CHAPTER XXI

CONCLUSION

It is now perhaps possible to form an adequate and yet a concise summary of the course of our statesmanship in Egypt. From 1889 to 1922 our policy had followed a fairly consistent line. In spite of the fact that theory and practice had diverged very widely at important points, our foremost concern had been to secure the humane and stable administration of the affairs of the Egyptian masses.

In 1922 came a radical alteration. We were no longer to concern ourselves with the welfare of the Egyptian masses, who were to be handed over to the charge of a responsible Egyptian Government, and we were to retain only so much of the former machinery of our domination as would enable us to safeguard certain imperial interests which were vital to us and certain responsibilities to third parties of which we could not honourably divest ourselves. This retention was to continue until a friendly agreement could be arrived at with Egypt, which would provide, by mutual arrangement, for the protection of those interests and the discharge of those responsibilities.

The theory upon which this new policy was based was that in the political atmosphere which then existed no satisfactory agreement was possible, that

a unilateral act of concession on our part would begin the creation of a more favourable atmosphere, and that in course of time the improvement would develop to a point at which a comprehensive agreement covering all questions at issue would be possible. But, as before 1922, so after it, practice began at once to diverge from theory. Formerly we had shown no determination to depart from Egypt, and now we could find in our hearts no determination to stay.

The question was not one of declared policy but of the spirit in which that policy was adhered to. In Cromer's day our declared policy had been to put an end to the occupation, but Great Britain was not in the mood to carry it out. After 1922 our declared policy was to limit our responsibilities to a minimum and to maintain that minimum firmly, but we have not been able to find the mood necessary for this purpose either.

One of the most curious illustrations of this state of affairs is to be found in the hostile attitude widely adopted towards any critic who attempts to recall to mind our declared policy and to suggest that we should adhere to it. Before the War a similar treatment was accorded to those who suggested that in accordance with our declared policy we should end the occupation. He who in pre-War days stood for adherence to declarations, was dubbed a defeatist, whilst he who to-day urges the same adherence is accused—and the accusation is accepted with very little question—of being an "expansionist", one whose ruling passion is to exploit the world for the benefit of the British race. There are few who pause to consider that all this talk of expansion and of imperial aims is entirely beside the point. By 1900 we were firmly planted in Egypt, whether we liked it or not.

It merely confused the issue to argue about the ethical values of the actions which had taken us there. The men and the nations who were responsible for the world movements of those days acted in accordance with the ethical standards of their day and generation. It is temptingly easy to argue that they were hypocrites, but even if the argument is accepted as valid it proves nothing, except that our ideas and standards are different from theirs.

The problem bequeathed to us for consideration and for practical solution is how we are to act in the position in which we find ourselves. It is a severely practical problem, and its solution cannot be advanced at all by a discussion of origins.

Cromer's policy was, in regard to the administrative needs of Egypt, clear-cut: it was pursued over a term of years and produced results which can be studied and appraised. The policy of 1922 had also the advantage of being definite and comprehensible: Lord Allenby's determined action substituted a clear purpose for an attitude that had been obscure and uncertain. So far the policy of 1922 was comparable to the previous policy, but only so far. Had it been steadily followed over a term of years as Cromer's policy had been, it would have produced results by which it could have been judged. Unfortunately it was not adhered to: the administrative advantage of a clear-cut plan was lost almost immediately, and the obscurity and uncertainty closed in again.

The declaration of 1922 left us in a position which was comprehensible only upon the supposition that the policy then announced was adhered to. We were left with an army of occupation, and a position of outstanding influence—weapons that were potentially decisive. If we were not to

use those weapons for the purpose for which we had avowedly retained them, to what other use were they to be put and what would their actual effect be? We could remain inactive; we could stand aside and make no endeavour to direct the influence which our position and our Army did in fact continuously and inevitably exert: we could be passive spectators of the struggle between demagogic and autocratic rule, which in fact commenced immediately after the Constitution had been brought into being. We could watch this struggle develop to its climax, but we could not escape the fact that whichever side was in the end victorious would owe the maintenance of its power to the presence, however passive, of our Army and our influence.

When the struggle was concluded, we might hope perhaps to exercise, upon the victorious party, some measure of beneficial restraint—not directly, but merely because of its knowledge of what it owed to our support.

It may be argued, indeed, that we are now in the very position which the previous paragraph has outlined as the probable outcome. If so, the important question is whether we have arrived without knowing it at the goal which Cromer foreshadowed in "Modern Egypt"—have we crossed into the promised land of a native Egyptian government sufficiently humane and efficient to pass Cromer's test, and stable enough to endure? The answer must be not yet at least—for whatever the vices and virtues of her present government, there is still a British Army in Egypt, and there is still no stability that is not bound up with the presence of British troops and British influence.

From this general survey can any general principle

be deduced upon which we may with certainty depend? More and more clearly the conclusion seems to emerge that the real danger to those countries which have come under our control arises when the claims of good administration are subordinated to the claims of political theory. In the present confusion of our political thought there is no accepted standard by which we can judge whether the gifts we have to offer are blessings or curses. We are no longer so sure either of the beauty or the fertility of our western political discontents that we can afford to regard as "pathetic" the placid contentment of other races. We are no longer firm believers in the permanent value of what has so long been called progress; still less are we sure that the lines upon which our own development has run are the best lines for the development of other countries of a different stock. Law and order, internal peace and quietness, and impartial justice, these remain the only gifts about the advantages of which little argument would be heard. And if this is true, then there is really only one article of belief upon which we can confidently depend—that good administration is the first requirement to be fulfilled, and that all other questions are subordinate to it.

Apart from the benefits of good administration, what indeed have we to offer to subject or protected races that is not now of doubtful value? There are many observers whose answer to that question will be calculated to fill our minds with despair. They will say that association with western races destroys the organic natural growth, and puts nothing of value in its place: that we break off short and kill a tradition that has at least the mellow charm of age and continuity, and try to substitute for it a jerry-built product which has no foundations in the soil upon

which it is placed. The Arab, struggling with the hardships of life in the desert, develops, by association with these stern surroundings, virtues of hardihood, true comradeship, and romantic hospitality. What comparable virtues are to be found in his Westernised brother, who in bowler hat and brown boots earns a more comfortable livelihood as a parasite upon the fringes of Western civilisation? The Indian peasant, fitted so perfectly into the background of a village polity that is the work of centuries, draws from the earth upon which he toils a virtue that is not so clearly apparent in his cousin—the "failed B.A." But although the truth of these contentions may be admitted, they are not relevant to the discussion, unless it can be proved that the conditions which they describe are the direct consequence of alien domination. We have always been careful not to interfere with indigenous customs and traditions. In Egypt many thoughtful observers have duly noted and complained of the absence of British culture or of any serious attempt to import it. In India, if, at the time British rule was consolidating itself, there had been any spring of natural culture to compete with the imported wares, we should assuredly not have weighted the scale in favour of the latter. It was not due to our governmental policy that village crafts died in India: the industrial revolution with its irresistible flood of cheap machine-made goods would have killed them there just as surely as it killed them elsewhere, whether we had been in possession or not. It was French culture which Egyptians so keenly sought and of which they obtained so strong a graft, and in India it was Indians themselves who half a century or more ago clamoured insistently for western education. Those who mourn for the good old days of

pastoral simplicity and the spinning-wheel may be right in contending that they were happier and better, but they cannot justly blame Government action for their disappearance.

To one charge, however, our imperial policy must plead guilty—the charge of advocating and implanting Western political ideas. It can, of course, be argued that they would have taken root without our interference, just as they have taken root and sprouted in countries where our influence was not officially predominant. But none the less we must clearly admit that we have deliberately stimulated the growth of democratic ideas and methods in the countries over which we have been ruling.

Here again we shall be accused of having done wrong—of having broken an old and not unhappy tradition of political thought that was still capable of natural growth. And here again the accusation is not relevant to our present problem, because it is not to be gainsaid that the good or the mischief we have done in this regard has gone too far to be undone now. We are faced with the situation as it is, and not with a clean slate upon which we can write whatever political thesis we like: and if this fact were once clearly comprehended it is very possible that we should be in a better position to arrive at a permanent solution of the difficulties which now beset us. If the history of our sojourn in Egypt teaches us anything at all, it is surely the impossibility of achieving any good result without a clear-cut policy honestly and courageously adhered to. In the confusion of our thought since the War, we have only once managed to devise such a policy, and that was in 1922 when Lord Allenby stated openly what was the logical conclusion of the drift

that had been allowed—accompanied always by vain protests—to take place, and forced the Government at home to accept his statements. But, as we have seen, the British Government began to drift again almost at once and the advantage was lost.

If, therefore, we are to salve our imperial destiny from the storm and wrack of post-War political confusion, we must steer clear of everything which is not clear-cut and consistent. We must rid ourselves of the dangerous illusion that we can achieve anything by promises, however liberal—to be redeemed in the distant future. On the other hand, we must refrain from declarations exhibiting a firmness of tone and temper, which is, in fact, non-existent.

All these maxims are of course only variations of, or corollaries to, the main fundamental proposition that the principles of good administration should be the principles by which our policy is invariably guided. The first duty, almost the only duty, of Government is good administration. It has no responsibility for the forcing of constitutional development. If it provides good administration, it provides the soil in which that development can grow. Should it grow, the Government may have a responsibility to foster and encourage it, but not to force it or to become so absorbed in tending it as to neglect greater responsibilities. Should it reach maturity, the Government must judge its capacities for self-government solely by the criterion of good administration and the welfare of the people for whom that government is still responsible.

The methods which the British have employed in dealing with the Asiatic and African races who have come under their influence, either as part of the British Empire or in some less definite status, have

been and are various, indeed. Between the method of direct rule which is now coming in for so much criticism and the "indirect rule" plan which it has been fashionable for some time to eulogise, there are infinite variations and gradations. As western political ideals have lost their sacrosanctity, and as their suitability for the use of Eastern or African races has come in question, so "indirect rule" has come into vogue. But it is permissible to wonder whether, in the course of a decade or two, indirect rule will not also be rejected by the theorists. Western self-government may mean progress on wrong lines, but may not indirect rule, judged from the same angle, mean stagnation? It is urged that the system retains all that is good in indigenous institutions and cuts out all that is bad. But who decides what is good and what is bad? So long as that question is decided by Western standards the decision must in effect impose an alien culture and may result therefore in destroying natural vitality. Children have this question decided for them, and as long as it is decided for them, they remain children.

In fact, in the background of all these systems, with their successes and their failures, there is discoverable only one common factor which connects and gives impulse to them all—the need for efficient, firm, and impartial administration and the capacity to supply it. Whatever else is attempted, however sincere and high-minded the objects which are aimed at, the effort must be judged to be misguided if it removes from the people concerned the security and the opportunities for justice which they have already attained.

It will at once be urged that, however sound the rule just described may be, it is of little present value.

The time has gone by when the situation would admit of the application of so simple a maxim. Undertakings have been entered into, foundations have been laid and policies have been followed which enormously complicate our present problems. The truth of this assertion must of course be admitted. But surely, even in the complex circumstances in which we now find ourselves, it cannot but be right to pay the first and the most prolonged attention to the interests and welfare of the general body of those for whom we are responsible. We may no longer be able to regard this as our sole concern, but none the less it remains a responsibility which must strictly limit our efforts in other fields. And apart from all questions of the universal principles of government, there is in history convincing support for the view that our imperial responsibilities were successfully discharged so long as this maxim was regarded, and that our success diminished in proportion as we lost sight of it.

The final—and the most plausibly dangerous—argument of all is that which seeks to disguise a lack of policy and of firmness in the stolen garments of common sense and foresight. Whenever it is proposed that this country should follow a clear-cut policy or adhere to a definite principle, there will be a chorus of voices adjuring us to do nothing rash. Only the fool, they will cry, in these chaotic times is stupid enough to be dogmatic. Only the wise man has the courage and the intelligence to realise that this is an age of transition in which we live, where nothing can be certain and no light is trustworthy. Here and there among the general audience will be some who will question whether it takes much intelligence to realise that we live in an age of transition—whether, indeed, the human race has not always lived in an age of

transition. Indeed, more expert historians than I have pointed out that one age of transition inexorably succeeds another in the history of the world. The first duty of courage and foresight is to realise that the difference between past and present ages lies only in this, that the speed of transition is more rapid than it has ever been before. In the past, statesmen and administrators have not acted upon the principle of "safety first" or shrunk from decision just because the world was changing. Foresight and courage were qualities which issued in action rather than in procrastination and despair. In the present they are more needed than ever. The changes with which the future is pregnant come to meet us with a swifter onrush than ever before and exact therefore a keener foresight and a more rapid power of decision. It is delightful, of course, to be assured that if we do nothing but sit and watch with folded hands, we are earning a reputation for wisdom and courage: delightful to assume that events are beyond our control and that statesmanship consists in realising this and announcing it to the public. But it is very difficult to believe that even this great country, equipped by its imperial position to play a leading part in the councils of the world, can maintain its influence by a persistent refusal to act. Should we not better display the virtues of wisdom and courage if, even in this age of transition in which we live, we were to adhere with tenacity to those fundamental principles which do not change and have never changed. Even in the shifting present-day world, stirred to a whirlpool by the activities of applied science, the foundations of these principles are not shaken. They emerge, indeed, clearer and stronger than before, swept free by the storm of all ephemeral accretions, and not

yet overlaid by the new driftwood which the whirlpool is throwing up.

With these final sentences I must take leave of the task which was set me. I have recounted in its main aspects the story of the British connexion with Egypt since the closing days of Cromer's long and beneficent administration. The years which have since supervened have been years of struggle long drawn out, darkened by failure and too often by bitter tragedy. It is indeed a story powerfully dramatic in its essential elements and I lay down my pen very conscious of the drama and of my inability to do it full justice.

"... And if I have done well, and as is fitting the "story, it is that which I desired: but, if slenderly and "meanly, it is that which I could attain unto ... "and here shall be an end."