

# Editorial

The summer of 1997 will see an interesting combination of events marking the history of the British Empire. On 24 June, it will be exactly 500 years since John Cabot sighted the New-found-land which was to become England's first colonial possession. Two days earlier, it will be 100 years since Queen Victoria celebrated her Diamond Jubilee, that great festival of empire which has been so memorably commemorated by James Morris in his *Pax Britannica* trilogy. Then, on 14 August will come the fiftieth anniversary of the independence of India and Pakistan, an event which may fairly be regarded as marking the beginning of the end of the imperial story. And lastly, on 30 June, Hong Kong will revert to China, and Britain will be left with only a handful of sparsely populated rocks and islands as a reminder that it once ruled a quarter of the globe

For most of this century it has been politically correct in Britain to feel ashamed about the empire, as if it represented some regrettable episode in the nation's history. The Commonwealth still exists of course, and does more good than many people think, but it is not taken very seriously by the media and is therefore all but invisible to most of the population. Britain's future lies in Europe, we are told, or perhaps out at sea in the North Atlantic, and the past five centuries mean little or nothing to the younger generation today. It is high time that we realized that this attitude, although it is common enough in this country, is not widely shared in the rest of the world. The countries which were colonized by the British not only bear the marks of that experience, but often owe their very existence to it. Newfoundland is as British as it has ever been, and although that may not be typical, it is far more common than one might imagine. I myself travelled overland from Uganda to South Africa in the summer of 1990 on the strength of my Barclaycard, because almost everywhere I went there was a Barclays Bank ready and available to meet my financial requirements. The Americans I met on the way were astonished at the ease with which I could do this – they had nothing comparable, and what is more, they had to get visas for almost every country they visited, whereas the British were let in free.

At a more serious level, the British Empire was a vehicle used by God for the spread of the Gospel to the furthest corners of the earth. It was largely because they enjoyed the protection of British arms that missionaries were able to establish themselves in many parts of Africa and Asia, and get on with their labours. It is easy to sneer at 'guns and the Gospel', but the fact remains that the evangelization of the third world would have taken far longer and probably been much less successful than it

has been, if the British Empire had not existed. In that respect, it can be compared with ancient Rome, which also made it possible for the Gospel to spread more rapidly than it otherwise might have done.

Equally important, and of continuing relevance today, is the spread of the English language which accompanied the empire. We have grown so used to the idea that everybody of any importance speaks English that we forget that it was not always so, and that even in the nineteenth century, English was little known in other countries. Today, it is the world language, learned eagerly by millions who have never seen a British gunboat. The official British response to this has been typically negative – Britain spends far less than France, for example, on promoting its language and culture, and has raised the level of tuition fees for foreign students to prohibitive levels for many. Private enterprise has done better, with hundreds of language schools springing up all over the country, but even that scarcely begins to meet the need. Meanwhile, standards of literacy and expression have fallen to such depths that the loss of our culture is a serious threat right here at home.

The importance of all this for Christians is enormous, even if it is not always obvious to the myopic British. A foreigner who learns English cannot help but encounter Christianity, which permeates our literature and our vocabulary. Even if our schools (and perhaps our churches as well) have done their best in the past generation to reduce biblical literacy to a minimum, it remains true that no-one can possess a serious command of English without a knowledge of the Scriptures. And that knowledge, as we all know, is the first stage on the road to conversion.

Evangelicals who write in English soon discover that their books will be sold all over the world. Few of us seem to appreciate that we would not have the vast range of Bible translations and Christian literature that we have if it were not for the overseas market, which takes more than half of what British publishers produce. The knock-on effect of this is that our ideas and our concerns are shared in places we have scarcely heard of and know almost nothing about. Even the doings of the Church of England are followed in other countries with a degree of interest which does not attach to any other national church. The empire of the sword has been replaced by an empire of the mind, perhaps even by an empire of the spirit, and there is no sign that this is likely to change in the foreseeable future. A recent French publication, outlining the state of the French language worldwide, had to confess ruefully that not only was English dominant right now – there was no prospect of any rival arising to take its place, because it covers the whole world.

This means that we Christians who use this language and benefit from this worldwide web (to borrow a phrase) have a particular responsibility before God. If he has brought about a situation in which we can influence

people of every language and culture, how can we possibly not use this opportunity for his glory? Translating the Bible into obscure tribal languages is a noble activity, but it is now far less important strategically than providing good Christian books and teaching materials in English, which can be used strategically all over the world. It is also an incentive to produce deep works of theology, as well as easy guides for beginners. Thanks to Scripture Union and other organizations like it, we are good at the second of these; it is the first which is less than satisfactory, and which needs more attention than it has been given of late.

The battles which we wage today are no longer in 'some corner of a foreign field that is for ever England', but in the hearts and minds of rising generations, who debate their future, express their concerns and in the providence of God hear the truth of the Gospel either in English or in a translated version of it. What we think, and how we express ourselves, has an impact far beyond anything we can imagine. For this, we should thank God for the British Empire, recognizing that it is not just a piece of rapidly fading history of which we should feel vaguely ashamed, but the prologue to a global spiritual revival, the like of which the world has never seen. It is our privilege and our responsibility to work for that revival, and to use the opportunities which God has so graciously given us to spread his Gospel by the ways and means which he has opened up to us. It is my prayer in this year of remembrance that we shall draw strength from our past and use it for the tasks which lie ahead of us in the future.

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