

JAMES MORRIS

[The Partition of India]

Attlee,¹ the Prime Minister of the new Labour Government, had firm views about India. He had gone there on a Parliamentary mission as long before as 1928, and had concerned himself with the subject ever since. He had long ago reached the conclusion that only the Indians themselves could solve their own problems, freed of all British constitutional restraints, and even before the war he had argued that India should be given Dominion status within a fixed period of years. By 1946 he was sure that the transfer of power must be made as soon as possible—peaceably if possible, with the rights of minorities protected if they could be, but above all quickly, and absolutely. The first necessity, he thought, was to be rid of poor Wavell,² whom he considered defeatist and ineffectual, ‘a curious silent bird’. It did not take him long to find a successor. ‘I thought very hard,’ he wrote, ‘and looked all around. And suddenly I had what I now think was an inspiration. I thought of Mountbatten.’³

Mountbatten! The perfect, the allegorical last Viceroy! Royal himself, great-grandson of the original Queen-Empress, second cousin of George VI, though by blood he was almost as German as he was English he seemed nevertheless the last epitome of the English aristocrat. He was a world figure in his own right, too, for as Supreme Commander in South-East Asia he had commanded forces of all the allied nations—one of the four supremos who, in the last year of the war, had disposed the vast fleets and armies of the western alliance. Moreover he was a recognised progressive, sympathetic to the ideals of Labour, anything but a reactionary on the meaning of Empire, and with a cosmopolitan contempt for the petty prejudices of race and class.

‘What is different about you from your predecessors?’ Nehru asked Mountbatten soon after his arrival in India. ‘Can it be that you have been given plenipotentiary⁴ powers? In that case you will succeed where all others have failed.’ The Viceroy had in fact *demande*d such powers, enabling him to reach swift decisions on the spot. He had also committed Attlee to a date for the end of British rule in India, with no escape clauses. The Raj⁵ was to end not later than June, 1948, when complete power would be handed to Indian successors.

This renunciation meant that Britain had no bargaining power any more: she was genuinely disinterested at last, and was concerned only to see that India was left a workable State, preferably a member of the Commonwealth, at least friendly to Great Britain. She had nothing much to offer in return, now that liberty was so firmly pledged, but nevertheless Mountbatten was marvellously, some thought overweeningly, self-confident. As he said himself, he thought he could do anything, and sure enough the combination of prestige, assurance and clear intention made him a much more formidable negotiator than the

1. Clement Richard Attlee (1883–1967), Labour (socialist) prime minister of Great Britain (1945–51).

2. Archibald Percival Wavell (1883–1950), British field marshal and viceroy of India (1943–47).

3. Louis Francis Albert Victor Nicholas, Earl

Mountbatten of Burma (1900–79), British admiral, viceroy of India in 1947, and chief of the British Defence Staff (1959–65).

4. Absolute.

5. British rule (Hindu for “reign”).

aloof Linlithgow⁶ or the despondent Wavell. It meant that he was arguing, if not from strength, at least from style.

The Mountbattens brought to the viceregal office an element of *brio*⁷ absent since the days of Curzon.⁸ They sustained the swagger of it all, the thousands of servants, the white viceregal train, the bodyguards, the curtseying and the royal emblems, but they made it contemporary. Gone were the ancient shibboleths⁹ of the court. The only royal Viceroy was the least grandiose of them all. At viceregal dinners now half the guests were always Indian, and earlier incumbents might have been horrified to observe how frankly the Mountbattens talked to natives of all ranks. It was an abdication in itself, for it was the very negation of imperial technique, but it was proper for the times and the purpose.

Mountbatten hoped to leave behind a federal united India, Hindus, Muslims and Princely States constitutionally linked. As second-best, he aimed at a peacefully divided one. He was adamant from the start that there would be no reservations or hidden clauses. 'All this is yours', he said to Gandhi¹ one day, when the Mahatma asked if he might walk around the viceregal gardens. 'We are only trustees. We have come to make it over to you.' No Viceroy had ever talked like that before, and no Viceroy had ever ventured into such intimate political relationships. During his first two months in India Mountbatten had 133 recorded interviews with Indian political leaders, conducted always in an atmosphere of candid urgency—if the Indians wished to inherit a peaceful India, they must decide fast how to arrange it. He talked to scores of politicians, but the fate of the country was really decided by four men: the Viceroy himself, Gandhi, Nehru and Mohammed Ali Jinnah.²

Mountbatten recognized the force of these men. Day after day he received them, usually together, sometimes separately, in the sunny and fresh-painted study at his palace. Times had greatly changed, since the half-naked fakir³ had first penetrated this imperial sanctum to negotiate with the austere Lord Irwin,⁴ while the palace servants gaped to see a political agitator exchanging badinage with the Viceroy. Now the negotiators met on an equal footing, like distant relatives assembling to divide an inheritance. The talks were seldom easy, for the issues were colossal and Indian passions ran high, but they were not generally rancorous, for at last it was patent that the British interest was not in keeping India, but in honourably getting rid of it.

Mountbatten's relations with the three leaders greatly differed. Gandhi, past the peak of his career, he recognized as a kind of constitutional monarch: he was baffled by him, charmed by him, often, like all Englishmen, irritated by him—'judge of my delight', he reported once, 'when Gandhi arrived for a crucial meeting holding his finger to his lips—it was his day of silence!' Alone among the senior British officials of India, though, he became a friend of the

6. Victor Alexander John Hope, marquess of Linlithgow (1887–1952), statesman and longest serving viceroy of India (1936–43).

7. Vivacity (Italian).

8. George Nathaniel Curzon, marquess of Kedleston (1859–1925), flamboyant viceroy of India (1896–1905).

9. Old-fashioned behavior or doctrine.

1. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948), lawyer, political, and (Hindu) spiritual leader, a major figure in the Indian independence movement,

was popularly known as "the Mahatma" (Hindu for "Great Soul").

2. Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1876–1948), lawyer, leader of the Muslim League, governor general of Pakistan, and first president of its constituent assembly.

3. Religious ascetic.

4. Edward Frederick Lindley Wood, Baron Irwin (1881–1959), statesman and viceroy of India (1925–31).

Mahatma, and Gandhi in return gave him his affection. He was, as always, free with his advice—‘Have the courage to see the truth, and act by it!’—but he was attracted by the soigné⁵ youthfulness of the Mountbattens, their combination of the simple and the very urbane. Though he was never reconciled to the idea of a divided India, still by making his friendship publicly clear, by appearing often in happy companionship with the Viceroy and his wife, Gandhi gave his *impri-matur*⁶ to the course of events.

Jinnah was a very different negotiator. He was dying of cancer, but nobody knew it: he was as decisive as Mountbatten himself, and as confident too—since the date of independence had already been decreed, he knew that he had only to keep arguing to ensure that Pakistan came into being. His lawyer’s brain was sharper than the Viceroy’s, his purpose more dogmatic, and as the months passed towards independence day he became ever more adamant that the only solution was the partition of India and the establishment of Pakistan under the government of the Muslim League. Though a Muslim only in theory—he was the grandson of converts, and could speak no Urdu, the language of Islam in India—rather than submit to Hindu rule, he said, he would have a Pakistan consisting only of the Sind desert. A gaunt, wintry, rather alarming-looking man, wearing a monocle said to have been inspired by Joe Chamberlain’s,⁷ and suits of irreproachable cut, Jinnah was very Anglicised: he had a house in London, and had spent much of his life in England. He was, though, impervious to the Mountbatten charm, and noticeably resistant to logic or sweet reason. Mountbatten thought him the evil genius of the drama, the wrecker, and called him a haughty megalomaniac.

It was Nehru who became closest to the Mountbattens, and this was not surprising. Nehru was an agnostic intellectual, but of a sensual, emotional kind, a patrician like Mountbatten himself, a charmer and a lover of women—the Nehrus were famous philanderers. He was a Kashmiri Brahmin,⁸ with much of the Kashmiri melancholy and introspection, and though he had spent his life fighting in the patriotic cause, he was highly susceptible to personal magnetisms. He needed a cause, a love, a leader. He was the devoted subject of Gandhi, and in a subtle, tacit way he was the passive collaborator of Mountbatten. The two men were of an age and of a taste, in many ways complementary to one another: through all their tortuous talks an understanding ran, an acceptance perhaps that they had more in common as men than they were at variance as statesmen.

Getting to know these three men, consulting many others, weighing the opinions of his administrators, nevertheless Mountbatten soon made up his mind about the fate of India—too soon, his critics were to say, and there was something impetuous to his solution, something inherited perhaps from his experiences of war. As the months passed so the British grip on security weakened, until the army could no longer guarantee order, the police were helplessly over-strained, the intelligence services had disastrously decayed and even the last Britons of the administration were demoralized. The conviction had gone, and as the country slid towards anarchy few Britons in India would now argue the case for Empire—Field Marshal Claude Auchinleck, the Commander-in-Chief,

5. Elegant.

6. Official sanction, authorization.

7. Sir Joseph Austen Chamberlain (1863–1937),

British foreign secretary (1924–29).

8. Member of Hindu priestly caste.

said of his own army that any Indian officer worth his salt was now a nationalist, 'and so he should be'.

Mountbatten's press attaché, Alan Campbell-Johnson, likened India in 1947 to a ship on fire in mid-ocean with a hold full of ammunition. The Viceroy himself, finding the parties irreconcilable, decided that partition was inevitable, and the sooner the better. 'There was in fact no option', Campbell-Johnson thought. Two Dominions would be created at once, with immediate independence. There would be no interim Government of any kind, no gradual transfer of power. Punjab and Bengal, with almost equal numbers of Muslims and Hindus, would be bisected. The Princely States would be urged to join one Dominion or the other. Everything would be partitioned, the Indian Army, the National Debt, the railway system, down to the stocks of stationery at the New Delhi secretariat, and the staff cars of GHQ.⁹

Mountbatten flew to London to get the Government's approval, and persuaded Churchill,¹ in Opposition, not to delay the process. Then, in an enormous hurry to prevent the whole administration falling apart in communal violence, he set the plan in motion. Congress² and the Muslim League both accepted the proposals, and together their leaders announced it to the nation on All-India Radio—Jinnah in English, his speech being then translated into Urdu. Mountbatten himself gave a press conference to announce that the British could not wait until the following year after all—independence had to come before the end of 1947. Pressed by reporters to name a date, he decided there and then upon the anniversary of the surrender of the Japanese in 1945. They would withdraw from India, he said, completely and irrevocably, by August 15, 1947, and sovereignty would then be surrendered. After 250 years on Indian soil, the British had given themselves seventy-three days to retire.

'Plan Balkan', the precipitate partitioning of India, was hardly a dignified process, but it was decisive. It was, like Dunkirk,³ a failure dashingly achieved, with a touch of sleight of hand. The unity of India, the proudest achievement of British rule, was to be deliberately sundered. The great institutions of British India were to be split down the middle. The Indian Princes,⁴ who had lost their own independence in return for the protection of the Crown, were to be betrayed. A sub-continent on the brink of civil war was to be subjected to an enormous social and governmental upheaval, millions of people to assume new nationalities, Ministries to be shuffled here and there, loyalties to be suddenly jettisoned or invented. Mountbatten himself called it 'sheer madness, fantastic communal madness'.

But it was final. Gone were the old fumbings and second thoughts which had, for forty years, alternately delayed, hastened and obfuscated the transfer of power in India. Seventy-three days! In London the India Independence Bill ran through all its Parliamentary stages in a single week, ending at a stroke all British claims to sovereignty in India, and abrogating⁵ all the hundreds of treaties concluded between the Crown and the Princely States. Mountbatten

9. General Headquarters.

1. Sir Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill (1874–1965), British statesman, soldier, and author; conservative prime minister (1940–45), and leader of the opposition (1945–55).

2. The Indian National Congress was a political party that, in the 1946 elections, won the Hindu

vote, but lost the Muslim vote to the Muslim League.

3. French port from which, in 1940, 300,000 Allied troops, retreating from the Germans, were evacuated by sea in small boats, many manned by civilian volunteers.

4. Rulers of the Princely States.

5. Canceling.

kept a large calendar on his desk, to mark off the days, like the count-down of a space launching, and with hectic resolution the British in India prepared the obsequies of their paramour.⁶ It had taken them centuries to pacify and survey the immense expanses of their Indian territories, father succeeding son in the great task: now in a matter of weeks a boundary commission sliced the edifice into parts, laying new frontiers like string on a building-site, under the dispassionate instructions of an English barrister, Sir Cyril Radcliffe, who had never set foot in India before. The Indian Army was bisected, regiments split by squadrons, companies that had served together for a century suddenly distributed among alien battalions. The white Viceregal train chuffed away from Delhi for the last time, for it was allotted to Pakistan: the officials of the Ken-Club were relieved to be told that its assets would remain in India.

All went! All the dreams of the Empire-builders long before, all the Curzonian⁷ splendour of imperial function, and as the British relentlessly cleared their office desks, India subsided into anarchy. Eleven million people abandoned their homes and moved in hordes across the countryside, hastening to the right side of the new communal frontiers. The roads were crammed with refugees, people clung to the steps of trains, or crowded upon their roofs, and the old gypsy confusion of India, the crowding and the clutter, the always familiar scenes of exhaustion, bewilderment and deprivation, were multiplied a thousand times. Violence erupted on a scale never known in British India before, even in the Mutiny.⁸ It was like a gigantic boil bursting, an enormous eruption of frustrations and resentments suppressed for so long by the authority of Empire. Whole communities were massacred. Entire train-loads of refugees died on the tracks, to the last child in arms. In the Punjab gangs of armed men roamed the countryside, slaughtering columns of refugees, and thousands of people died unremarked in the streets of Amritsar,⁹ where the death of 400 had horrified the world twenty-five years before.

The Viceroy was not deterred. Working day and night the last British officials of the Indian Civil Service established administrations for the two new Dominions, one with its capital at New Delhi, the other at Karachi. A Boundary Force, commanded by a Welshman with Hindu and Muslim advisers, was hastily put together to try to keep the peace, and the British Army was steadily and unostentatiously withdrawn: one by one the regiments left the soil of India, embarking on their troopships at Bombay while the bands on the Apollo Bunder played 'Auld Lang Syne', and the old hands of the Royal Bombay Yacht Club looked on sadly from their verandah.

The last days passed. The last of the wavering Princely States opted for one Dominion or the other, leaving only Kashmir, Hyderabad and Junagadh with their futures unresolved. The last of the British imperialists desperately worked against the clock, creating at least rudimentary Governments to succeed themselves. As the bloodshed and the turmoil continued, as the migratory masses laboured this way and that across the Indian plains, in the midst of it all the British Empire came to an end in India. At 8.30 a.m. on the appointed day, August 15, 1947, the Union Jack was hauled down all over the sub-continent, from frontier fort and Governor's palace, from law court and town hall, from

6. Funeral rites of their supremacy.

7. Grand, in the manner of George Nathaniel Curzon.

8. Indian uprising (1857) against the British, sup-

pressed with great savagery on both sides.

9. City in eastern central India, scene of a massacre of Indian civilians by British troops in 1919.

the water-front at Surat where it all began, from the Viceroy's crowning palace, from the ruined Residency at Lucknow where the flag had flown night and day since the Indian Mutiny—

Shot thro' the staff or the halyard, but ever we raised thee anew,
And ever upon the topmost roof our banner of England blew¹

In Karachi Jinnah was sworn in as Governor-General of the Dominion of Pakistan.² In Delhi Lord Mountbatten gave up the Viceroyalty, with its almost despotic power, and became the Governor-General of the Dominion of India, with no power at all.

Incalculable crowds celebrated the event in Delhi—the largest crowds anybody could remember seeing, in a country of multitudes. The grand military parade planned for that evening was cancelled, the military being so engulfed in the crowd that only the coloured tips of their puggarees³ were visible from the grandstands. When the Mountbattens returned in their State coach to the palace, thronged all about by hysterically happy crowds, Nehru sat on top of the hood, 'like a schoolboy', Mountbatten reported, four Indian ladies with their children clambered up the sides, a Polish woman and an Indian newspaperman hung on behind. Thus queerly loaded, and accompanied by several thousand running, cheering people, the last of the Viceroys clattered the long mile up Kingsway to his great house, while fireworks sprayed the evening sky above him, and the thunder of a million people echoed across Delhi.

It was done. The flags of the new Dominions, the Indian decorated with the Wheel of Ashoka,⁴ the Pakistani with Islam's star and crescent, flew all over the sub-continent, and all the paraphernalia of authority was handed over to the successor States. King George VI, Emperor no longer, sent his somewhat stilted greetings. Mountbatten proclaimed it 'a parting between friends, who have learned to honour and respect one another, even in disagreement'. Attlee said it was not the abdication, but the fulfilment of Britain's mission to India. The British Press was self-congratulatory, the British public, casting a cursory eye over the reportage, thought that on the whole they were well out of it. Some 200,000 Indians had died.

1978

1. Said to have been the 200th in the line of succession from the original mutiny flag, the Lucknow Union Jack was sent to King George, at his own request, to be kept at Windsor Castle [Morris's note].
2. A conception first devised by Indian students at Cambridge in 1932. P stood for Punjab, A for the Afghan areas of the North-West Frontier, K for

Kashmir and S for Sind, while PAK handily meant "pure," in a religious sense [Morris's note].

3. Indian turbans.

4. Buddhist symbol associated with Ashoka (ca. 273—ca. 232 B.C.E.), Indian emperor of the Mauryan Dynasty.