

John Stuart Mill and E.O.K.A

'...Mill yet stands out as one of the great figures of the Classical tradition ... a rare spirit, conspicuous even in his own great age, with a message of candour and humanity which . . . has still much relevance for ours.' (Professor Lionel Robbins in "Economica," August 1957, p. 259).

In the second week of October, 1865, a riot developed in the small Jamaican township of Morant Bay. A crowd of several hundred marched into the market square and demonstrated opposite the Court House where the local magistrates were in session. Most of the crowd were armed with sticks, a few with cutlasses and old fashioned guns. A section of the local Volunteers was already drawn up in front of the Court House and as the situation appeared to become more threatening, the Riot Act was read and the Volunteers opened fire. Seven people were killed. The crowd, enraged, drove the Volunteers back into the Court House and several hours later it was stormed and fired, and a number of the leading magistrates and officials were put to death. More deaths followed during the next 24 hours.

These events began in the afternoon of Wednesday, October 11th. Until the end of the week there were isolated killings and sporadic looting in the surrounding countryside. All told, in addition to the original seven rioters killed by the Volunteers, about 21 white and coloured men were killed by the local population. No woman or child was hurt. Such were the proportions of the great Jamaican 'rebellion' whose aftermath wrote such a bloody and terrible page in the history of British colonialism.

There were long-standing grievances among the native peoples. One was the slow and expensive administration of justice; another was the considerable unemployment that had existed in the most recent period; a third, common to all such societies, was the too limited access to land ownership. The situation in Jamaica was, however, far from being an explosive one; and at no time, not even after the Morant Bay riot, did a large scale uprising threaten. The riot of October 11th certainly had a background of discontent which was well enough appreciated by the local officials but the killings on that day were largely the responsibility of the magistrates and the Volunteers and their incompetent and panic-stricken handling of an admittedly difficult situation. The more reasonable contemporary witnesses later agreed that the original crowd of demonstrators, if firmly controlled, could have been dispersed without bloodshed. What in fact happened, then and later, is a familiar story in the

history of the white man's dominion over coloured peoples. Once the riot had got out of hand, hysteria ran quickly through the whole of the white population and both they, and their officials, gave free rein to the deep-rooted hatred of the peoples over whom they were ruling. In the Jamaica story, the Governor of the island, Edward John Eyre, bears the major responsibility.

Two days after the first rioting, on the morning of October 13th, a Council of War declared martial law throughout all the eastern part of the island. By the end of the week, when isolated killings had ceased and when there was no longer any flicker of resistance among the common people, the reinforcements of troops, police and local volunteers began their bloody work of vengeance and retribution. The troops, urged on by their officers, inflamed by lying stories of atrocities committed by the rioters, slaughtered without discrimination. A letter written by the Chief Staff Officer to one of his colonels sets the atmosphere :

11 a.m., 18th October.

Dear Colonel,

I send you an order to push on at once to Stony Gut but I trust you are there already. Hole is doing splendid service with his men all about Machioneal, and shooting every black man who cannot account for himself (sixty on the line of march). Nelson at Port Antonio hanging like fun by court martial. I hope you will not send me any prisoners. Civil law can do nothing. Write to me if you want ammunition, as well as Newcastle. Do punish the blackguards well.

Yours in haste,

J. Elkington

(Deputy Adjutant-General).

Colonel Hobbs, to whom this letter was addressed (and who later committed suicide) carried out these instructions in the full spirit in which they were written. Part of a report which Hobbs sent to his superior officers dated two days after the above letter, reads as follows :

... I took with me all persons detained, to execute each lot in the exact locality in which the insurrection was hatched . . . , and I then adopted a plan which has struck immense terror into these wretched men far more than death, which is, I compel them to hang each other; they entreat to be shot to avoid this, which appears to me to be by far more dreadful an ordeal to them than death, and stranger still, they howl and shriek from a few lashes from the cat, whilst they carelessly bow and remain unmoved at being shot. I then fired all their houses from which the inhabitants had fled; marched to Coley where I repeated this painful and distressing duty on 18 men; halted and returned here. Permit me to remark that if ever there was anything calculated to endear a man to the Established Church (or indeed to any recognised or regular kind of religion) it is a week's campaign in St. Thomas in the East or St. James. The place swarms with native Baptist Chapels, their ministers are the leading rebels . . .

Men were flogged first, and then hung; made to dig their own grave and then shot, kneeling by the hole they had just dug; executed

on the evidence of others who themselves were under sentence of death; shot for running away at the approach of troops; executed in droves by emergency courts martial. No distinction was made between men and women; both were flogged and both hung. It was butchery and barbarism on a truly imperial scale.

In sum, although the tally varies in different reports, at least 500 persons are known to have been put to death. Many more hundreds were flogged; not less than 1000 houses and buildings were burnt and destroyed.

The incident that achieved most notoriety was the death of a local coloured Baptist preacher and politician, C. W. Gordon. Without doubt, Gordon was a "trouble-maker." He lacked, that is to say, the "spirit of docile humility, and that ready submission to authority" which a clergyman of the Established Church in Jamaica bewailed as absent in the "black population." Gordon had been a magistrate and was now a member of the House of Representatives. For his denunciation of abuses and his attempts to remedy the more obvious injustices, Gordon became the Governor's most bitter enemy and Eyre saw in Gordon the focal point of all the discontents of the coloured population. When the news of the Morant Bay riot reached Eyre in Kingston, the seat of government, Eyre easily convinced himself, in his own words, that "All this has come of Mr. Gordon's agitation." Eyre issued a warrant of arrest for Gordon—who had been nowhere near the scene of the rioting—and since Kingston was not under martial law, Eyre had Gordon shipped to Morant Bay and there tried under emergency court martial. The president of the court martial and the two other members were junior officers in the navy and army - two naval lieutenants and an ensign. Gordon was allowed no counsel and no witnesses. The sentence was death. It was confirmed by the local commanding officer and personally confirmed by Governor Eyre. Gordon was hanged two days later - the intervening day being Sunday and it would have been unseemly to hang even a Baptist on the Lords Day.

Most of the facts retailed above were published in the report of a Royal Commission which investigated the 'rebellion' and its aftermath. When the full realisation of what had happened began to be appreciated in England, the country sharply divided in its sympathies. Those who had supported the slave-owning South in the American Civil War - only recently concluded - naturally saw in Governor Eyre a man of order whose actions were wholly justifiable. Among the intellectuals who thought this way was Thomas Carlyle, the Number One 'nigger-baiter' of the 19th century. He wrote to his wife in the spring of 1866 ;

... if they do condemn [Eyre] to censure ... I shall never forgive them. Nay (privately very) if Eyre had shot the whole Nigger population, and flung them into the sea, would it probably have been much harm even to them, not to speak of us? I really calculate, from the aspects and horoscopes, not...

On the same side as Carlyle - for somewhat different reasons - went Charles Kingsley, Tennyson, Ruskin and Dickens. Against them were the overwhelming majority of the liberal intellectuals - Huxley, Spencer, John Morley, Professor E. S. Beesley and his fellow Positivists, and, towering above all in moral passion and determination, John Stuart Mill. It was Mill who guided the work of the Jamaica Committee, formed for the purpose of bringing to justice all those responsible for the murders and the atrocities. For over two years Mill organised a superb campaign - one of the most important in the history of anti-colonialism but one that since it was mostly developed outside Parliament has been largely ignored by the writers of text-books - and although his more cautious supporters fell away, Mill pursued his declared aim until no further action was practicable. Mill took his stand upon two simple, but essentially revolutionary assumptions; first, that the rule of law means what it says, namely, that those who take human life or are guilty of any kind of felony or misdemeanour must account for their actions, whatever the provocation, before a Civil Court of Law, and second, that within the wide area of Empire where English political power is exercised and English law rules, there can be no distinction between the legal rights of subject peoples and the rights of citizens of the United Kingdom. He was emphatic, moreover, that martial law or emergency regulation in no way abrogated the responsibility of those involved in the administration of justice or in positions of power under the extraordinary situation; and that when the emergency was over, all actions must be justified, if necessary, before the highest legal authority. Otherwise, as he said in the Commons, we resign ourselves to arbitrary power and are giving up altogether the principle of government by law.

The Jamaica Committee attempted to prosecute through the civil courts certain of those responsible for the worst of the atrocities in Jamaica - among them Lieutenant Brand, the President of the court martial that sentenced Gordon to death, and Governor - now ex-Governor Eyre. In all of several attempts they were unsuccessful; but while the campaign therefore failed in its immediate objectives, its magnificent protest was not wholly lost: although it is worth noting, as a wretched postscript to this story, that the Liberal Government of 1872 voted Eyre his legal costs in the actions he had sustained and two years later the Conservative Government awarded him a pension. But as Mill drily observed in his 'Autobiography,'

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" Colonial governors and other persons in authority, will have a considerable motive to stop short of such extremities in future."

The quality of Mill's liberalism and of those who ranged themselves along with him, was never better illustrated than in the discussion of Irish Fenianism in the same years as the Jamaica Committee was fighting its way. In May 1867 John Bright presented a petition to the Commons which protested against the severity of the sentences upon certain Fenian prisoners. The petition had been got up and circulated by Professor E. S. Beesley, and it set out the reasons why the violence of Fenianism must be judged in the historical context of the situation in Ireland, and sharply distinguished therefore from mere violence as such. As John Bright summarised their views in the Commons :

They state that in consequence of the apparent hopelessness of a remedy for the evils which press upon their country, honourable Irishmen may, however, erroneously, feel justified in resorting to force -- that, in a word, there is a legitimate ground for the chronic discontent of which Fenianism is the expression; and therefore some palliation for the errors of Fenianism ...

Mill, in a later debate, expressed himself in complete agreement with the sentiments of this petition. He went on to point out that he, as well as the originators of the petition, strongly condemned the conduct of the Fenians, but that " it was conduct of which men of honour might have been capable "; and that those who resorted to force in the particular situation in which Irishmen found themselves were men whose minds were " capable of heroic action and lofty virtue. Such acts have been committed by the most self-devoted and admirable persons." Mill did not deny that order must be maintained - and this was why earlier he had strongly protested against the suspension of Habeas Corpus but had abstained from voting - but the actions of the Fenians stamped them not " as objects of detestation, but rather of pity."

All this is grimly relevant to our situation today. The record of Britain's colonial administration in the post-war years in Palestine, Kenya and Cyprus - to mention only the countries where the worst of our misdeeds have been committed - cries out for the courage and the passionate sense of justice displayed by Mill. In Kenya the fighting is over, the vast indiscriminate detention camps are emptying of their victims. Piece by piece we can assemble the evidence of life under the emergency: the summary executions: the wholesale repression: the pointless murders, such as that which Peter Marris has honourably described in 'Conviction' - a crime committed " between breakfast and lunch . . . with (the) mind on the names of trees, beer and fried eggs, and the files waiting in an office

tray." And how many other acts like this were hidden beneath suave parliamentary replies, or smoothed away from the conscience in hedging, defensive editorials in the liberal press?

But in Cyprus the crisis is not over - not even temporarily as in Kenya - and it is less easy for the liberals and those who profess socialist principles to escape the central moral issues. Here is no "far-away country" in which foreign correspondents are few and in which a mass resistance movement can be written off as atavistic and primitive. The Cypriots are struggling for independence in conditions that are comparable with the advanced national liberation movements all over the world. Their fight against British rule evokes an immediate response among the Indians and the people of the Arab countries; and more sophisticated arguments are demanded by those English liberals whose allegiance to principle is matched only by their anxiety to avoid the vulgarities of action.

There is - fortunately for the liberal conscience - EOKA, involving as it does violence, often of a vicious kind, and terrorism that has been used not only against the occupying power but also against the Left in Cyprus. And there is no doubt that the violence of a section of the national movement in Cyprus has provided at least the superficial excuse for most people in Britain not insisting upon immediate self-determination. It is worth listening to Mill, speaking on Fenian violence. He was addressing a mass meeting in the Agricultural Hall on an evening when two Fenian prisoners were within hours of the death penalty :

I should like to know whether you think that we have any right to hold Ireland in subjection unless we can make Ireland contented with our government? (Cries of No, No). That expression of your sentiment will resound through Ireland, and win the hearts of her people to you. Let me ask you now: Do you think the Irish people are contented with our government? (Cries of No, No). Is that your fault (No, No). Do you think that those men who have been driven desperate by the continuance of what they think misgovernment ... do you think, I say, that those men are not fit to live for that reason?

Substitute Cyprus for Ireland, and there is no word that we would change. Let us consider for a moment the Famagusta incident, and the implications it holds for us in this country. On October 3rd, 1958, the wife of a British soldier was murdered in the open street and another English woman was gravely injured. It was a terrible and barbarous act. Everyone can appreciate the tragedy of the soldier whose wife lay dead, and we can see how it was that rage swept the British troops in Cyprus. In the search for the killers of this woman British troops in the Famagusta area went berserk; and three Greek Cypriots lost their lives. One was a girl of 12 whose fright was such that she died of heart failure; the second was a man who was suffocated to death on the floor of a lorry as others were

shed on top of him; the third died in circumstances that are still unexplained at the time of writing.* The local hospital admitted more than 200 injured, some of them seriously hurt.

Famagusta was the worst of similar episodes that have been growing in scale as the politicians have steadily revealed their political bankruptcy and as the tensions have continued to mount. Mrs. Cutcliffe, the English woman who was killed at Famagusta, was the mother of five children. A month earlier, during a period when EOKA was observing a truce, a Cypriot woman was shot dead in a village street in a minor fracas involving only a boy and some other women. The dead woman was the mother of six children and at the time she was killed she was pregnant. As we write, the toll mounts of schoolboys shot while "trying to escape" or for "failing to answer a challenge." English and Cypriot (we had understood) are equal in the eyes of the law; but now it seems that the English-born are rewarded with a revolver, ten rounds of ammunition, and free licence to kill the half-wit shepherd boy or the deaf labourer who fails to hear their shout.

We are not concerned to strain a comparison between the Famagusta affair and the outburst of savagery which followed the affair at Morant Bay in 1865. The scale of violence employed in the latter case, with the open connivance of the civil, military and legal authorities, would make any direct comparison far-fetched. We do not know how far the civil authorities were accessories to the Famagusta beatings: what licence was given to the troops by their officers: nor can we yet look into the correspondence of our present-day authorities and Tory men of letters. Our concern is with the **trend** of events; and - even more than this - with the response in this country of the much-vaunted "liberal conscience."

And here a direct comparison may be justly drawn. For several years the most grave accusations have been made by Cypriot nationalists, by the Ethnarchy, and by Greek publicists as to the conduct of a section of British security forces in Cyprus. We have before us two booklets, published by the Ethnarchy in New York in 1957, purporting to present scores of these documented cases. Charges include illegal arrest, religious desecration, maltreatment in detention camps, and - repeatedly - the torture of EOKA suspects. The details of these tortures only too often reveal that element of sexual sadism with which we have become familiar in accounts of the behaviour of French parachutists towards their victims in Algeria:

* As we go to press, the facts brought to light at the Coroner's Inquest confirm our worst suspicions. Some military witnesses appear to hope to establish that a man can break seven ribs through "natural causes".

In his signed statement made at the Pyla Concentration Camp, Andreas N. Patsallis, aged 39, mason of Potamos Tou Kambou, says that after his arrest, the interrogators took him to Kambos on October 27th, where they let loose the police dogs on him. They subsequently tied him on a bench and after pulling down his trousers, started hitting him with leather strips on all parts of his body and his genital organs. Subsequently, they put a piece of wood in his mouth so as to keep it open and they poured in salt, sawdust and kerosene. He felt as if he were drowning and lost his senses. When he recovered, he was covered with blood. (Vindication of Human Rights in Cyprus, Ethnarchy of Cyprus, October 1957, New York, p. 41).

A priest from the village of Holi Skoudi alleges

They took off my garments and my clothes, except my breeches, stretched two empty sacks on the floor and a blanket over them and made me lie down, face upwards. They sent policeman Ahmed Aly to bring a pail of water. They wet a cloth and put it to my face. Then, one Englishman put his foot on one of mine, another Englishman put his foot on my other. Then, stretching out my arms, two others put their feet on them. Another went to his knees on my belly, and another took hold of my head and started pouring water into my nostrils, while another Englishman was ordered to take hold, and took hold, of my genitals, pulling them and twisting them . . . (Ibid, p. 102).

There are scores of similar allegations: many worse than those quoted. How can we confirm or deny them? Some have been endorsed by spokesmen of the Greek Government - a Government which (if it were not for our estrangement over Cyprus) we would no doubt be expected to regard as a gallant NATO ally, and a proper nation for the exchange of televised Royal visits. This fact need not confirm their truth; we would be glad to see them duly and impartially investigated and found to be without any basis. But, after this half-century of violence, have we any right at all to be so naive? After the German occupation of Europe (and the crimes which the German people "did not know about"): after Kenya (and the crimes which we "did not know about"): after Algeria (and the crimes which the French "do not know about"): after the publication of Alleg's 'La Question' - how is it possible for the majority of Her Majesty's Parliamentary Labour Party to accept without demur the smooth official denials such as those of Mr. Lennox-Boyd in the House of Commons on November 4th: "As members will know, reports of ill-treatment on this and other occasions have been deliberately and systematically fabricated or exaggerated . . ."

And how do members know? On the word, it must be supposed, of a number of Conservative officers and gentlemen. But Governor Eyre and General Dyer of Amritsar were also Conservatives and gentlemen. Can the best-intentioned journalist or Labour M.P. find out the truth of what goes on in the security prisons, when on a

fleeting visit to the island and surrounded by watchful officials and military? Do officials and staff officers know the whole truth themselves? Why has Mr. Gaitskell not called for an impartial Commission of Enquiry, with full facilities, if only to vindicate our national reputation? Or, if we can go no further than Mill, and insist upon the accountability for all actions before a properly constituted tribunal or an ordinary court of law, why has the Parliamentary Labour Party not made this demand? Why has the National Executive of the Labour Party, which publicly humiliated its own Vice-Chairman, Mrs. Barbara Castle, with indecent haste when she dared to question the actions of the British Army, not acted with equal haste to assert the rule of law after Famagusta? The correspondents of the 'Times' and the 'Observer' were among those who reported British troops were out of hand on that day. For the life of an Englishwoman, the troops exacted a toll of three Cypriots killed and many dozens injured. And who has called this balance sheet to account? Our liberal intellectuals who so often quote Mill on Liberty? The coterie of Liberal politicians for whom Mill is surely bedside reading? Those leaders of the Labour movement who have always been so insistent that we trace the origins of social revolt and social-democracy to such thinkers as Mill rather than to Marx? And yet can there be "a shred of a shadow of a shade of a doubt" where Mill would stand today?

We are not accusing the British troops in Cyprus of a record of wholesale racialism and sadism. But we are getting tired of reading pious assertions by editors and politicians of every persuasion as to the "remarkable" and unblemished record of our soldiers. It would be better to discover the facts first, and write the conclusions second. If the worst charges were sustained, they would most probably incriminate only a fragment of the security forces, just as the most violent acts of EOKA are the work of a very few very young men, half-crazed with a mystique of national honour. But nothing can corrupt any army more surely than security duties among a hostile population; there is no army in the world today which could avoid the descent into illegality and private violence which has always characterised such a situation. Those who presented the Fenian petition to Parliament in 1867 were under no illusion about the conduct of the British army against national movements; and they specifically quoted the atrocities committed by English troops in Ireland in 1798, in India during the Mutiny and in Jamaica in 1865. We have the example of the Black-and-Tans in Ireland to add to these. Should violence of this type be proved to have been committed by our troops in Cyprus, we must recall that the responsibility is not theirs in the first place, but it is the responsibility of the politicians who have given them the task of subjecting an insurgent

people. The responsibility for British and Cypriot deaths lies squarely upon the British Government, It lies only less heavily on the leadership of the Parliamentary Labour Party who have so signally failed to engage the hearts and minds of the British people in a supreme effort to end this infamy. Nothing could be more false than the suggestion that a vigorous Labour campaign for Cypriot self-determination would "play into the hands of the terrorists." What young Cypriot would face probable death and possible torture while knowing that the Labour Party was pledged to bring early constitutional redress for his grievances? It is the pusillanimity of the Labour leadership which has brought final despair to the island, and it is in despair that violence breeds. When the Labour Executive repudiated Mrs. Barbara Castle, how many death sentences did it write, for Cypriot and Englishman alike?

This Cyprus business is not another political "issue," a pre-General Election kick-about. It is not the subject for a politician's campaign which can be won by "statesmanlike" speeches and carefully-qualified parliamentary questions. It must be fought - as Mill would have fought it - as a matter of principle. Above all, it is a campaign which cannot be won by those who are for ever gazing timidly over their shoulders at the public opinion graphs, the Royal tattoos and troopings of colours, the TV newscasters, the coshboys and dry-eyed sentimentalists of the popular press. What are we to make of those Labour politicians, who - for the sake of a cheap paragraph in 'Reveille' or the 'Daily Mail' - push themselves forward as the foremost defenders of the British Army, right or wrong? Such men would have warmed the heart of Horatio Bottomley. What are we to make of Mr. Paget, Labour Member for Northampton, who used the occasion of debate on Famagusta on November 5th to deplore the fact that some of the British security forces had lived for two years under canvas:

That is wrong. The Greeks have got houses. They have created the necessity for this military occupation. Houses should be requisitioned for our troops and it is the Greeks who, if necessary, ought to be under canvas.

He was not saying that it was right to have a military occupation (Mr. Paget went on) but "if you did have one you must follow the consequences." Of course. Of course (a gesture to the Labour constituency parties, whose record is so much better than most of their leaders) the thing may be wrong, **but** (a low bow to Dr. Gallup) right or wrong the thing to do is to "get the confidence of the troops."

The confidence of the people of Cyprus does not, it seems, come into it. And this reminds us that there is for us no "Cyprus

problem" but **a problem of the British-in-Cyprus**, in furtherance of the needs of oil imperialism and of an antique cold war strategy. Socialists do not need reminding of the duties of international solidarity, and of the absolute political and ethical prohibition, which their principles dictate, against participating in any degree whatsoever, direct or indirect, in the repression of a movement for national self-determination. But, in appealing to the Parliamentary Labour Party, and to the kept Labour press, it is no longer fruitful to appeal to socialist principle. We must therefore ask them: do you in any sense respect the liberal and radical traditions symbolised by Mill?

Perhaps we are naive. Perhaps it is impossible seriously to imagine that the present Labour leadership will take time off from their unwearying pre-occupation with the trends of the Gallup poll, and will stand upon principle in the way that John Stuart Mill stood ninety years ago. But to the Labour constituency workers who returned Mrs. Barbara Castle second in the Executive poll, there are other - and more ominous - trends in Europe which demand attention. Those who follow the path indicated by Mr. Paget, those who (like the Labour Party Executive) capitulate without a struggle before the sensational manufacturers of "public opinion," are already far advanced towards the Gaullist "solution" of Guy Mollet. Despite all differences in scale, intensity and degree, Cyprus is our Algeria. The betrayal of human rights and of the rule of law cannot take place abroad without the corruption of public life at home. The lads whom we send to Cyprus, to do inhuman policing duties, will return to vote in Britain. As each principle is publicly discarded, the electorate becomes more cynical, more chauvinist, and the constituency workers lose heart. Each new betrayal feeds upon the betrayals which went before. Is there no body of persons, as Mill wrote of the Jamaica Committee in his 'Autobiography,' willing to redeem "the character of our country?"

John Saville.

20 November 1958.

E. P. Thompson.