

MARK TWAIN: CRITIC OF CONQUEST

By ARTHUR L. SCOTT

ONE of the accusations emanating from behind the Iron Curtain is that the "reactionary publishers" of the United States have long been suppressing certain "anti-imperialist essays" by America's favorite author. (This charge is summarized in the *N. Y. Times*, July 28, 1947, p.13, col. 5.) "To the Person Sitting in Darkness" (1901) and "A Defense of General Funston" (1902), suggests the accusation, are two pieces by Mark Twain which we dread to reprint lest they undermine American morale and harm our prestige abroad by exposing the basic sham of America's foreign policy.

Of no surprise is the fact that this charge is mere balderdash. The first of these essays is frequently reprinted, whereas the second is mainly personal invective which has sunk into a merited limbo. Furthermore, our single act of restoring independence to the Philippines proves the charge inane.

The Soviet indictment, however, serves the useful purpose of goading us into an examination of Mark Twain's manifold pronouncements on the subject of imperialism. In these days of clashing ideologies and imperialistic fervor such an examination is of interest. And it is well to remember that not only was Mark Twain a public oracle half a century ago, but he is still (Jack London excepted) the most popular American author in Russia. Many people, moreover, need to be reminded that Mark Twain was a man with more foreign experience than most diplomats. He resided and traveled abroad for twelve years, knew four languages, was at home in most of Europe, and had a voyager's acquaintance with Africa, Asia, and Australia. He was friend and associate of ambassadors, cabinet ministers, princes, kings, emperors—of the great and near-great in many walks of life and in many countries. At all times he was in vital contact with the issues of the day; and regarding this matter of imperial conquest he was seldom disposed to jest.

As a young correspondent, for example, Mark Twain saw nothing to jest about in Hawaii in 1866. England he scored for her brutality and treachery to the unoffending natives and France he condemned for using missionaries as vanguard for the army. "Metaphorically," wrote Twain, "the French nation spit in the face of Hawaii." Opinions such as these are not to be found in his fiction, but are generally imbedded in his notebooks, letters, and other private writings which are little known

today—and it is to these sources that we must go to learn the truth.

But if Mark Twain indicted the ruthless *methods* of imperial conquest in 1866, it is significant that he did not indict the *principle* of imperialism. He was, in fact, some years ahead of American thought in suggesting that the United States annex Hawaii for her sugar, silk, and rice. As he observed in his San Francisco lecture that year: "The property has got to fall to some heir, and why not the United States?"

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In the course of the next thirty years Mark Twain crossed the Atlantic some two dozen times. Curiously—for these were decades of global conquest—he showed no further interest in imperialism until debt drove him on a lecture tour around the world in 1895-96. There has hardly been a more royal progress than this elevenmonth trip of the Clemens family. Australia, India, South Africa—everywhere the great humorist was acclaimed with packed houses, ovations, and all manner of lavish entertainment. Since he was continually under the British flag, it is understandable that the Anglophobia of *A Connecticut Yankee* mellowed into a warm affection which Mark Twain never again lost for the British people. And this affection colored all his confused comments upon British imperialism from 1895 until mid-1900.

Traveling with the sun on his world tour, Mark Twain first encountered this imperialism in Australia. He expressed immediate admiration for the easy-going colonial policy: "Can't see that the British Gov't has any more authority here than she has over the constellations." Twain had no sympathy for radical groups which sought a complete break from England and which cited the American Revolution as an example. The two cases were quite different, he replied. Australia governed herself wholly, without interference; her commerce and industry were not oppressed in any way. "If our case had been the same," he argued, "we should not have gone out when we did."

In India Mark Twain showed an ability to run with the fox as well as hunt with the hounds, for he extolled the British *raj* in India—where there was no self-government—even more highly than he had praised Britain's *laissez faire* policy in Australia. His reasoning was simple: the Indians were much better off under the enlightened, benevolent guidance of England than they had ever been before. Twain admitted that Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General, had many stains on his

name, but he had saved the Indian Empire for England," . . . and that was the best service that was ever done to the Indians themselves, those wretched heirs of a hundred centuries of pitiless oppression and abuse." To throw India back upon her own resources, he maintained, would be to do her immeasurable harm and to annul the immense good accomplished by the British in the past century and a half. In short, Mark Twain here gave his sanction to a kind of benevolent despotism. He did not consider that the Indians themselves might prefer freedom with chaos to order without freedom— as the late Mahatma Gandhi assured the present writer in 1935. Perhaps Mark Twain's general attitude towards Western imperialism at this time is most clearly summed up in his following statement:

The signs of the times show plainly enough what is going to happen. All the savage lands in the world are going to be brought under the subjection of the Christian governments of Europe. I am not sorry, but glad. This coming fate might have been a calamity to those savage peoples two years ago; but now it will in some cases be a benefaction. The sooner the seizure is consummated the better for the savages. The dreary and dragging ages of bloodshed and disorder and oppression will give place to peace and order and the reign of law.

One is stuck immediately by his phrase that Western imperialism will be a benefaction only "in some cases." Without elaborating on this qualification, it might be pointed out that Mark Twain never gave his blessing to the conquests of the French. During his early travels he had acquired for France and her people a dislike which never wore off. The reasons for his aversion were largely emotional and filled vast areas from her climate to her morals, and from her treatment of Joan of Arc to her treatment of Alfred Dreyfus. Cynics might also add that Twain's humor was never appreciated in France as much as elsewhere. Be this as it may, we are not surprised to find him now lamenting that England had allowed France to grab Madagascar. "Without an effort," he cried, "she could have saved those harmless natives from the calamity of French civilization, and she did not do it. Now it is too late." Regardless of what we think of Twain's discrimination, it is evident that he showed increasing concern for the kind of culture which European nations were disseminating.

In South Africa a new situation confronted Mark Twain. The ill-timed Jameson Raid had come to grief only a few months before his arrival. The British, through the grey-headed machinations of Cecil Rhodes, were in the process of taking over the land from the Boers, who had previously won it from the black natives. In Australia and India Mark Twain had been pre-

sented with the accomplished fact of imperialism, but here he was faced with the ugliness of colonial conquest in the making. It repelled him. So enraged did he become at the British treatment of the Bantu natives that he exoriated Rhodes and for a time forgot his admiration for British colonial policy. The British, said Twain, had reduced the South African natives to a slavery several times worse than the American slavery which had once pained England so much. Any kind of death was preferable to what he called "one of these Rhodesian twenty-year deaths, with its daily burden of insult, humiliation, and forced labor for a man whose entire race the victim hates. Rhodesia is a happy name for that land of piracy and pillage, and puts the right stain upon it."

On the other hand, Mark Twain was able to view with ironic detachment the mad scramble for colonies by European nations which were more or less equals in might and right.

Dear me, robbery by European nations of each other's territories has never been a sin, is not a sin today. To the several cabinets the several political establishments of the world are clothes-lines; and a large part of the official duty of these cabinets is to keep an eye on each other's wash and grab what they can of it as opportunity offers. . . . No tribe, howsoever insignificant, and no nation, howsoever mighty, occupies a foot of land that was not stolen. . . . In fact, in our day, land-robbery, claim-jumping, is become a European governmental frenzy.

In other words, by censuring every tribe and nation of the world, Mark Twain tended to exonerate territorial conquest in general on the grounds of historical precedent.

But now we come to something more relevant to our own day of political blocs and fronts and spheres of influence. Hitherto Mark Twain's concept of imperialism had been somewhat amorphous, being derived emotionally, rather than intellectually. After his trip around the world, however, Twain resided in Europe for four years. And during these years he quickly ceased to regard international rivalries with amused indulgence and began to think seriously in terms of power-politics, *ententes*, and natural alliances. Early in 1897 he wrote to one of his best friends a letter in support of British colonial policy. Beneath the governing crust, he assured William Dean Howells, England was sound-hearted and sincere. "This has been a bitter year for English pride," he continued, "and I don't like to see England humbled—that is, not too much. We are sprung from her loins, and it hurts me. I am for republics, and she is the only comrade we've got in that."

From this time onward it became increasingly evident that Mark Twain was commencing to regard England as America's

natural ally against the tyrannies of eastern Europe. The following year in a public address he strongly urged the interweaving of the British and American flags, "which, more than any others, stand for freedom and progress in the earth—flags which represent two kindred nations, each great and strong by itself, competent sureties for the peace of the world when they stand together."

This basic conviction must be kept in mind when examining Mark Twain's curious and unpopular attitude towards the Boer War, which broke out late in 1899. Twain had long believed that the intellect and the feelings could act quite independently of each other. And now in 1899 he embodied this theory, informing everyone who inquired that his head was with the Briton, but his heart was with the underdog—the Boers.

For once his head dominated his heart. The fighting in South Africa had been in progress only a few months when he sought to explain his anomalous position to his two closest friends back in America—Howells and the Rev. Joseph Twichell of Hartford. He wrote them that England was profoundly in the wrong in this conflict, but must be supported, since her defeat would be an irremediable disaster for the human race. The letter to Howells is of exceptional interest today:

Privately speaking, this is a sordid and criminal war, and in every way shameful and excuseless. Every day I write (in my head) bitter magazine articles about it, but I have to stop with that. For England must not fall; it would mean an inundation of Russian and German political degradations which would envelop the globe and steep it in a sort of Middle-Age night and slavery which would last till Christ comes again. Even wrong—and she is wrong—England must be upheld. He is an enemy of the human race who shall speak against her now.

It would appear that Mark Twain had now assumed a statesman's view of power-politics, regarding England and America as kindred republics which must cling together at all costs in order to maintain the balance of power in the world. The continent of Europe had been split into two armed camps by the renewal of the Triple Alliance in 1891 and by the subsequent Dual Alliance of France and Russia. Mutually antagonistic, these two alliances had one desire in common: the defeat of England by the Boers in South Africa. But Mark Twain followed the course of the war anxiously, convinced that hope for the future resided in an Anglo-American bloc which would present a formidable front to the rest of the world. Nor was Twain a man to overlook the fact that England alone, of all the nations of Europe, had just supported the United States in her war against Spain.

As for the Spanish-American War itself, Mark Twain thought it glorious. At the outset he felt a few shortlived misgivings, but these were quickly allayed when he received assurance of America's charitable purpose. In the summer of 1898 he wrote enthusiastically to Joe Twichell from Austria:

I have never enjoyed a war—even in written history—as I am enjoying this one. For this is the worthiest one that was ever fought, so far as my knowledge goes. It is a worthy thing to fight for one's own freedom; it is another sight finer to fight for another man's. And I think this is the first time it has been done.

A short time later, however, Mark Twain regretted his naivete in failing to associate this brief conflict with the land-grabbing indulged in by the monarchies of Europe. Indeed, it was an unhappy day for him when he learned that his homeland really meant to annex the Phillippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam. In cold anger he now observed, "When the United States sent word to Spain that the Cuban atrocities must end she occupied the highest moral position ever taken by a nation since the Almighty made the earth. But when she snatched the Philipines she stained the flag."

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Although Mark Twain had once believed it the sacred mission of the Christian nations to civilize the savage peoples of the earth, doubts now assailed his mind. Robbed by recent events of his faith in the benevolent motives behind imperialism, he soon came to view imperialism rather as the application of capitalism and its principles to internationalism. He grew convinced that the underlying motives of colonial expansion were not humanitarian, but economic. That which carried Western flags into savage lands was no charitable spirit, he decided, but a national money-lust. "This lust has rotted these nations;" he mourned, "it has made them hard, sordid, ungentle, dishonest, oppressive." Perhaps the turning-point in his attitude came when he discovered that America was actually fighting Filipinos instead of Spaniards. The moral protestations even of America, he now saw as nothing but a sanctimonious disguise cloaking all manner of base designs.

At the close of the century Mark Twain returned to America after a nine-year residence abroad. All over the world the Christian nations, crazed by imperialistic fever, seemed to him behaving more atrociously than ever before. In secret bitterness he sat down and penned "A Greeting from the Nineteenth to the Twentieth Century:"

I bring you the stately nation named Christendom, returning bedraggled, besmirched, and dishonored from pirate raids in Kiao-Chow, Manchuria, South Africa, and the Philippines, with her soul full of meanness, her pocket full of boodle, and her mouth full of pious hypocrisies. Give her soap and a towel, but hide the looking-glass.

This was just a sort of preliminary. Not only had Mark Twain become disillusioned concerning the philanthropic motives of imperialism, but the deepening cynicism of his general outlook on life was causing him to denounce Western culture itself—that very culture he had extolled in his happier days. More and more he came to see that the glorified Progress of Christian nations was, after all, nothing but an advance in gross materialities, particularly in respect to weapons of warfare. Spirituality had failed to keep pace with science and the result was that Western civilization revealed itself to be “a poor shabby thing and full of cruelties, vanities, arrogancies, meannesses, and hypocrisies.” Obviously, Mark Twain could no longer tolerate imperial conquest which spread a culture so contemptible.

It was at this time that Twain wrote the first of those papers which we are accused of suppressing; and certainly America has no cause to be proud of its portrait as drawn therein. “To the Person Sitting in Darkness” appeared as leading article in *The North American Review* for February, 1901. It shocked the nation and made its author countless enemies in high places, for it scored an institution about which Americans were most smug: imperialistic exploitation under guise of Christian missions in China and under guise of friendly liberation in the Philippines. After condemning the aggressive cruelties of Russia, France, Germany, and England, he then blasted America for “playing the European game” in the Orient. America may well have hid her face in shame before this penetrating, scorching blast, but she has not been guilty of trying to hide the shame itself by suppressing Mark Twain’s article.

This same year Twain composed a gruesome pageant entitled “The Stupendous International Procession,” once more giving vent to his hatred for imperialism. Among the leading figures in the procession marched Christendom, whom he described as follows:

A majestic matron in flowing robes drenched with blood. On her head a golden crown of thorns; impaled on its spines the bleeding heads of patriots who died for their countries—Boers, Boxers, Filipinos; in one hand a slung-shot, in the other a Bible, open at the text, “Do unto others,” etc. Protruding from pocket bottle labeled “We bring you the blessings of civilization.” Necklace—handcuffs and a burglar’s jimmy. Supporters—at one elbow Slaughter, at the other Hypocrisy. Banner with Motto—“Love Your Neighbor’s Goods as Yourself.”

The pageant goes on to execrate nation after nation for atrocities perpetrated in the name of benevolence. It is a fearful document and Twain did not try to publish it.

Throughout the following year Mark Twain filled many pages with vitriolic assaults upon America's actions in the Philippines. These writings served as an emotional safety-valve, but he had little thought of publication. The most conspicuous piece which did find its way into print was the sarcastic "Defense of General Funston." On publication this article stirred up nearly as great a storm as its predecessor, because it attacked the character of a popular military hero in the very hour of his triumph. In particular it described the treachery employed to capture the Filipino leader, Aguinaldo. In view of the recent charge from behind the Iron Curtain, one might speculate upon the fate of a Soviet satirist daring to assail the current national hero.

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Mark Twain's preoccupation with the Chinese and Philippine situations shows that by the twentieth century he had turned his attention away from European abuses in order to concentrate on the evils of American imperialism. Censure of Europe was no longer becoming to a man living in a glass house. He did not like his glass house, but soon saw that he was going to have to put up with the unpleasantness. His final words on the subject are not sweet:

We have bought some islands from a party who did not own them; with real smartness and a good counterfeit of disinterested friendliness we coaxed a confiding weak nation into a trap and closed it upon them; we went back on an honored guest of the Stars and Stripes when we had no further use for him and chased him into the mountains; . . . we have acquired property in the three hundred concubines and other slaves of our business partner, the Sultan of Sulu, and hoisted our protecting flag over that swag.

And so, by these Providences of God—the phrase is the government's, not mine—we are a World Power; and are glad and proud, and have a back seat in the family. With tacks in it. At least we are letting on to be glad and proud; it is the best way. Indeed, it is the only way. We must maintain our dignity, for people are looking. We are a World Power; we cannot get out of it now, and we must make the best of it.

These caustic remarks of 1901-1902 seemed to spend most of Mark Twain's fury about imperialism. For a while the partitioning of the globe was nearly ended and even Mark Twain was inclined to subside before the *fait accompli*. Only once again did he raise his voice on the subject and this time he cried out against enormities so gross and flagrant that the sympathy of the whole world mobilized behind him. The brutal atrocities

of King Leopold in the Belgian Congo had been an open international scandal for years. *King Leopold's Soliloquy*, which Twain contributed outright to the Congo Reform Association in 1905, is the most elaborate and pitiless personal satire of his career. The long soliloquy pictures Leopold as a contemptuous, inhuman fiend, who causes the unoffending blacks of the Congo to be mutilated and butchered by the millions in order to swell his private fortune. Illustrated by dozens of authentic photographs, it is an account of dismembered bodies, charred corpses, and of women cruelly tortured to make their men slave harder. This was imperialism run amuck. Public opinion, even within Belgium itself, gradually curtailed these activities of King Leopold—and perhaps Twain's satire speeded the process.

Broken now in health and grieving for wife and daughter, Mark Twain continued to break a lance with anything that seemed to interpose on that broad highway over which he believed that the whole of mankind had the privilege of passing in the onward march of the ages. Steadfastly he championed all those who, from Broadway to the Congo, knew the blight of bondage. Critics can cavil how they will concerning the sub-stratum of misanthropy in Mark Twain during these late years. The fact remains that his passionate defense of the weak and oppressed everywhere proves a love for humanity so deep and true that no secret scribblings can belie it.

In China and Cuba, in Hawaii and the Congo, everywhere Mark Twain demanded that the little man be given a square deal. This ardent concern for the individual was basic in his countless comments on imperial conquest. It also underlay his conviction that England and America together must present a bulwark against the despotism and political degradations of eastern Europe.

In short, by the spirit of justice and brotherly love which animates all his writings—even his attacks on America's foreign policy—Mark Twain has done more than any other writer towards making the concept of liberty a part of the American heritage. Certain of our world-neighbors would be wise to examine this fact and to consider its implications before trying to remove the mote from the eye of Uncle Sam.