

CHAPTER I

The Victorian Scene

George Nathaniel Curzon was born on January 11, 1859, the eldest son and heir of Lord Scarsdale of Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire. Curzon never forgot the magnificent family manor house and the ancient lineage - the Scarsdales claimed their descent in an unbroken line from the days of William the Conqueror.¹

Victoria had been on the throne for 22 years at the time of Curzon's birth. A plump and homely mother of nine, she continued to be in love with Prince Albert. Two years later Albert was to die, of a chill caught after a visit to Cambridge where he had gone to reprimand their eldest son the errant Prince Edward, and Victoria went into mourning for the remaining 40 years of her life. At the time of the Queen's death in 1901, Curzon had been Viceroy of India for two years. Darwin, Tennyson and Gladstone were all 50 when Curzon was born. Thomas Arnold, Headmaster of Rugby, had died 17 years ago. Dickens was 47, John Stuart Mill 53 and Palmerston 75 in 1859.

When the year 1859 began Victoria had much to feel smug about. Napoleon had long been vanquished and the

¹ See Family Tree, pp.14-17

CURZON OF KEDLESTON

Robert de Courson, from Courson in Normandy (fl.1066)

Giraline de Curcun

Richard de Curcun, 1st Lord of Kedleston (fl. 1135)

Robert de Curzon (d.c 1205) - Alice Somerville

Richard de Curzon, ancestor
of the Curzons of Croxall

Thomas de Curzon - Sibilla

Thomas de Curzon (d. 1245)

Richard de Curzon, 5th Lord of Kedleston (d. 1275)

Richard de Curzon (fl. 1297) - Joan

Ralph de Curzon

Richard de Curzon (fl. 1330) - Joan

Sir Roger de Curzon, Kt.

Sir John de Curzon, Kt. 10th Lord of Kedleston (d. 1406) -
Eleanor, d. of Sir Robert de Twyford, Kt.

John Curzon (b. 1394) = Margaret, d. of Sir Nicholas
Montgomery, Kt.

Richard Curzon (fl. 1432) = Mariora

John Curzon, 13th Lord of Kedleston (d. 1456) = Joan, d.
of Sir John Bagot, Kt., of
Blithfield, Staffs.

Richard Curzon, 14th Lord of Kedleston (d. 1496) = Alice,
d. of Sir Robert Willoughby,
Kt., of Wollaton, Notts.

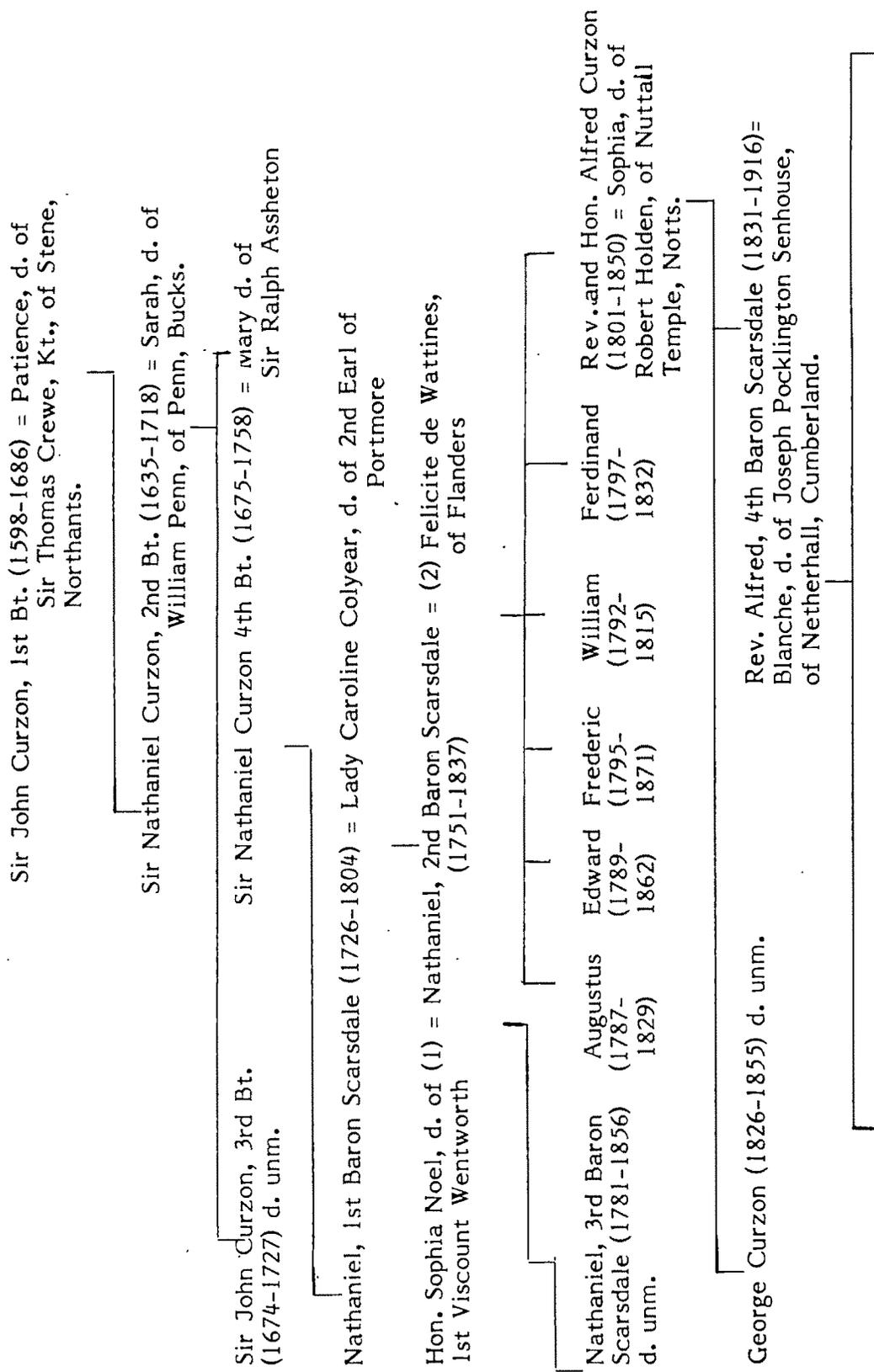
John Curzon (d. 1512) = Elizabeth, d. of Stephen Eyre, of
Hassop, Derbys.

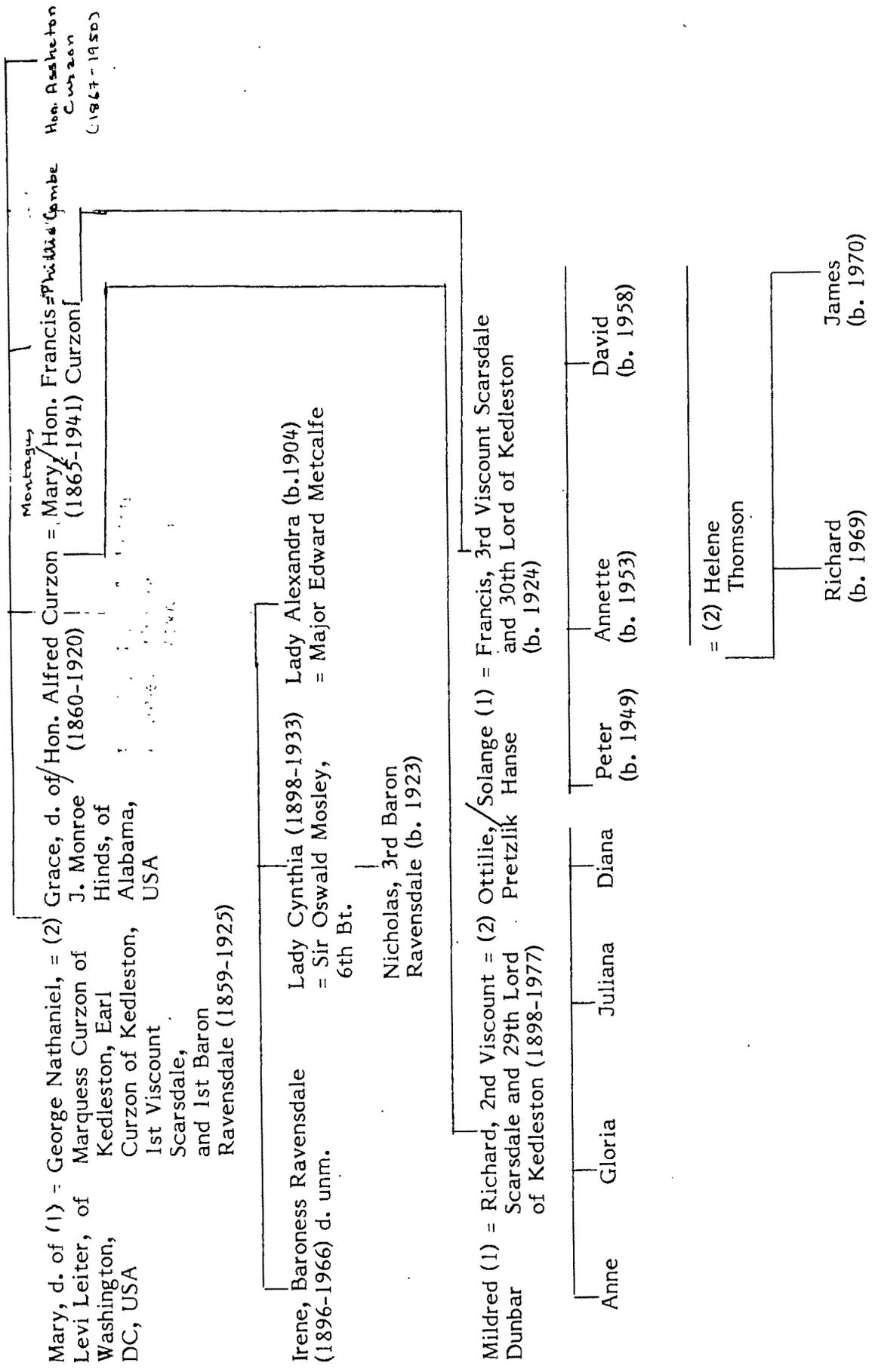
Richard Curzon (1505-1546) = Eleanor, d. of German Pole,
of Radburne, Derbys.

John Curzon (d.s.p. 1549)

Francis Curzon (b. 1523) = Eleanor, d.
Thomas Vernon, of Stokesay, Salop.

John Curzon(1551-1632) = Millicent, d.
of Ralph Sacheverall, of Stanton, Notts.





Family Tree courtesy 3rd Viscount Scarsdale.

Russian bear trounced in the Crimea. Britain continued to occupy its commanding position as the supreme imperial power; the scramble for colonies by other European nations was yet to begin. The Sepoy Mutiny that had shaken British rule in India two years before Curzon's birth had been suppressed ruthlessly and the government of India brought directly under the British Crown; the Royal Proclamation of 1858 assured Victoria's Indian subjects that they would be treated at par with all other subjects of the Crown. Indeed, the sun seemed to be blazing brilliantly on her empire.

The Victorian political arena was dominated in Curzon's growing up years by the rivalry between William Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli. Though a Liberal, Gladstone was very much a part of the Establishment, having gone from Eton to Oxford where he took a First in Classics and Mathematics. Disraeli, with his Jewish origins, his trail of debts, his flamboyant ~~opportunism~~ belonged to another world. But with his charm and jugglery Disraeli had been able to transform handicaps into advantages, becoming a confidant of the Queen, a creature of myth and legend.

In the meanwhile, an industrial revolution of such scale as the world had never hitherto seen was convulsing the island, throwing into sharp focus the ever-growing disparities in wealth. However, there were few signs of a corresponding bloody upheaval that had ripped apart France seventy years ago.

In the England of Curzon's childhood the landowning families formed a sort of an exclusive club that ruled over

Britain and they saw no reason why they should give up their primacy in the ruling hierarchy. Their sons were reared in great ancestral seats and studied at Eton and Oxbridge before taking their seats in Parliament. The landowners were by and large rich and refined and the peasantry often ignorant and hungry. The pattern of relationship between the patrician and the plebeian was precisely etched and divinely ordained as it were. Like most aristocrats Curzon viewed society in these static terms and remained fixated at that level till the end of his life.

Yet England had indeed become the land of two nations as Disraeli called it in his novel Sybil or the Two Nations, the classes and the masses. In the Midlands and the towns of the North all around were signs of that tremendous but brutal industrial revolution: the long huddle of textile mills creeping away to the moor's edge, the marching file of tall brick chimneys belching black smog around. The poor crouched higger-mugger in filthy tenements; so debased were their lives that they thought nothing of sending out their daughters to eek out a living from prostitution. They accepted poverty, disease, child mortality, drunkenness and filth as natural. Many of the poor still went hungry. Almost half of the country's children were not in school. They worked in factories and mines. Workers in the sprawling industrial towns of the Midlands and the northwest saw little of the growing prosperity at this time; many were even charged for use of water and the cost of cleaning lavatories.

The upper classes knew little of this seamy side of

life. The blood, toil, tears and sweat of the workers who toiled away in the factories did not penetrate the confines of their gilded walls. Even in the twentieth century, Sir Harold Macmillan when he first stood for election from Stockton in 1923 confessed:

I have no practical knowledge of the world in which I was to move. I had never been to Teesside or, ever Tyneside... I had never seen the great iron-works, shipyards which had been built up on the banks of the rivers of the North of England and of Scotland.¹

For the vast majority of the upper classes life was a giddy round of pleasure. Every year the nobility migrated to London from their huge country estates which financed their pleasures. The Winter Session of Parliament commenced in February and the peers came to take up their place in the House of Lords. With them travelled entire households from far-flung estates; the carriages, the coachmen, the grooms, footmen, butlers, house-keepers and their minions would come up from the country.

In London from May till the end of July dinners, balls and parties succeeded one another without intermission. Parties were arranged for witnessing pigeon-shooting and the fashionable flower shows. Between mid-day and two o'clock the park was the most frequented place in London. Here the fashionable world congregated. Not all members of the nobility subscribed to this glittering pleasure-go-round. Victoria and Albert's court was sombre and almost stuffy, made up of old quiet conservative families. Duty and self-denial were the guiding words at court and they found an ample echo in Curzon's parents' household in Derbyshire. Lord Scarsdale's ambition did not extend beyond

¹ Sir Harold Macmillan, Winds of Change (London, 1966), p.41.

his estates. Curzon's own vision however was not confined to a nobleman's estate. It soared beyond the shores of Britain to include the Empire. The nobleman was by birth and tradition, he fervently believed, privileged to rule. It was in the divine rightness of things that he should rule.

Highly exclusive and governed by strict protocol, the aristocracy followed the rigid schedule of the seasons. Even though Curzon's parents did not follow this round, preferring to stay back on their estate looking after their tenants, they too scarcely knew how the other half lived in the industrial areas within driving distance from their own manor house. All they knew of the poor were the tenants on their estate. Curzon's own ignorance was rudely betrayed in his first election attempt from South Derby in 1885. He knew little or nothing of the needs and aspirations of the new potters, colliers and factory workers who were, with the Reform Bill, added to his constituency.

Society read Dickens but they knew almost nothing of the world of Oliver Twist. They lived in their exclusive ivory tower world, moving periodically from huge estates in the country to London, to take their place in the House of Lords and to participate in the gay pleasure round of the seasons. They knew nothing of the crippling poverty of the agricultural districts which had forced thousands to flee to the ugly industrial towns in search of jobs.

The tenor of Victorian society remained, except for minor ripples, bucolic and calm. For most people, England remained as it always was: the rich man in his castle and the poor man

654

at his gate, each accepting the other as predestined and normal. The credit or otherwise for this social acceptance of class divisions must go to the strong influence of Evangelism. Not so much a religion as a way of life, Evangelism laid down a code for society providing a justification for its wealth and power:

Starting early in the 18th century as far back as Williams Law, author of 'Serious Call', coming down through the Wesleys and Whitefield, Johnson and Cowper, Clarkson and Wilberforce and the Clapham 'sect', great school-masters like Thomas Arnold and Charles Wordsworth, great nobles like the Greys on the Whig side and the philanthropic Lord Shaftesbury on the Tory...it became after Queen Victoria's marriage practically the religion of the court and gripped all ranks and conditions of society. After Melbourne's departure it inspired nearly every front-rank public man, save Palmerston, for four decades. That does not mean they were all Evangelicals in the sense of being bigots for the low church,...Gladstone and Selbourne and Salisbury were pronounced high churchmen;... Even Disraeli, by nature as remote from it as Palmerston, paid every deference to it in politics, and conformed to all its externals in Hughenden church.¹

Evangelism with its stress on reward and punishment for deeds done developed the corollary virtues of duty, sacrifice, honesty, hardwork and frugality among the people. They were virtues ideally suited to a society engaged in rapid industrialization and empire-building. To that extent Evangelism was the cement that preserved Victorian society from disintegrating in an era of revolutions.

The keen sense of moral accountancy preached by the Evangelicals not merely helped to keep Victorians on the straight and honest path but also goaded them to feats of exceptional endeavour. Reward was inevitable, if not in this, then

¹ R.C.K. Ensor, England 1870-1914(London, 1906), p.137.

certainly in the next life:

It might equally have been applied to Livingstone's lonely heroism in midmost Africa, to Gladstone laying daily before God the issues of right and wrong in national politics, to Shaftesbury championing oppressed classes who could never conceivably reward him.¹

Curzon's gloomy pride in having dared to do the right in India by the natives against grim unpopularity among his own people owes no small debt to this same all-pervading Evangelism of Victorian life. Kedleston Hall in the regime of Curzon's father, Rev. Lord Scarsdale, with its reverence for the Bible and daily compulsory prayers in the family parish behind the manor house was a household modelled on Evangelism.

Empire-building too was sanctified by Evangelism. The call was the same: to perform feats of exceptional endeavour, without expectation of gratitude. The call was motivated by duty and demanded self-denial. In this new religion, however, service to God was substituted by service to Empire. Commercial gains were deliberately played down.

The Great Exhibition of 1851 had demonstrated that the British held the technological initiative of the world. It was their ships, railroads, ironworks and bridges that were bringing prosperity and thus helping to ameliorate the lot of lesser breeds over the earth. Surely this was Providence's way of demonstrating that the British had been singled out to regenerate the world? They were the Select People with a moral duty to serve mankind.

Here was the convenient justification that the guilt-ridden Victorians were looking for in their actions. A commercial pursuit had been elevated and converted to a righteous crusade.

¹ Ensor, op.cit., p.138.

So superb was the brainwashing that the Victorians actually believed in the divine nature of their rule. It was only towards the end of the Victorian age that the new rich were able to elbow out the old rich from their estates and jockey for key positions in government. For Curzon however the Empire was truly a moral - not commercial - crusade. He said:

If I thought it were all for nothing that you and I, Englishmen, Scotchmen and Irishmen in this country, were simply writing inscriptions on the sand to be washed out by the next tide; if I felt that we were not working here for the good of India in obedience to a higher law and to a nobler aim, then I would see the link that holds England and India together severed without a sigh. But it is, because I believe in the future of this country and the capacity of our own race to guide it to goals that it has never hitherto attained, that I keep courage and press forward.¹

It would be scarcely an exaggeration to say that Empire-building was regarded by many Victorians as a sublimation of the sexual instinct. Libidinal or sexual energy if properly channelized has been known to lead to the highest and most creative human endeavour and to Victorians Empire-building was a divine call. Many of the Empire-builders married late: Curzon at 36 and Viscount Milner at 67. Kitchener, General Gordon and Cecil Rhodes died bachelors. Sometimes the Empire made too arbitrary a demand upon her sons, demanding impossible feats of sublimation. The Evangelical Gospel had stepped in then, prodding them to meet the challenge. There was a certain masochistic satisfaction in having done one's duty. There was pleasure in self-denial and physical suffering, for reward was waiting, if not in this then certainly in the next life.

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Calcutta, Feb.12,1903,Indian Speeches 4 Vols.(Calcutta, 1900-6), Vol.III, p.142.

The Victorian era saw other free-thinking movements outside the Evangelical stream and Curzon was to be influenced by them. Poet and literary critic Mathew Arnold and biologist T.H. Huxley, though reared in the Evangelical fold, moved out by challenging the Bible and disbelieving the miracles given in it. Curzon did not openly rebel against the Spoken Word but certainly moved away from it. As we shall see, his loss of faith is believed to have occurred during his visit to the Holy Land as a young man of 23. Subsequently Curzon was to transfer his allegiance from God to the Empire.

Empire-building had other sociological roots. The inheritance laws of the upper classes forced younger sons to seek their fortunes far beyond their homes. The law of primogeniture excluded younger sons from the bulk of the inheritance and unless they could make a fortune(it was generally believed to be easier in the colonies) many had to forego marriage and the life-style they were accustomed to.

Secondly, theirs being a mechanical age, the Victorians tended to look upon man as a machine prone to depreciation from wear and tear. The greatest danger was believed to be not hard work but sex which led to depletion of energy. Young boys were nurtured through adolescence to adulthood in carefully calculated atmospheres where early sex with women was frowned upon. So stern was the disapproval that Victorians "put frilly knickers on piano legs and separated books written by men and women on their shelves."¹ In homes and in schools attempts were made

¹ Wayland Young, Eros Denied (London, 1964), p.197.

to steer energy towards greater excellence in the playing fields and in class rooms:

If every value and every force surrounding an adolescent tells him that his bodily affections must at all costs be transformed and sublimated into physical effort, intellectual prowess, competitive zeal and manly friendship, how can he not found empires? If virility is held to be something which is lost, not acquired, in concourse with women, what is left for him but to organise the whole world?¹

Women cooperated by tacitly accepting the call of the Empire. Curzon's first wife Mary unquestioningly allowed Curzon to go alone on a long and hazardous journey to Afghanistan even though they had just got engaged to be married. She accepted it as vital to his career and, aware of the heavy risk entailed told him that if he should die on the journey, she would retire to a convent.²

Mary was not being hypocritical. Victorians expected their women to be noble, saintly, sacrificing creatures and they had no option but to be that. Belief in a myth turned them into fragile beings and men were given little choice but to offer them their chivalrous protection. Women were not to be trifled with and sex was only sanctified in marriage. Victorians were thus able to develop yet another safeguard to isolate women and allow men to pursue longer their all-male pursuits in remote imperial outposts.

The all-male public schools carried further the carefully

¹ Young, *op.cit.*, p.203.

² Nigel Nicolson, *Mary Curzon* (London, 1977), p.57.

maintained attempts to transform bodily energy toward great strenuous effort both in the playing fields and in the classroom. Manly efforts were given encouragement and adolescents grew to manhood tacitly aware that relationship with women led to loss of energy. A contempt for early marriage was a part of the public school ideal. Empire-building, in allowing them to carry their all-male activities to dangerous and far-flung corners of the world, was thus seen as an extension of school.

It was not unnatural that this segregation of sexes during adolescence should see the sprouting of intensely passionate friendships in schools. The literature of the Victorians is replete with instances of romantic attachments erupting between a hearty athletic hero of the cricket field and a blushing youngster with curly locks. More often than not these attachments were crushes that died a natural death. But homosexuality did exist and the incidence of witch-hunting in schools is ample testimony to it. At Eton, this gentlemen's vice went by the name of 'spooning'.

Curzon was also to flirt with the cult of hedonism made popular by the Prince of Wales. Edward, in defiance of his mother's excessive zeal for the Evangelical cult of the Sabbath, had set out to break the tradition by giving dinner parties at Marlborough House on Sundays. Later he sponsored "the weekend".¹ Even in his college years Curzon became a regular visitor to weekend parties.

Utilitarianism had also left its imprint upon 19th-century Britain. Like Evangelism, it was obsessed with the upliftment of

¹ Ensor, op.cit., pp.142-3.

society: while the former had depended upon faith and prayer, the latter relied upon reason and legislation. Beginning in the late 18th century with Jeremy Bentham and as a creed advocating the greatest happiness for the greatest number, Utilitarianism had been carried on through the next century by James Mill, Malthus, Wilberforce, John Stuart Mill, Henry Maine and James Fitzjames Stephen. In the latter half of the 19th century, both these creeds had been exploited to rationalize and justify the continuance of British autocracy in India.

From the beginning, Utilitarianism and Evangelicalism had India connections. Charles Grant and John Shore of the Clapham sect had been East India Company servants and Cornwallis' advisers on the Permanent Settlement. Grant had advocated aggressive missionary activity in India. Both the Mills had worked in East India House; James Mill had written History of British India, John Stuart Mill On Liberty, Utilitarianism and Considerations on Representative Government.

Obsessed as they were with the regeneration of society, both these creeds had found in India a utopia for experiment. At the turn of the 18th century Grant had seen salvation for India through Christianity. Macaulay had felt that western education alone could transform the natives and lift them from vice bred by ignorance. While James Mill placed his faith on good government and just laws it was Charles Traveyan, brother-in-law of Macaulay, who, in his pamphlet Education in India, put forth the true Liberal attitude to India, implying that in the eventual analysis altruism was enlightened self-interest.



The self-assured optimism of the mid-19th-century imperialists, which had encouraged the spread of western education and western forms of government for India, had however soon revised itself. The Mutiny, the rise of an articulate English-educated class in India, and Britain's own diminishing superiority in the European arena contributed to the change of heart. In spite of their differences the Liberals and Utilitarians agreed, insofar as India was concerned, in superimposing upon the principle of liberty the paradoxical principle of authority. Self-government was to be superimposed by good government and justified on the ground that the people were not ready for it. Sir James Fitzjames Stephen had challenged the intellectual basis of J.S. Mill's doctrine of representative government and tried to rally the Utilitarian tradition to the principle of authority in maintenance of the Empire. Greatest happiness for the greatest number, Stephen felt, could best be achieved in India not through Parliamentary democracy but by concentrating power in British hands. He said:

It is essentially an absolute government, founded not on consent, but on conquest. It does not represent the native principle of life or of government and it can never do so until it represents a belligerent civilization, and no anomaly can be more striking or so dangerous, as its administration by men, who being at the head of a Government founded upon conquest, implying at every point the superiority of the conquering race, of their ideas, their institutions, their opinions and their principles, and having no justification for its existence except that superiority, shrink from the open, uncompromising straightforward assertion of it, seek to apologise for their own position, and refuse, from whatever cause, to uphold and support it...

In this Fitzjames Stephen made a complete break from

¹ Letter of Sir J. Fitzjames Stephen, The Times, March 1, 1883 as quoted by Eric Stokes, The English Utilitarians and India (Oxford, 1959), p.288.

Sir James Fitzjames Stephen (1829-94). A Liberal and a Law Member of Viceroy Mayo's Council from 1869-72. Author of Liberty, Fraternity, Equality (London, 1872).

the early Liberalism of Bentinck and Trevelyan which had envisaged not only cooperation between the races but ultimate self-government for India, even if after undergoing a process of paternalist rule. Curzon was to first hear Stephen when in school at Eton and was to be powerfully influenced by him.