

Fostering the imperial view: life-writing in Dollar Magazine before the First World War

Ian Brown

I attended a school that partly offered boarding education for the children of empire-makers: administrators, doctors, missionaries, colonial policemen, businesspeople. So many of my schoolmates were born within the Empire as it once was that each year in June there was a sixth year tug o' war competition between the Britishers and the Foreigners, the latter being the pupils born furth of the British Isles. My last year, 1963, was the first in which a full team born abroad could not be mustered. The eighth 'Foreigner' was found by including someone born in Arran. Until this watershed, the school for at least a century and perhaps since its foundation in 1818 had had a role in providing empire-makers. It was founded as the result of a legacy left by Captain John MacNabb, a Dollar-born ship-owner and merchant whose fortune was made, at least in substantial part, by trade in human beings through the eighteenth-century triangular slave trade. In the nineteenth century, its pupils sat either the Cambridge Examinations or, in an explicit imperial connection, the Indian Civil Service Examinations.

As part of the process of consolidating its role among current and former pupils and friends of the school, *The Dollar Magazine* was established in 1902 as 'The Official Organ of the Dollar Academy Clubs [for former pupils]'. An old school companion of mine, Robin Cumming, has begun publishing selected articles from this periodical and it is from his effort of memory that this paper emerges.

In 1909 *The Dollar Magazine* published W J Drysdale's 'Notes from the Burmah Oilfields'. Drysdale was a manager with the Burma Oil Company, which

employed Indian 'coolies'. He reports hearing a fight going on in the village between Burmans and them. You will observe the casually racist language of that imperialist period, as, given his role as a colonising leader, he talks of breaking up this 'bit of a row':

Needless to say, I did not wait to see who was at fault, but fixed on the first coolie I met. I managed to get the fight stopped, but not before one Indian was laid out with a club. I worked at him for an hour or so, but could not get him back to consciousness, so he died. He had got a smash on the back of the head. I don't think it takes much to kill a coolie.¹

What we see here is a direct example of the Scot as colonist and empire builder and the ways in which the very language used embodies imperialist and colonialist perceptions. And one suspects the last sentence, 'I don't think it takes much to kill a coolie' is intended as jocular, even though it refers to the death he has witnessed of a human being. While he has clearly tried to help the man, he seems both to discount any responsibility and imply that somehow it would take more to kill someone not a coolie, perhaps like him, a coolie's boss.

The colonial role was often represented as adventure. In June 1907, A W (Arthur) Strachan wrote from Sylhet in Assam in June 1907:

I am sending you a photo of one of the tigers that has been killing such a lot of cows round here lately. I had been watching the brute's tracks for weeks, and finding out his regular beats we then decided to try and tempt him with a goat.²

Cumming notes that Strachan later lost an arm and a leg after being attacked by a tiger. Ever resourceful, he later returned to run a boarding house in Dollar for pupils, future possible colonials, and wrote a book entitled *Mauled by a Tiger*,³ with the subtitle, *Encounters in the Indian Jungles*. Such imperial adventurism was linked into sporting activities, often field sports: the Reverend J L Findlay, ('Chaplain to the

Forces') wrote in March 1911 of a trip of a fishing party to the Drakenberg Mountains.⁴ Again, as with Drysdale's report from Burma, we find racist attitude enshrined and treated as matter for jocular comment:

It is not a usual thing to see white men carrying loads in Natal – that is black man's work – however coolies or natives take some waking, and all that means time, so it is by necessity and not by choice that each of us could be seen humping his weary load at 5.30 towards the waggon [*sic*], which, because of the cattle fever has to keep a mile away from the town.⁵

The sporting colonialist takes sport so seriously that he (or she – the party is revealed to include a woman) will even carry a load, contravening – and in so doing emphasising – the racial distribution of work roles. Further by a touch of reportage Findlay inserts an exotic sense to life in South Africa, the cattle fever keeps the wagon out of town so that they have to carry their 'weary' loads, transgressing the decorum of racial typing, for over a mile. And the objective is sport recognisable in Scotland: the river they aim to reach offers such good fishing that even a woman can be successful despite her technical deficiencies:

I have found more than once that the lady of our party, blundering up with no such high hopes [of getting a three- or five-pound trout], has hooked and landed from the self-same pools three-pounders, and, as often as not, she has had the sun behind her.⁶

Despite such transgressive achievements of the 'lady', by the end of his report Findlay highlights and reinforces the primary importance of her nurturing and domestic role. Having himself blundered on one fishing trip into a long trail around and, on his return seeking warm food, found the fire out because of a flood in the camp kitchen, he decides he needs some 'Irish neat'. At this point, the 'cheery voice' of the lady invites him in for a mug of cocoa. She has set him on the strait way for he

replies to her that cocoa is 'the very thing I have set my heart on. No, no I won't have any whisky, thank you; this cocoa is the best of drinks at present; but, I say, how did you boil the water?' The nameless She (we are introduced to her as Mrs---) reveals the secret of her role as domestic goddess: a small spirit stove. And on this revelation of woman's constantly caring and domestically accommodating nature Findlay continues

Yes! And what is more she had other things of which we were ignorant. That night, though it never ceased pouring, we had a fine supper all the same; there was camp pie, there was tongue, there was pickled trout and coffee afterwards, and all that we owed to the forethought of the one lady in our party.⁷

What it was to be a colonial woman.

Underlying such valiant efforts in search of good fishing in a colonially bountiful river supported by the forethought and care of the 'lady in our party', is the history of the stream and why it is called 'Bushman's River'. Nine miles from their destination, they call in on two storekeepers 'who have been there for many years [and] know the Zulu language as well as white men can know it'. Findlay goes on:

They will tell you in detail about the extraordinary exploits of the Bushman in the early days – how they used to come down from the mountains, hiding themselves in bushes during the day, and, only travelling by night, raid the horses and cattle of both the white and black man alike – how the Zulu and white combined forces in the late sixties and pursued them right up the Berg, driving them into the innermost caves of the very topmost ridges – how two whites were killed, and many blacks – how the Zulus returned with the women and children as war prisoners, and how, suddenly, one night many months afterwards, every Bushman prisoner, woman or child, suddenly vanished, and no one to this day knows how or where – how the feuds went on and on till at

last the breechloader banished for ever every trace of the Bushman with his little bow and poisoned arrow, his implements of stone and wood. How, even to-day scientists come for guides to help and search the caves to try and find some real live Bushman, and can only find skeletons and broken water-pots. We sense the ambivalent nature of the Bushman for Findlay the colonial cleric as he describes him as both infantilised and lethal, having a 'little bow' and a 'poisoned arrow'. That women and children can be war prisoners is accepted with insouciance, as is the fact that all the Bushmen, after whom the river is named by the imperialist appropriators, have been exterminated, become 'skeletons', or driven away, disinherited and shattered, leaving only 'broken water-pots'. Values of racial superiority and hierarchy are established: the Bushman is esteemed below the Zulu, who may ally with the white man against him, but will remain subordinate to the white. In his old school magazine, the reverend, not just an angler, but a fisher among men, presents his peers and his young readers with a sporty example to aspire to, colonial experience represented as a dashing adventure into which are embedded racial and gender status and values.

Very early in the run of the magazine, its fifth issue a year after it was launched, a real-life colonial war story helps begin the embedding process of some of the values that later stories were to carry on. These values include a sense of racial hierarchy, the adventurousness of hunting and passion for field sports, all wrapped up in the triumph of difficulties endured and overcome and the certainty of imperial destiny. Keppel Harvey reports in March 1903 on a Boer War action beginning on 18 February 1902 and led by Colonel Urmston of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, Dollar's local regiment. The tense adventure of the action is highlighted, as is the kind of factual, but nonetheless exotic, detail already seen in the fishing tale:

During that three hours' march not a word was spoken above a whisper, and strict orders were issued against the lighting of matches. By this time the

moon was well up in the sky, and many thanks are due to it for saving men from falling into antbear holes and over ant hills.⁸

The adventure is also picturesque:

Far in the distance like so many dots the scouts were carefully picking their way, ever on the alert for hidden Boer snipers, who at this time infested [note the author's language here] the country. The long silent snake-like column moving over the veldt lent a peculiar and almost weird finish to the scene. (p. 34)

The column of men becomes almost a living creature seeking to rid the land of an infestation of its non-British, though pre-British, colonisers. It is made up, nonetheless, of brave individuals. Harvey goes on, '[By 4 a.m.] some poor fellows were sore and weary, and scarcely able to drag one foot after the other (p. 34)', but those 'poor fellows' endured and the quarry was spotted. The Boers were encircled and surrendered, though the 'fight while it lasted was fierce' (p. 35). In a jocular tone we have seen already elsewhere, but one tinged by cynical and wise caution, we read of the surrender:

The handkerchief of questionable colour, known as the white flag, was probably the most welcome sight witnessed since the march commenced. As the Boers were in force, and cases of the misuse of this emblem of peace had occurred before, the Colonel took all necessary precautions, and satisfied himself that this was no ruse on the part of his wily foes to induce his men to forsake their cover' (p. 35).

189 Boers are captured, of whom sixteen are wounded, while nine dead are found and buried. The funeral becomes a symbol of reconciliation, perhaps particularly important since by the time the report was published the Boers were, at least nominally, assimilated into the British imperial adventure:

That plain funeral service, where Briton and Boer stood together with uncovered heads, drew any ill-feeling from the heart and showed the logic of that seemingly paradoxical expression, "My friend the enemy." (p. 35)

The report closes by noting that the distance covered in the march was twenty-six and a half miles – by significant coincidence within less than half a mile of a marathon's length (again sporting competition, here linked to a classical battle is an underlying metaphor). It then concludes in observing that within fifteen minutes of forming camp the men 'enjoy[ed] a well-earned rest' and noting that Lord Kitchener 'telegraphed his congratulations to the column'. (p. 36) The hunt is concluded and to the victor the laurels.

It is not only former pupils who contribute to the magazine. A neighbouring landowner and, and presumed friend of the school, an inveterate traveller, Isabella Christie of Cowden Castle to the east of Dollar, on several occasions contributed colourful pieces on her journeys in China, Korea and even such exotic places as Majorca. She has an acute eye and ear, noting the way in which in Shanghai the French settlement offers 'Chinese speaking excellent French' while the British teach and keep up a pidgin language.⁹ In framing her exotic countries, in which it is natural she should travel and other nations interfere, Miss Christie includes such observations as:

There are large cotton mills on the river-bank, though curiously enough the material of the blue cotton garments worn by the natives both at Shanghai and up country is made in Lancashire and dyed by the Chinese themselves. Something like twelve millions is said to be annually imported of this commodity. (p. 41)

She implies, even asserts, an incuriosity about the economic, political and imperial factors that might lead to such a 'curious' fact as cotton mills in China working cotton actually made up from colonial cotton in the North of England. Imperialism,

colonialism and their consequences become unexamined, though vaguely quaint, amusing and ironic facts of life.

The Dollar Magazine also includes notes on current events related to the school. In 1921 General Davies unveiled a war memorial. In his reported speech, he observed to his listeners that

They were met to do what honour they could to those men, to that woman, who had passed their childhood there, and who had given their lives in order that they who remained might live and be free. [...] He always thought that of all war memorials, perhaps the one that touched one's heart most of all was a school memorial, because one knew that these men had spent their childhood there, learned their lessons there, and played their games, and the whole place seemed haunted with their memory.¹⁰

His speech is remarkable in that it draws together many of the underlying ways in which the magazine expresses an ethos within which a virtual world of colonial values is identified and promoted. The games and the lessons of childhood and school all shape the future of the child, and Davies later goes on:

It was, perhaps, most of all, what they learned outside the class-room [that mattered]. It was the spirit of understanding that all men are not made alike; the spirit of give and take. It was at school that they learned that essential first lesson – to obey.' (p. 73)

Having learned to obey, the future former pupil had a right to authority, to have great influence. And out of the school he (and, in the case of Dollar, she) would strive not to bring disgrace to the school, 'and if he did well, the honour and glory of his school was thereby enriched'. Davies concluded, to applause:

The knowledge of what the memorial stood for would give [every boy and girl who came to the school] more than ever reason to take care that in after life

they never did anything which would bring discredit to that great and noble Academy.

And 'that great and noble Academy' can be seen to imbue its pupils with the 'great and noble' values of Empire, not least through the construction of *The Dollar Magazine* as an instrument of promulgation of a system of values that support colonialism and the development of empire. Articles by both former pupils and friends of the school shape and nurture a virtual world. In this, school, community and colonial world are artfully conjoined into a continuum of experience, so familiarising readers with a view of colonialism and empire as natural order and with the racial and gender power hierarchies they will inherit and sustain.

¹ W. J. Drysdale, 'Notes from the Burmah Oilfields (June 1909)' in R. R. Cumming (ed.) *The Dollar Compendium*, vol. 1 (Dollar: The Dollar Compendium, 2009)

² A W Strachan, 'Extract of Letter from Sylhet, Assam' in Cumming, p. 3

³ Arthur W Strachan *Mauled by a Tiger: Encounters in the Indian Jungles* (Edinburgh, 1933)

⁴ Rev. J L Findlay, 'In the Drakenberg Mountains: Fishing Trip to the Bushman's River', in Cummings, pp. 14-22

⁵ Ibid., p. 15

⁶ Ibid., p. 21

⁷ Ibid., pp. 21-2

⁸ Keppel Harvey, 'A Night March in the Eastern Transvaal', in Cumming, pp. 33-36, p. 33

⁹ Miss Christie of Cowden, 'Notes on my Travels: SHANGHAI' in Cumming, pp. 39-44p. 40

¹⁰ Anon., 'Notes from Near and Far: UNVEILING OF WAR MEMORIAL', in Cumming, pp. 71-5, p. 72.