

Reviews

The Liberal Imperialists. The ideas and politics of a post-gladstonian élite.
By H. C. G. Matthew. Oxford University Press, 1973. xvi, 331 pp.
U.K. price: £5.50.

THE READER would be well advised before embarking on this book to pay careful attention to both the main title and the sub-title, for it is primarily neither about imperialism nor about those liberals in nineteenth-century Britain who saw no incompatibility in their being devoted at one and the same time to liberalism and to the cause of Empire. It is about a small group of Liberal politicians, of whom Lord Rosebery, H. H. Asquith, R. B. Haldane, and Sir Edward Grey were the most prominent, who worked together in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to promote the reconstruction of Liberal policies. Dr Matthew's main contribution to our understanding of these people lies precisely in the emphasis which he places in the non-imperialist aspects of their conduct and policy. This in turn, of course, leads us to understand their imperialism better when we see it in its domestic and liberal context. For Dr Matthew rightly stresses that the origins of the Liberal Imperialist group are to be found back in the eighteen-eighties in a concern about the development of the Liberal party, a concern in which imperialism played a very minor role. But he also shows that much later on, even during the South African War, disputes which appeared to be about imperial policy were fundamentally still about Liberal policies and the style of Liberal leadership. His book should be read in conjunction with G. R. Searle's *The Struggle for National Efficiency* (Oxford, 1971) which places 'imperialism' in the broader context of the movement to increase 'efficiency' in the organisation of national life, including the structure and working of institutions and the improvement of the physical condition of the working-class population.

Domestic politics predominate in Dr Matthew's book, and rightly so. The Liberal Imperialists turn out to have been remarkably cautious and confused in their attitude to the Empire itself. They had little understanding of or interest in the economic development of such Empire as Britain already possessed and they showed little enthusiasm for the expansion of the Empire. Their approach to the question of imperial federation is seen to be controlled by their devotion to free trade principles which made them hostile to any form of fiscal union. Dr Matthew shows that their interest even in South Africa was not a primarily imperialist interest. They were remarkably ignorant about South Africa, and their support for Milner was based not

on conviction about the rightness of his policies and ideas but on their fundamental élitism. Here was a man whose judgement they believed they could trust, and one of their main political principles was that government should be controlled by an élite of progressive, efficient men such as themselves — and Milner.

In so far as the book is a study in the practical application of any doctrine, that doctrine is 'élitism' and not 'imperialism'. This, rather than any enthusiasm for the Empire, was what held the group together—their belief in themselves as an élite and in the necessity of rule by élites. Dr Matthew shows how this belief permeated all that they thought and did and also how it ultimately diminished their own effectiveness and impact. For they cared little for local politics or party organisations and failed therefore to develop any really substantial and durable support either in localities or in the party. They made their way on the strength of their claims to lead. They took a gloomy view of democracy and showed a distaste for popular politics which reflected their belief that leaders must lead and not follow the ebbs and tides of popular opinion. Although they had theories about the trend of liberal electoral support, this was on the most elevated and abstract level only. They indulged in no proper electoral analyses and showed no desire to do so. Their lack of contact with the rank and file caused them to make some basic miscalculations, especially about the extent to which a 'clean slate' approach can ever be viable in a political party where traditions are so important in determining how members see their place and role in the political scheme of things.

It may be, however, that Dr Matthew has allowed the undoubted élitism of the Liberal Imperialists to have an excessive and a distorting influence over the structure of his book. A study of Liberal Imperialism rather than just of Rosebery, Haldane, Grey and Asquith would have revealed a good deal more activity in the party than he shows us. Numerous Liberal M.P.s, candidates, and local organisations at various stages professed some degree of commitment to the promotion of 'Liberal Imperialism'. These are not given much attention or analysed in any detail but are usually seen only through the eyes of the Liberal Imperialist leaders. This may be fair enough in terms of the subject as defined in Dr Matthew's sub-title, but it denies us the chance of adequately understanding the leaders in their party context. And not even all the leaders are analysed. H. H. Fowler was a Liberal front-bencher who became very prominently involved in Liberal Imperialist activity, yet he remains a shadowy figure in this book because he does not happen to belong to the Asquith-Haldane-Grey generation. One particular weakness is the absence of analysis of the situation in Scotland where Liberal Imperialism had a strong appeal.

The somewhat cramped nature of Dr Matthew's book may have something to do with its origins as a doctoral thesis. To this too may possibly be attributed the awkwardness of its structure. But it is a book which is to be welcomed for the lucid and penetrating way in which it opens up a hitherto curiously neglected topic: the Liberal Imperialist side to the struggle to determine the future course of the British Liberal party between 1895 and 1905.