had had the great advantage of assimilating some of the technical innovations of the West, all the while retaining at its core its own powerful, radically independent culture. Playing with the idea of organic national character then current among social Darwinists and degeneracy theorists in Europe, Chamberlain speculated that Japan the organism was firmly on the upward evolutionary

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196 Ibid, pp. 80-91.
track: “The national character persists intact, manifesting no change in essentials. Circumstances have deflected it into new channels, that is all.”\textsuperscript{198}

The writings of Hearn and Chamberlain, as well as other noted Japanophiles like Earnest Satow and W.G. Aston, provided the template for much of the language used by efficiency advocates to describe Japan in the Edwardian Era: its “deep” culture, profound historical wisdom, and strong national cohesiveness. That template was exploited in full during the years after the Anglo-Japanese alliance and then the Russo-Japanese war catapulted Japan into an entirely new level of fascination among the British pundit class. When Lord Lansdowne, the Tory Foreign Secretary, announced the signing of the Anglo-Japanese alliance in January 1902, many traditionalists (including Lord Lansdowne himself) viewed the pact as, at best, a necessary evil. To a generation for whom Britain’s independence of foreign powers and absolute naval supremacy was a point of pride, it was an exercise in humility for Britain to consent to a strategic partnership with an Asian power. For many of the “Liberal Imperialists” surrounding Lord Rosebery and the members of the incipient Co-Efficients club, however, the alliance was the brilliant first step in the courtship of a rising star. In the pages of the journal \textit{The Nineteenth Century}, which became the premier outlet for the opinions of the “efficiency school” and their allies, the glorification of the military potential of Japan began as early as 1895, when R.K. Douglas published an article confidently titled “The Triumph of Japan.” Writing in the aftermath of Japan’s success in its war with China, Douglas presented the Far Eastern conflict as a real-world cautionary tale of the consequences of a collision between a degenerate nation and a fit one: “The sick man of the East will be obliged to march on the lines of civilization and

improvement, and the present torpid empire with its industrious population and internal wealth, will begin a new page in European history.”

Ruing the consequences of the Western powers’ efforts to restrain Japan from overwhelming China in that war, the *Fortnightly Review* rejoiced in 1902 that Britain had finally stopped backing “the wrong horse.” In a rebuke to the fussy bigotry of *The Economist*, the *Review* provided a brilliant, succinct sketch of the new international calculus which sought to replace quaint liberal moralism: “Self-preservation is the law of their [Japan’s] policy, and self-preservation is the great common denominator. It is not only Heaven’s first law, it is the first law of earth as well, and perhaps that of the devil also.” Sir Archibald Hurd, a naval expert and one of the most vocal proponents of naval reform and national service, saw in Japan a nation of unrivaled “self-sufficiency and efficiency” -- a nation which he repeatedly called “The Britain of the East.” Hurd and others, most famously the *Times*’ special war correspondent Charles Repington, saw in Japan an echo of the raw energy and daring which had characterized the sea-going British of folklore; the new alliance was thus justified not only by the calculus of material self-interest, but in the hopes of reviving their own nation’s dormant warlike instincts through Japan’s salutary example. The military reformers dared to hope, as Hurd put it, that the “inheritors of the Glory of Trafalgar” could join hands with the ascendant “victors of the Japan Sea.”

If the Anglo-Japanese alliance spurred widespread praise of Japan’s masterful naval strategy and spirit of military efficiency, the shocking news from the Russo-Japanese war in 1904-05 lifted the tone of praise of Japan to new heights that frequently bordered on absurdity. From the very beginning of the war – a conflict which started with a Japanese surprise attack on

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the Russian stronghold of Port Arthur – the British press gave generally favorable coverage to the Japanese cause. Even liberal sources were attracted to the story of the daring underdog Japanese fight against a Russian Empire which the British public had always viewed unfavorably as a traditional enemy and a menacing, anachronistic despotism. Despite the continued flow of decisive Japanese victories throughout 1904, however, the common-sense view held that the vastly greater might of Russia would eventually wear down Japan – a view reinforced, of course, by the old disbelief that an Asian power could defeat over a European one. After the Russian Baltic Fleet sailed all the way around the world only to be destroyed by the waiting Japanese in May 1905, however, the reality of the Japanese triumph began to sink in.\footnote{The climactic battle was the Battle of Tsushima Straits; defeat moved the Russians to peace talks} Leo Amery, the reform advocate who had made his name criticizing the British logistical failures of the Boer War, recorded in his diary that Japan presented the very opposite image of what he had seen and lamented in South Africa from his own country. He later recalled that “we all naturally applauded in those days the bold masterstroke of attacking and crippling the Russian Navy without declaration of war;” perhaps unconsciously echoing Hearn, he speculated that subsequent Japanese success in battle must have come from the “superhuman contempt of death” bequeathed by the samurai tradition.\footnote{Leo S. Amery, My Political Life, Volume I: England Before the Storm (London: Hutchison, 1953) p. 218.}

In the years immediately after the war, the twin narratives of Japan as the holder of a uniquely powerful culture and Japan as a ruthlessly efficient military power coincided in a series of portraits of the country which painted it as the very ideal of the efficient, organically whole state, a nation primed to advance above all others on the evolutionary ladder. Beyond the mass of coverage in the newspaper and periodical press, two works stand out as exemplars of this Japan movement: Henry Dyer’s \textit{Dai Nippon} and Alfred Stead’s \textit{Great Japan: A Study in}
National Efficiency. Dyer spoke from genuine, first-hand knowledge of Japan and lent authority to his work as an expert in efficiency – in the word’s original sense. As an accomplished Scottish engineer, he was invited to Japan by members of the Iwakura Mission in 1873 and stayed there nearly a decade; as a founding professor at the Tokyo Imperial University, he played a crucial role in developing Japan’s later-famed technical education system, and he contributed to the design of a Tokyo industrial works which at the time was the largest the country had ever seen. Always an ardent enthusiast of Japan, he took advantage of the rush of publicity surrounding the war in 1904 to publish his lengthy tribute to the country and its institutions, subtitled, tellingly, The Britain of the East.

Dyer, despite his obvious enthusiasm, maintained a measured tone through most of his work; Alfred Stead was almost unbounded in his praise. As the son of the famous late Victorian reformer W.T. Stead, he had leveraged his family’s name-recognition into prominence in his own right as a freelance writer and commentator on international affairs. Like Leo Amery with the Times, Stead’s formative experience was in covering the British debacle in the Boer War, and like so many others of his particular generation and mindset, he inevitably processed the ideal of efficiency through the lens of that war as a master template of “inefficiency.” Stead’s travels took him throughout Africa and the decaying Ottoman Empire, but he found his greatest inspiration in Japan. In his own way, Stead was as radical as Arnold White in his obsession with efficiency; also like White, he obtained legitimacy for his work from the omnipresent Lord Rosebery, who penned Great Japan’s preface. If nothing else did, Rosebery’s language made it clear where the real significance of the fulsome praise for Japan lay: the damning comparison with Britain, a perfect piece of ammunition for the passionate advocates of domestic reform. In Rosebery’s words:

204 See Ch. 3
Not a hundred books or a thousand prefaces will bring this lesson home to our own nation. We won our empire and our liberties by genius and daring in an inefficient world. Now that one or more nations are keenly striving after efficiency, it will not be easy to maintain our heritage, for the inefficient nation must sooner or later go to the wall. Three things may move us: obvious decline, sudden catastrophe, or some stimulating example. This last, at the least, is furnished by Japan.205

These Edwardian profiles of Japan took up the existing conventions of Japanese exceptionalism and constructed a full-fledged fantasy of a nation whose strengths corresponded almost exactly with Great Britain’s perceived weaknesses. In three respects, above all else, they presented Japan as a mirror image of British shortcomings: its physical and moral hygiene, its national system of education/indoctrination, and its efficient methods of elite control. The stereotype of Japan as a painstakingly clean, industrious land, of course, dated from far before the twentieth century. When earlier travelers praised the tidiness of the Japanese village or the work ethic of the Japanese peasant, however, they did so as a way of conveying vividly to their readers the country’s untouched backwardness; belching smokestacks and coal soot, not untouched landscapes, were the hallmarks of mid-nineteenth-century supremacy, a truth underscored by the undisguised admiration the Iwakura Mission’s members displayed for the paradoxical “beauty” of Birmingham and Liverpool.206 One of the first efforts to convert this image of Japan into the language of Darwinism – and to connect it with the quasi-mystical cultural traditions which so fascinated Western readers – was made by the Japanese émigré Inazo Nitobe in a book aimed at promoting his home country to British and American readers. His

*Bushido: The Soul of Japan*, published in 1905, held that the ancient warrior code, far from being extinct, so permeated Japanese society that it provided the secret to the physical strength and moral rectitude of the common people. Though the order of *samurai* had been formally abolished in 1870 (a move that the older generation of observers hailed as a step away from medieval darkness), Nitobe was convinced that the aristocratic spirit of the order was the secret behind Japan’s “moral evolution.”

“Though they kept themselves socially aloof from the populace, they set a moral standard for them, and guided them by their example.” As a result, the lower classes of Japan, unlike the rudderless working masses of Britain with only individualism to guide them, lived and died by the code that held together the larger organic whole of their nation.

For Nitobe, *bushido* was the *volksgeist* whose disciplinary force prevented the drunkenness, slovenliness, and hygienic degeneracy which so dismayed British observers of their own cities.

Henry Dyer used a variation on the same theme in seeking the source for the supposed greater physical health of the Japanese. On his account, it was the practice of the martial art of jiu-jitsu, coupled with the organic cohesiveness of a society which prohibited individual deviousness, which produced what he called the “wonders of physical endurance” that he claimed to have witnessed in even the humblest villagers. In Stead’s fantastical vision, the physical purity of the people was the fruit of an intentional plan on the part of the leaders of Japanese society, to whom he attributed an acute long-term vision of the evolutionary adaptations necessary to achieve victory in the coming international struggle: “Physical training

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208 Ibid. p. 147.
209 Nitobe, somewhat surprisingly, was actually a devout Christian. He professed that not only was the samurai ethic compatible with his vision of Christianity, but that modern Europe had gone astray in losing sight of its original Christian ethos.
210 Ibid. p. 150.
211 Dyer, p. 379.
is made much of,” he ventured, “because the future physical condition of the Japanese race must be efficient and able to support the nation in the ever-increasing physical struggle for existence.” The sexual regulations of Japan, in which prostitution was more openly acknowledged but strictly regulated, were part of the same benevolent conspiracy, in this case to “prevent the racial existence being sapped by the fruits of immorality.” The image of Japan as a land of worker bees – gross, myopic cultural generalization though it was – had become by the 1900s a vehicle for breathless praise rather than fodder for amusing paternalist anecdotes. A nation of physically clean, industrious, and obedient citizens provided excellent raw material, after all, for the efficient state.

A second key piece in the blueprint for any efficient state was a national scheme of education in which the state’s values and the principles of obedience and patriotism could be taught systematically. Education reform, of course, was not exclusively the province of radical Darwinists and efficiency advocates; liberals had been advocating it in Britain, and urging it on developing countries like Japan, throughout the nineteenth century. As elsewhere, however, the change in tone which occurred near the turn of the century is crucial and instructive. Writing in the liberal Edinburgh Review in 1890, Robert Kennaway Douglas offered praise for Japan’s progress in its educational methods. “The Mikado practically acknowledged the inferiority of their civilization by adopting wholesale the learning, science, and arts of Europe,” he wrote; even though the schools paid partial tribute to the “discarded” Confucian ethics which had dominated schooling in the Tokugawa era, they promised a bright future for Japan’s students by teaching them English, geography, Latin, and “the philosophies expounded by Herbert Spencer and J.S.

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212 Stead, p. 125.  
213 Ibid. p. 388.  
214 Edinburgh Review, at the start of the nineteenth century, had been the standard-bearer for the founding fathers of British utilitarianism/liberalism: Jeremy Bentham, both Mills, and Thomas Babington Macauley. By 1890 it was still associated with liberalism, though no longer considered radical or innovative.
With educational standardization in the 1870s, crowned by the foundation of the Tokyo Imperial University in 1877, Japan had indeed made tremendous progress in constructing a modern educational network. By the 1900s, British reformists looked with envy on a system that not only had the benefits of youth (unlike the supposedly sclerotic British institutions of Oxford and Cambridge), but also proved proficient at nationalist indoctrination. These observations were, in part, grounded in fact: the imperial government, starting in 1890 with the Imperial Rescript on Education, did make a concerted effort to build more fervent patriotism in the school curricula at all levels.\(^{216}\)

The divorce from reality, however, came in the British propagandists’ wholesale acceptance of the Japanese official fiction that the new primacy of the principles of “loyalty to emperor and ancestors” sprang organically and continuously from Japan’s past; they colluded with the Emperor Meiji’s advisors in collectively forgetting the era in the not-too-distant past when Japan had seemed eager to distance itself from the cultural legacies of its medieval heritage. Said Dyer: “they have evolved an organization of their own, which is very well suited to the particular requirements of their country.”\(^{217}\) In marked contrast with the British universities’ quaint preoccupation with the liberal arts and the pursuit of pure knowledge, Alfred Stead found in Japan a refreshing focus on the real, practical purpose of education: producing useful workers, skilled at performing real-world tasks. “The Japanese educational system strives first to develop the character of the children and to ensure their development into good citizens; it being thought far better to make members of the state sound in body and clear in mind than to encourage mere intellectuality.”\(^{218}\) A mere half-decade after activists like Arnold White had

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\(^{216}\) Jansen, pp.80-83. Also see above.

\(^{217}\) Dyer, *Dai Nippon*, p. 83.

\(^{218}\) Stead, *Great Japan*, p. 125.
railed against the inefficiencies of the British educational regime, joined wholeheartedly by the Webbs, Haldane, and the other Co-Efficients, they were presented with a Japanese system which seemed nearly the exact embodiment of their prescriptions.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the devotees of Japanese efficiency lauded the country’s exemplary cohesiveness – its ability to function as a single organism through its culturally evolved mechanisms of control. The *bushido* ethic explored by late-nineteenth-century British writers and expounded at length by Inazo Nitobe was not only socially useful as a guarantor of clean living, of course. It became as well the primary explanation for an unwritten hierarchy surviving intact from the Middle Ages, in which every citizen knew his place and willingly allowed his individual concerns to be subsumed under fanatical devotion to nation and emperor. This, too, was an image whose emphasis was precisely the reverse of the Victorian liberal *Weltanschauung*; like the other myths of Japan, it had its roots in venerable pejorative stereotypes, revived for the new era with a gloss of approbatory Darwinian language. The convention of Asia as the homeland of “oriental despotism” was as old as the ancient Greeks; the label had successively been affixed to the Persians, the Ottomans, the Mughals, the Chinese, and the Japanese of the missionary era. But as no less an authority than Karl Marx observed in 1853, Japan by the late Tokugawa era was no despotism at all, but the last great exemplar of the patron-client latticework of feudalism.\(^{219}\) In language which would heretofore have seemed hopelessly anachronistic, Nitobe offered a spirited defense of hereditary privilege – the ordering principle of “recognition of, and homage to, one’s natural superiors.”\(^{220}\) Citing the Darwinian theorist W.H. Mallock’s contemporary work *Aristocracy and Evolution*, he went on to posit that the preservation of a recognized social elite conferred a distinct evolutionary advantage, as the

\(^{219}\) Nitobe, p. 2.
\(^{220}\) Ibid. p. 74.
nation as a whole derived benefit from the exertions of the aristocracy: “Social evolution may be
defined as the unintended consequences of the intentions of great men.”221 After the late-Meiji-era reforms which sought to reinstitute a cult of personal loyalty to the emperor, the stage was set
for British Japanophiles to paint a composite portrait of a nation with the ideal constitution for
efficiency: a feudal ethic to hold the classes together in harmony, the nominal machinery of
parliamentary government as a forum to diffuse political tension, and a monarchy to inspire
absolute devotion and serve as a focus for self-effacing patriotism. Such a blissful arrangement
never existed, of course, but as with the educational system, the efficiency propagandists
accepted the government’s fictions of organic development at face value.

Echoing the works of Benjamin Kidd on the evolutionary benefits of religious belief,
another British writer, Archibald Colquhoun, asserted that Japan had developed a national
religion which effectively fused the habits of spiritual submissiveness and the imperative of
patriotic devotion.222 Thanks to Japan’s revived Shintoism, he said, “patriotism fills the minds
and hearts of [the Emperor]’s countrymen which Westerners fill with religion.”223 Just as
proverbial zealous Crusaders in the Christian Middle Ages would gladly have given anything for
the defense of the faith, so would modern Japanese subjects supposedly lay down their lives for
their emperor – not, as writers of past centuries would have claimed, because they were
unenlightened slaves, but because they were imbued with a moral code which had happened
upon the Darwinian truth that the whole’s interests supersede those of its component parts. The
reports of correspondents from Japan during the Russo-Japanese War, a time in which by all

221 Ibid. p. 147 (quoting Mallock). William Hurrell Mallock, an unapologetic conservative and spiritualist ally of
Matthew Arnold, found his works defending aristocracy quoted approvingly by “liberals” and socialists only
through the bizarre bending of ideological identities fostered during this period of intellectual crisis in Britain.
222 (See Chapter 2) Kidd’s Social Evolution posited that Christianity had provided the glue necessary to inspire
centuries of Westerners to sacrifice without which progress could not have been made.
accounts support for the war effort was indeed exceptionally strong, only reinforced the conviction that Japanese citizens were held by some special emotional bond to the state which could never be replicated by individualist Westerners. In one letter published by the *Times* during the peace negotiations, a British visitor claimed that it was positively absurd to speak of “individual contributions” to the war, for “it seems as if there had been here only one individual – Japan itself.”

Just as had occurred in nearly every other aspect of the British dialogue on Japan, the dedicated enthusiasts drew from the indisputable facts of the country’s remarkable achievement in the war to reach entirely unverifiable, implausible conclusions. Henry Dyer complained that the custom of *seppuku* ritualized suicide had received unfair criticism from Westerners – in fact, it was emblematic of the culture’s achievement in reaching a rapport with honorable death which was unimaginable elsewhere. Ignoring evidence to the contrary, Stead concluded that the national ethic of “kio-koku-itchi” – the United Action of the Nation – was so powerful that it led citizens to reject with one voice the divisive spirit of party politics. In a similar vein, he reached into the innermost recesses of the minds of the Japanese peasantry, asserting that the unique harmony of Japanese life not only removed the sting from the “economic struggle for existence,” but it also rendered the people positively enthusiastic about compulsory military service: “The Japanese look upon it as a privilege to be allowed to receive such training.”

One British traveler to Japan neared the limits of such fulsome, unreflective praise when, in 1909, he enthused that he had visited something very near to a paradise on earth: “Wonderful country! Wide-awake, lovable, joyful people! How old, exhausted, and grey life is in other

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224 Hugh Fraser, “Patriotic Self-Sacrifice in Japan,” *The Times*, February 26, 1906.
227 Ibid. pp. 229 and 255.
countries of Asia, compared to that of the land of the rising sun, where every man goes to work silently and dutifully and the women smile even when the rain is coming down in streams from the dull grey heavens.²²⁸ At least for the small cohort of devoted enthusiasts, the traditions of narrative accounts of Japan had thus come full circle: once praised for its bewitching aesthetic qualities in spite of its sociopolitical defects, it had become a country whose advanced social evolution was so awe-inspiring that it created a kind of beauty in its own right. It was from such accounts that the intellectual leaders of the efficiency school at home in Britain, almost none of whom had been to Japan themselves, derived a large part of their knowledge of the much-praised country.

This image of Japan, so neatly framed around the very issues which they perceived as the decisive components of Britain’s national crisis, was immensely appealing as a comparative device to the loose circle which surrounded the Webbs’ Co-Efficients dining club. As early as 1903, Sir Richard Haldane, one of the group’s unofficial experts on educational reform, used reports of Japan’s progress towards integrated “national” education in framing his arguments for the erection of institutions like Japan’s Imperial University at home.²²⁹ The application of a Japanese-style ethic of self-abnegation, he thought – rather than the complacent intellectualism and hedonism he found at the great British schools – could help those institutions produce an elite worthy of the coming struggles of the twentieth century.²³⁰ The idealized portrait of the Japanese military regime, too, found immediate favor. In an oft-cited remark, the conservative imperialist Philip Lyttelton Gell wrote to his friend and fellow army reform advocate Lord Milner that:

²²⁹ Haldane’s Universities and National Life, one of the definitive statements of his position, was published in 1903.
²³⁰ Searle, The Quest for National Efficiency, p. 59 (citing Haldane).
I shall turn Japanese, for they at least can think, and act and be reticent!... I fail to see any Western people in a position to set the Japs an example in their diplomacy, their organization, their strategy, their virile qualities, their devotion and self-control. Above all, their national capacity for self-reliant self-sacrifice and their silence.\(^\text{231}\)

An avid reader of military correspondent Charles Repington’s dispatches from the Russo-Japanese war zone, Leo Amery later recalled that he had been captivated by the rise of a new international star which suffered from seemingly none of the organizational defects of older powers like Britain or Russia.\(^\text{232}\) For Sidney and Beatrice Webb themselves, and for other like-minded Fabians, what seemed most attractive about Japan was the gratifying prospect of a system in which the “scientific” management of major facets of national existence – education, religion, the military – was playing out in real life. Beatrice Webb, in particular, became an unabashed enthusiast of this imagined Japan. Riveted by the reports of Japanese military triumphs, she reflected in her diary: “I watch in myself and others a growing national shamefacedness at the superiority of the Japanese over ourselves in capacity, courage, self-control.”\(^\text{233}\) Some months later, in 1905, she insisted that:

Japan is proving the superlative advantage of scientific methods in the international struggle for existence…For many a long day, the reformer will be able to quote on his side the innovating collectivism of the Japanese. [The example of Japan] will tell in favor of organization, collective regulation,

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\(^\text{232}\) Amery, *My Political Life*. Amery later regretted that he had been taken in by such propaganda, which he later characterized as “myth.” Winston Churchill was another prominent British politician who would have occasion to retract his initial receptiveness to the “learn from Japan” movement.

scientific education, physical and mental training – but not in favor of

democracy!\textsuperscript{234}

Webb found herself, perhaps to her own lingering surprise, struck by admiration for the very
features of the newly aggressive Japanese empire which were the most antithetical to liberalism,
to the traditional British idea of progress. That she was able to read a kind of “socialism” into the
Japan of Alfred Stead and Henry Dyer, despite the manifest lack of any such ideological content
in the Japanese measures, is all the more remarkable; it shows again the extent to which the
deeply felt imperative of efficiency transcended more conventional political boundaries.

Section 3 – Japan and the Utopian Impulse

At the heart of the Japan movement of the 1900s lay the image of Japan as the “Britain of
the East.” The notion was not necessarily ideologically loaded. As an island nation, traditionally
isolated from its geographic neighbors, which had risen to international prominence through sea
power, Japan almost inevitably invited comparisons to Great Britain. In earlier years, such a title
would have been a badge of approval; by the Edwardian era, it was taken by many as either a cue
for either wistful reminiscence of past glories or a blueprint fit for emulation. For Darwinians
concerned with the unified national spirit as the motor of states’ evolution – for whom latter-day
Britain seemed rudderless and degenerate – it summoned up a painful comparison with the
fierce, conquering spirit which they imagined their country had possessed in its own youth
during the Elizabethan Era. To their eyes, the Japan of the 1900s was producing its own heroes
like Francis Drake and its own underdog triumphs like the victory over the Spanish Armada --
complete with its own daring, aggressive sovereign along the lines of Britain’s Elizabeth I.

\textsuperscript{234} Ibid. pp. 299-300.
Modern British heroes of such stature, however, were lacking. To those members of the
Efficiency School of a more technocratic bent like the Fabian Socialists, on the other hand, to
whom efficiency was a matter of policy and scientific management more than of Volksgeist,
Japan was more significant as a harbinger of the future than as a throwback to the British past.
From an outlook so deeply critical of their society’s own ad hoc institutions and stagnation,
cherishing the thought of Japan as the Britain of the East was not a statement of reality, but of
aspiration.

One member of the Co-Efficients’ inner circle, the novelist and visionary H.G. Wells,
was notable in incorporating the nearly utopian imagery of Japan presented by British writers
into the literally utopian vision of one of his trademark futuristic novels. Wells’ relationship to
the Fabian Society’s politics was not entirely harmonious, but he shared their single, central
faith: that the power of scientific, rational thinking could redeem the disorderliness and failure of
society. Like so many other intellectuals of his era, he was also fully immersed in the imagery of
the state as a biological entity engaged in an evolutionary struggle.\(^{235}\) Wells’ relationship towards
science itself was similarly ambiguous. His novels When the Sleeper Wakes, The Invisible Man,
The Time Machine, and The Island of Dr. Moreau all explored the horrible ramifications of
untrammeled technology; at the same time, however, his conviction of the dangers of the future
only heightened his belief in the necessity of leadership by a scientifically-trained elite.\(^{236}\) His
writing thus marked him both as a full-fledged inheritor of the British utopian tradition as a
science-fiction writer and at the same time as an effective political propagandist. In his

\(^{235}\) John Huntington, Ed., Critical Essays on H.G. Wells (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1991) p. 130. Wells’ junior colleague, the
great British historian A.J.P. Taylor, took him to task later in life for having “taking all that anthropomorphic clap-
trap seriously” during the Edwardian era.

\(^{236}\) Peter Kemp, H.G. Wells and the Culminating Ape (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982)
Anticipations, published in 1902, Wells gave voice to the kind of social organization which he believed could foster mankind’s successful evolution:

As the result of forces which are practically irresistible, a world-wide process of social and moral deliquescence is in progress, and a really functional social body of engineering, managing men, scientifically trained and having common ideals and interests, is likely to segregate and disentangle itself from our present confusion of aimless and ill-directed lives. 237

National efficiency doctrine, with its emphasis on social hygiene, educational reforms, and decisive leadership, was geared towards the creation of precisely such an enlightened elite; Wells, like so many of his colleagues, saw a prototype of such a society in contemporary Japan. In 1905, at the height of the British intelligentsia’s infatuation with Japan, Wells published another one of what he called his “fantasias of possibility,” A Modern Utopia. He conceived it explicitly as a post-Darwinian answer to Thomas More, a utopia which reflected the unique preoccupations of the early-twentieth-century scientific mind: “The utopia of a modern dreamer must needs differ in one fundamental aspect from the nowhere and utopias men planned before Darwin quickened the thought of the world.”238 Wells envisioned a world state in which the common people lived orderly lives free of misery and moral degeneracy, education was rigorously practical and geared to societal needs, and benign governmental intrusion into private lives and property had become a matter of routine. Though professedly humane, his utopia fully embraced the Darwinian notion of a hierarchy of talent and usefulness. “The better sort of people

must have the fullest opportunities of parentage,” one government official warns; “the breed of failure must not increase, lest they suffer and perish, and the race with them.”

At the apex of the societal pyramid stood an elite caste called the samurai, whose name and ethical code drew obvious inspiration from their Japanese namesakes. In place of bushido, Wells’ samurai are bound by “The Rule,” a code which prescribes a spirit of absolute service to the state, personal self-abnegation, and “optimal physical health and efficiency.” Like a hybrid between the samurai class of the Tokugawa era and the genro clique of modern Japan, Wells’ samurai governed a society which made some obeisance to the general principle of popular rule but kept the levers of real power in its own hands, realizing that utopia “demands more powerful and efficient methods of control than any electoral methods can give.” Wells viewed A Modern Utopia as one of the most satisfactory visions of the future he ever created; on its completion he forwarded it to his fellow efficiency advocates as a useful concrete realization of their shared reform priorities. To his friend Beatrice Webb, he jokingly warned that the work would “cater to her worst instincts” of almost blind admiration for the Japanese.

The picture of Japan as the Britain of the East also contained an effort to diagnose a larger trend in geopolitical history. The cycle of the rise and fall of nations and empires was an ancient theme in the writing of history, but the Edwardian era saw it infused with evolutionary language to the extent that the ebb and flow of political history presented itself as almost a biological phenomenon, lending declinism an even grimmer aura of inevitability. Quite suddenly, Britain had begun to appear a spent force, suffering from a complex of ills which could
conveniently be attributed to nothing less than a national syndrome of degeneration. The world
of the 1900s was crowded with new competitors, to the extent that the margins of the British
Empire in every corner of the globe seemed threatened by rising and vigorous peoples. None,
however, had risen faster or created a more powerful impression than Japan, whose very racial
exotism and newness made it seem the very paragon of national vigor. According to the most
pessimistic of the British elite, Britain and Japan were two nations on opposite, intersecting
evolutionary paths – for the moment, they were equals and allies, but surely Japan’s spectacular
growth would continue to the point that Britain itself would become the junior partner.

Alongside Wells’ utopian vision of a stateless future, another work of self-styled
prophecy appeared in 1905. Provocatively entitled The Decline and Fall of the British Empire, it
was a pamphlet by the freelance writer Elliott Mills which detailed, in sixty pages, the
irredeemable weaknesses of his country as it faced the twentieth century. The flaws which he
enumerated were the standard fare of Co-Efficients and reformists throughout the decade:
physical weakness, educational defects, parliamentary indecisiveness, the death of moral fervor
and patriotism. Mills made his most provocative statement, however, in the narrative conceit
around which he framed the work; it was addressed to young schoolchildren in 2005, studying
history in an academy in the new world imperial capital of Tokyo. There had come a point, the
author cautioned the students, when the once-proud British nation had simply lost the will to
survive. Too weak to “sally forth and encounter the forces of nature,” Great Britain had simply
gone extinct at the hands of its stronger, more virile neighbors. 244 That such imagery had become
plausible, even respectable, in the first decade of the twentieth century is a powerful testament to
the changes undergone by the worldview of a large segment of the British elite – and to the
intellectual developments which had made such a radical shift in perspectives possible.

Chapter 5 – A Crisis Reconsidered

Section 1 – Image and Reality

The Emperor Meiji, the titular steward of Japan’s age of modernization, died at the age of sixty on July 30, 1912; it was a landmark in Japanese collective memory almost as significant as the death of Queen Victoria had been more than a decade earlier. Among its other effects, the imperial succession set in motion a brief period of political crisis which perfectly illustrates the collision between the British myth of Japan and its more prosaic reality. By 1912, the majority in Japan’s weak, consultative parliament – the Diet – was held by the moderately liberal Seiyukai party, a mouthpiece of business interests which had long called, without much effect, for greater government responsibility to the elected representatives. Frustrated by parliamentary delay in its request for the creation of two new Army divisions, and dead-set on its program of relentless military growth, the military high command simply bypassed parliament and convinced the pliant new Emperor Taisho to issue a personal edict.245 Long pliant and dormant, the liberal parties in the Diet were provoked to outrage, taking a united stand against the government under the banner of the “Movement for the Protection of Constitutional Government.” In a public manifesto, the defiant parliamentarians proclaimed that “the arbitrariness of the military clique has reached such a pass that constitutional government is endangered…we are firmly resolved against government by the oligarchs.”246 Mobs appeared in the streets of Tokyo and other major cities in support of the liberals, and the government of Taro Katsura was forced out of office – an unprecedented exertion of popular will over the government. The moment did not last, however.

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In early 1913, hand-picked supporters of the *genro* oligarchy created a sham party to regain control of the Diet, the “Constitutional Fellow-Thinkers Association;” the new cabinet contained some token liberal representatives but remained firmly under the control of the “wise old men” who had retained the levers of power throughout the Meiji era. Popular dissent, despite its brief efflorescence, was effectively quelled.²⁴⁷

As the story of the political crisis of 1912-1913 so amply demonstrates, the physical reality of Japan was never as utopian as the fantasies elaborated by Arthur Stead, Henry Dyer, or H.G. Wells. Meiji Japan was never nearly so liberal as the most optimistic British had hoped, and by the same token the Japan of the 1900s was never the harmonious engine of firm leadership and docile obedience that the efficiency enthusiasts imagined.²⁴⁸ The reality of Japan fell short of the image in other respects, as well. The extent of its economic and military progress, while nonetheless impressive, was rendered deceiving by the fortuitous circumstances of the 1890s and 1900s. It won its first signature military victories through predatory moves against a Chinese empire which had become yet another “sick man” to be carved up by the great powers. In 1904-05, it succeeded in achieving local supremacy over a Russian Empire which was on the brink of its own social breakdown, and whose center of power was nearly 3000 miles away from the Sea of Japan. The shock value of the victories was undeniable, but the amazing spectacle of an Asian nation behaving as a great power helped conceal the extent to which Japan was still a developing nation. Despite flattering reports of the cleanliness of its city life and its national hygiene, Japan by 1910 still trailed far behind the weakest of European powers like Italy or Austria-Hungary in

²⁴⁷ Scalapino, p. 193.
²⁴⁸ Robert Scalapino’s *Democracy and the Party Movement in Pre-War Japan* is a comprehensive portrait of how oligarchic forces directly descended from the feudal houses of Tokugawa Japan effectively throttled the growth of party government, even after the 1889 promulgation of the Meiji Constitution which seemed to provide for a modified parliamentary democracy. Genuinely liberal Japanese institutions would not exist until after 1945 – and even after that point, Japan remained an effectively one-party state for decades.
its basic standard of living. Moreover, and despite the glowing predictions of the value of the Anglo-Japanese naval alliance, Japan’s total military strength was impressive only relative to its immediate neighbors. Its navy had grown phenomenally in only three decades, but its total tonnage even at the end of the era had barely reached one-sixth that of Great Britain. Japan was indisputably a rising power, perhaps even the incipient “Britain of the East,” but the reality of its position in the 1900s belied the exaggerated assumptions of imminent parity with the West. The benefits of Britain’s military relationship with Japan, too, suffered greatly from long-term scrutiny. The Tokyo riots of late 1905, which had come in response to the perceived shortcomings of the Russo-Japanese peace agreement, could be explained away as an over-exuberant eruption of patriotism. Even as the British government continued in negotiations for the renewable and expansion of the Japanese alliance, however, opinion in Britain grew steadily more troubled at the increased militancy of the Japanese government and its continued expansionism. The formal annexation of Korea, completed in 1910, served as a sobering counterweight to Japan’s public relations efforts at the Japan-British exhibition and elsewhere.

The disillusionment of the collision between image and reality played out on a more personal scale when husband and wife Sidney and Beatrice Webb visited Japan in 1911-1912. The first flush of excitement on the heels of the Japanese victories in 1904-05 had worn off, but the Webbs remained as ever faithful to their ideological convictions; the word “efficiency” as a kind of shibboleth recurs again and again in their diaries. To some extent, the society they saw matched their expectations: they even declared themselves wholly impressed with the efficient

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249 Kennedy, p. 203.
250 Japan did achieve naval supremacy over Britain in the Pacific by the outset of the Second World War, but was still not equal the total economic capacity of Britain, let alone the United States.
organization of the Japanese ship which conducted them across the Pacific.\textsuperscript{251} Once landed in Japan, they were duly impressed with what they expected to be impressed with: disciplined classrooms, social deference, government-sponsored factories. They also, however, saw sobering reminders of the reality of a developing nation. “Squalor” in urban areas, dreary, despoiled industrial landscapes, even starving children in villages.\textsuperscript{252} In the longer perspective of history, the enthusiasm of key elements of the Edwardian intelligentsia for Japan had exceptionally shallow roots; it was nonetheless more significant than other, more purely aesthetic passing fads for foreign cultures in Britain. It was one of the more absurd outgrowths of a feverish, multi-layered critique of British society – but it was a profoundly revealing episode nonetheless.

This essay has been concerned primarily with perceptions rather than hard realities, with intellectual rather than material history. At the same time, however, it is useless to pretend that such phenomena as illiberal social Darwinism and the changed perceptions of both Britain and Japan during the Edwardian era grew up out of a vacuum, confined solely within a small circle of thinkers and social critics. The very elasticity of Darwinism, discussed in the second chapter, is a striking example of the coexistence of intellectual history with broader social trends. It is clear that the emergence of mass politics and the “social problem” in the late nineteenth century – which not only threatened the social standing of the European elites who had been the strongest supporters of liberal doctrine but also left them outflanked in their claim to speak for the people by growing socialist movements – played a crucial role in the political realignment of social Darwinism. It not only weakened confidence that individual liberties and free enterprise would suffice to keep social order, but helped spawn a new kind of Darwinian language which codified elite anxieties about control and national hygiene into a respectable pseudo-scientific creed.

\textsuperscript{252} Ibid. pp. 27-105.
Other anxieties, too, were at least partially connected with elements of truth. Britain truly did have a serious problem with income inequality and slum conditions in its cities – though, as noted before, the crisis when it made headlines in the 1900s was actually less acute than it had been in the earlier years of industrialism. The Boer War was indeed an organizational disaster, and perhaps more importantly it pointed to worrying signs of imperial overreach. Finally, of course, the reality of Japanese growth played a significant part in fostering the inflated perceptions of Japan which emerged from British writers. It was only because Japan had made itself a plausible candidate for reification through its conquests and economic progress that the “learn from Japan” fad which struck Britain was possible. In fact, this essay’s case study of Japan serves not only to illustrate the powerful effects of intellectual trends, but the complex relationships between such trends and reality on the ground. If the social developments of the West helped create Darwinism as it was known to the Co-Efficients and Liberal Imperialists of the 1900s, then it is equally true that the same doctrine, in turn, served as the intellectual lens which created an alternate picture of the reality of Japan for those observers. It is always important to remember the limited scope of intellectual history in this context; after all, the ideas discussed in this essay prevailed only within an exclusive stratum of British society. It is equally important, however, to note the complexity of the interactions between the realm of ideas and the alternate streams of economic, political, and social history. National Darwinism, efficiency, and Japanophilia ultimately declined, just as they had earlier risen, hand-in-hand with the changing dynamics of British history.

Although perceptions of British decline, too, were rooted distantly in reality, the Edwardian Crisis was proven by subsequent history to be a fleeting phenomenon, reflective not of permanent degeneracy but by a fortuitous confluence of intellectual history and the catalyst
provided by the Boer War. The famous 1904 “Report on Physical Deterioration” produced a
scare chiefly because it was among the first generation of government reports to systematically
measure such population metrics; reports of decline from the strength of the hearty English
yeoman of an earlier era were purely anecdotal. When the pamphleteer Elliott Mills, in his
fictional look backward from the year 2005, related that the diminished strength of the British
man had required the Army to institute lighter field rifles, he was indulging in a typical hysterical
generalization – the new, lighter rifles were simply a technical improvement over those they
replaced.253 With regard to the “social question” and the supposed inefficiency of Britain’s
venerable forms of government, predictions of collapse were similarly premature. The
constitutional struggles which occurred in Parliament near the end of the period – whose chief
result was the curtailing of the power of the House of Lords – turned out in the long view of
history to have been yet another of the seemingly endless series of incremental changes which
had defined the British system’s slow evolution towards modern democracy. Despite the
pressures of the rise of the Labour Party, the First World War, and the long-awaited 1918
Reform Act which granted female suffrage, the British constitutional system emerged from the
war more or less intact. Britain’s relative power had indeed begun to decline from its height by
the turn of the twentieth century, but the fall from global supremacy was far less traumatic than
the declinists of the 1900s had imagined, cushioned above all by victories in two world wars and
Britain’s new place in the US-led Western postwar order.

As for the strand in intellectual history which culminated in the changed perceptions of
Japan and of domestic crisis, it too did not enjoy prominence long after its heyday in the first
decade of the twentieth century. The Edwardian era’s ending, unlike its beginning, is difficult to
define. King Edward VII, already an old man when he had come to the throne in 1901, collapsed

253 Mills, The Decline and Fall of the British Empire, p. 10.
from a lung ailment in March 1910 and eventually died in May of the same year. His death, unlike that of his mother, did not provoke widespread reflections on the end of an era.\textsuperscript{254}

Edward’s reign had been too short, and more importantly too tempestuous, for contemporaries to easily define its essence while it lasted or pronounce a fitting eulogy for it once it had ended. Both within and without the school of efficiency and reform, it was an era of transition; its aftermath came to be defined more and more by the looming threat of European war. The years between 1910 and the outbreak of war in August 1914 saw continued frantic political reform, as the Liberal government struggled to position itself between indignant conservative interests and the ever-more vocal Labour partners in its coalition; in many ways, a continuation of the political atmosphere of the 1900s. War with Germany, when it came, relegated the social concerns of the era to secondary importance; if the Edwardian era did not end in August 1914, then it certainly ended before the Armistice four years later.

Section 2 – The Strange Rebirth of Liberal England

If there is a single grand narrative traced in the course of this essay – a theme which unites the growth of national Darwinism, theories of efficiency, and elite anxieties over social control – it is that of the decline of traditional liberalism in elite British intellectual culture. The liberal paradigm had no monopoly on British thought even at the mid-nineteenth century apex of the Victorian order, and its hold had been even less secure in the decades and generations which had come before. Individualism, civil libertarianism, and free market capitalism were certainly not – the teachings of Whig history notwithstanding – eternal building-blocks of the English national character, handed down from ancient Anglo-Saxon traditions and strengthened with

\textsuperscript{254} Hynes, p. 60.
each succeeding century of gradual progress. Liberalism was, in fact, a relatively new phenomenon, with some deep roots in the Middle Ages but its primary origins in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Whether it helped drive Britain’s rise to world preeminence in the nineteenth century or merely reaped the benefits of the industrial revolution and the country’s military victories is an open question, but what is indisputable now is that its moment in the sun was the product of a particular time and place in history rather than the inevitable unfolding of a universal law. Other nations had their “liberal eras” – post-1860s Italy, belle époque France, and even Weimar Germany – but in no other country did circumstances conspire to make liberalism a core element of national ideology for so long as they did in Great Britain. Even the United States, despite its founding commitment to the political principles of individual rights, was never a consistent proponent of either true laissez-faire economics or free trade in the nineteenth century. Britain was the spiritual homeland of the ideology preached by Bentham, Mill, Cobden, and Gladstone, and was recognized as such worldwide; its disavowal in the Edwardian era, especially by many of the political heirs of its greatest exponents, is thus all the more remarkable.

Ultimately, however, liberalism proved far more resilient and adaptable than its eulogists had imagined. The conventional view, held by contemporary observers as diverse as Winston Churchill, Joseph Chamberlain, and H.G. Wells, was simple and stark: the old creed had outlived its usefulness, and its confident worldview was hopelessly out of touch with the changed social situation and the new climate of international competition. Many twentieth century historians agreed with that verdict. In The Twenty Years’ Crisis, his famous account of interwar international relations, the realist historian E.H. Carr held that the “utopian,” self-serving nostrums of British liberalism, having survived the First World War and embedded themselves in
institutions such as the League of Nations, were finally discredited by their utter failure to keep the peace in the interwar era.\textsuperscript{255} Dangerfield’s \textit{Strange Death of Liberal England} advanced a similar theory regarding domestic history. Liberalism in its classical form, he maintained, was ultimately a luxury, tenable only so long as Britain remained on top of the world, with its expectations for the future boundless. “Liberalism,” he said, “was a child of progress, and it died when ‘progress’ died.”\textsuperscript{256}

It is certainly true that the more utopian precepts of nineteenth century liberalism died a hard death in the cold light of the twentieth century; in that much, at least, the doomsayers of the Edwardian era were justified. The notions that free trade and open borders could break down international rivalries, that the guaranteeing of individual rights would obviate the need for collective action, and that parliamentary institutions represented the lone road to progress were unquestionably obsolescent, relics of an age of over-confidence. The crisis atmosphere of the 1900s, despite its excesses of anxiety, was if nothing else a useful corrective to these exuberant facets of traditional liberalism. The core doctrine of liberalism – the basic philosophical stance of tolerance and individualism – was never truly discredited, however. In fact, the next phase of British history ultimately reinforced its status as a centerpiece of national, and ultimately Western, identity.

World War I drove a wedge into the reformist, efficiency coalition of the previous decade. The more conservative members of the group, the “Liberal Imperialists” and the outright Tories, supported the war effort wholeheartedly and as a matter of course. For the Fabian Socialists, the decision was far more wrenching. For dedicated pacifists like Bertrand Russell or grassroots socialist activists like Keir Hardie, the doctrinal socialist commitment to peace

\textsuperscript{255} Edward Hallett Carr, \textit{The Twenty Years’ Crisis: 1919-1939} (New York: Perennial, 2001)

\textsuperscript{256} Dangerfield, p. 8.
dictated a principled stand against a war for empire and European supremacy. For the majority of Fabians, however, including the Webbs and H. G. Wells, there was no inherent conflict between their brand of collectivism and an imperialist foreign policy; after all, as Wells reminded his readers, an orderly world with clear leaders was far more efficient than a chaotic multilateral one. Even as many of the efficiency advocates supported war with Germany, however, the resonance of their views with the general public declined precipitously. German efficiency and technical prowess, which had been admired in the same circles as had praised Japan so effusively, became sinister rather than admirable in wartime. Government propaganda placed a renewed emphasis on “traditional” pillars of British strength such as free institutions and the Crown, and the struggle against Germany, under the added influence of American participation, became nothing less than a battle for freedom and democracy, those formerly passé terms. The collective experience of the 1930s and the Second World War only further eroded the allure of “efficient” doctrines of control and obedience, whether from the left or right. There remained holdouts, of course. Even while most British socialists came to reject Stalinism, Beatrice and Sidney Webb notoriously allowed themselves to be taken in by the grandeur of the Five Year Plans, pronounced themselves awed at the organizational capacity of the Soviets just as they had been in the 1900s by that of the Japanese. The British system continued to muddle through as if by default, and political liberalism saw its stature greatly enhanced simply by the thorough discrediting of the extreme alternatives presented in the first half of the twentieth century. The authoritarian oligarchy of Japan in the 1890s and 1900s, though different in crucial respects from the military dictatorship which carried the country into the Second World War, could never be

257 Wells played a fairly major role in the war effort as director of propaganda directed at Germany.
258 Another Fabian who was initially warmly disposed towards the Soviet Union, George Orwell, was disabused of his good first impression by the mid 1930s.
evaluated again without reference to the eventual consequences, real or imagined, of such a system.

Just as political liberalism helped rejuvenate itself after World War I through comparison with the absurd extremes reached by systems once touted as its competitors, so did the humanistic philosophy at the heart of liberalism benefit from the moral bankruptcy of social Darwinist thought. The ideal of the efficient state, and of expert social planning as a universal panacea, was an outgrowth of a European culture which throughout the nineteenth century had grown increasingly intoxicated with the boundless possibilities of science. Nowhere was the “science of man” held in higher esteem than in Britain, the homeland of political economy and of modern evolutionary theory. When the socialists’ dogmatic faith in science fell together with the prejudices of traditional elitism, the resulting coalition was unabashedly illiberal, even anti-liberal. The horrors of 1914-1918 shattered the faith of thinkers of nearly all stripes in science as an agent of progress. Moreover, the appearance outside of Britain of futurism and fascism, doctrines which drew from Darwinian language and which exalted the machine over the individual, further discredited the “organic analogy” and collectivism among respectable British figures. Faced with the example the monstrous extremes of social planning in the Soviet Union and of social Darwinism in Nazi Germany, it was only natural that liberalism saw something of a return to fashion. H.G. Wells to the end of his long life continued to proclaim his faith in the kind of scientific elitism portrayed in *A Modern Utopia* and so exemplified by the fantasy Japan of the 1900s, but his ideas grew out of vogue even among his former intellectual colleagues.259 Fabian tracts in the postwar era discarded the talk of people as “functional units” and of social planning, instead couching their calls for wealth distribution in the language of basic rights and

freedoms. The tone of British political philosophy after the experience of the two world wars was set by men like Isaiah Berlin and Friedrich Hayek, whose greatest ambition was to rehabilitate liberalism for the new era as a creed worth fighting for; their arguments relied on the slippery slope – what Hayek called the “road to serfdom” – presented by Darwinism, collectivism, “efficiency,” and the other illiberal outgrowths of the late nineteenth century.

In defending what he thought was a dying philosophy, the British politician C.F. G. Masterman in 1905 gave eloquent voice to the dim uncertainty of the future he saw facing his country and its traditional liberal creed. Like so many others, he perceived that Britain had reached a turning point, and a landmark moment whose import was clear but whose ultimate resolution lay undecided. “Expectancy,” he said, “belongs by nature to a time balanced uneasily between two great periods of change…. On the one hand is a past showing faint vitality – on the other is the future but hardly coming to birth. The years as they pass still appear as years of preparation, a time of waiting rather than a time of action.” At least for the circle of politicians and thinkers discussed in this essay, the crisis of the liberal order began not with the world wars, as presented in the conventional account, but at least a decade earlier, in what they thought was a decisive confluence of social problems which could no longer be ignored. They were ultimately mistaken. The uncertainty and the sensation of transition were real, but the decade was one of the innumerable turning points of history which failed fully to turn. Both the British state and the philosophies which had accompanied its period of world preeminence survived into the twentieth century, and beyond, far better than the alarmists of the Edwardian era would ever have predicted.

260 Anthony Crosland’s *The Future of Socialism* (1955) is the chief blueprint of postwar Labour philosophy, and had its start as a Fabian commission.  
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