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‘There Are Few Who Do Good and Many That Do Evil’

On the morning of 3 March 1938, a slim figure dressed in the blue and silver frock coat and white-plumed cocked hat of a Governor General of the British Colonial Service stood on the deck of HMS *Endurance* looking east towards the fast-approaching shore of the Holy Land. Haifa harbour had been dressed up for the occasion. Union Flags and bunting fluttered from ships and buildings. Chiaroscuro added to the drama as the sun made intermittent appearances, darting in and out from behind the dark rainclouds stacked up over Mount Carmel.

For Sir Harold MacMichael, the arrival in Palestine to take up his post as High Commissioner represented a considerable change in his fortunes. At the age of fifty-five, his career had been going nowhere. He had spent most of his working life in one of the empire’s least congenial corners, imposing a semblance of order on the natives of Sudan. He immersed himself in its culture, spoke fluent Arabic and was admired for his scholarship, evident in such works as *Brands Used by the Chief Camel-Owning Tribes of Kordofan*. He was equally at home in the drawing rooms of the empire’s elite. His mother, Sophia, was the sister of George Nathaniel Curzon, sometime Viceroy of India, whose hauteur had been immortalized in a famous piece of doggerel while he was still an undergraduate at Oxford.*

* My name is George Nathaniel Curzon/I am a most superior person/My cheeks are pink, my hair is sleek/I dine at Blenheim twice a week.

Ability and high connections had brought few obvious benefits. Departmental jealousies and bureaucratic rules stalled his progress and after nearly three decades in Sudan, the Colonial Office's reward was to shunt him sixteen hundred miles further south to be governor of Tanganyika. There he stewed for three years, uninspired and unfulfilled, treating the post as 'a disagreeable interlude before a more suitable position' came along.[1]

Then, in December 1937, a message from London offered a way out of the cul-de-sac. The High Commissioner of Palestine, Sir Arthur Wauchope, was moving on. Would MacMichael, the Colonial Secretary, Sir William Ormsby-Gore wondered, be interested in replacing him? The answer was yes. And now he was entering his new domain, with all the pomp and circumstance that the empire could muster.

Endurance docked at a few minutes before nine o'clock. The rain had come to a respectful halt and the sea glittered in bright sunshine. Sir Harold, with Lady MacMichael and his daughter, Araminta, by his side, walked down the carpeted gangway and into the harbour's No. 3 Shed, transformed into a reception hall for the arrival ceremony. The officials and notables gathered to greet him stood to attention while the band of the Second West Kent Regiment played the national anthem and the warship's seventeen guns boomed out a royal salute. Sir Harold then mingled with the company, delighting those standing near him by chatting in Arabic to the mayor of Haifa, Hassan Bey Shukry.

Before the First World War the area had been under Ottoman rule, a backwater of a backward empire, unregarded by any of the major colonial powers. Britain's presence there stemmed from a slight looking document issued in November 1917, which would have seismic consequences for the region and, indeed, the world.

The Balfour Declaration was less than seventy words long. It was made public in a letter from the Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour to the Jewish peer Lord Rothschild, a shy, bearded giant who preferred zoology to the family banking business. It stated: 'His

Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of the object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.'

The formula passed through many hands before it was finally approved, yet no amount of drafting could resolve the contradiction at its heart. At the time there were roughly 60,000 Jews in Palestine, a mixture of Zionist pioneers trying to build a modern state on historic territory and the poor and pious, who wished to end their days on sacred soil. They were outnumbered twelve to one by 730,000 Arabs, the great majority of whom were Muslims.

Britain's motives for giving the first international endorsement of mass Jewish immigration to Palestine – with the implicit goal of establishing some sort of political entity there – were complicated. Among them was the fact that the war was stuck in a bloody stalemate and pro-Zionist declarations were thought useful to coax a reluctant United States into the fray. Possession also provided a land bridge to the oil-producing areas of Iraq, which now had great potential strategic importance. Persuasive figures in the British political establishment, Winston Churchill among them, also held the sincere conviction that the Jews deserved a home of their own. Altruism might bring its reward. Surely Jewish immigrants to Palestine would feel a debt of gratitude to their benefactors and cooperate closely with British plans for the area?

It was obvious that mass immigration would cause huge social, economic and political upheaval. How such a feat of human engineering would be achieved without friction, tension and – very probably – bloodshed was neither explained nor even addressed. Britain was in hurry to finish the war and the consequences could be dealt with later.

A month after the Balfour Declaration one major obstacle to its implementation was removed. The Ottoman Empire had sided with Germany in the war. Unbeknownst to its enfeebled ruler, Sultan Mehmed V, the British and French had in 1916 hatched a future carve-up of his Arab possessions, a shady bargain known as the Sykes–Picot Agreement. In 1917, British forces advanced from Egypt to secure their portion. On 11 December their commander Sir Edmund Allenby entered Jerusalem's Old City on foot to take its surrender. Palestine was now Britain's by right of conquest and, at the 1919 Versailles peace conference, she hung onto it. Britain's governance was formalized when the League of Nations granted it the Mandate to rule Palestine in 1923.

But fifteen years on, a territory that had been acquired in a spirit of hasty opportunism was starting to feel like an accursed burden. When MacMichael accepted the post, the Colonial Secretary William Ormbsy-Gore left him in no doubt of what he had got himself into. 'I am very grateful indeed to you for consenting to take on what I must admit is the hardest and toughest job under the Colonial Office,' he wrote. 'The various problems of Palestine [are] among the most difficult that the empire has been confronted with in its history.' Given that Britain's domains included the vast human mosaic of the Indian subcontinent, widely scattered footholds on the shores of the world's oceans and large chunks of Africa, this was saying something. Palestine represented only a tiny sliver of the great imperial pie. The populated area was less than 150 miles from north to south, no more than fifty miles wide. But as the British had learned with Ireland, the smallest morsels could cause the greatest heartburn. As with Ireland, it was the people who were the problem. 'The human material, both Jewish and Arab is particularly difficult,' lamented Ormsby-Gore. 'The country is full of arms and bitterness and there are few who do good and many that do evil.'[2]

There had been trouble from the start. With intoxicating swiftness, the Zionists' dream of a Jewish state had become a practical

proposition. From 1918 Jews flocked to Palestine, most of them refugees from an Eastern Europe shaken up by revolution and the aftershocks of the First World War and rancid with anti-Semitism. They brought energy and modern attitudes and skills and came armed with money, buying up large swathes of cultivable land, mainly from Arab proprietors.

For the Arabs of Palestine, rooted in the stasis of centuries, the rush of change was first shocking, then threatening. Anti-Jewish riots broke out in Jerusalem in 1920 and the port city of Jaffa in 1921. They were stoked by a sandy-haired, lisping rabble-rouser, Haj Amin al-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, and, by virtue of his office, the leading Muslim legal authority. The Mandate's rulers remained serene. They were used to this sort of thing. Then in August 1929 came an explosion of violence that could not be ignored. In a week of murder, rape and arson 133 Jews lost their lives. In suppressing the pogrom, 116 Arabs were killed. British complacency evaporated.

London dispatched a commission to investigate, the first of many that would wrestle with the Palestine conundrum. Essentially, it addressed Arab grievances and recommended reining in Jewish immigration and restricting land purchases. It was a vain proposal. Not only would it prove unworkable. The British had revealed that their commitment to the Balfour Declaration was faltering and from now on Jewish suspicions and disillusionment would grow.

In the meantime, though, it was the Arabs who were causing the trouble. MacMichael would be taking over in the middle of a full-blooded uprising. Hitler's rise to power in Germany had triggered a new Jewish exodus. In 1935 more than 60,000 Jews arrived in the country, and more were trickling in illegally. There were now about 430,000 in Palestine – roughly a third of the total population.[3] It only needed a spark to ignite Arab anger and that came in April 1936 when the murder of two Arabs by Jewish extremists in retaliation for the murder of two Jews sent violence rippling through the country.

Arab bands, reinforced by mercenaries and sympathizers from Syria and Iraq, attacked Jews, policemen and soldiers. They felled telegraph poles, ambushed cars and blew up railway lines and the oil pipeline that ran through Palestinian territory on its way from Mesopotamia to Haifa. A general strike lasted for six months. The rebellion was coordinated by the Arab Higher Committee, a collection of notables dominated by the Mufti. Their demands were simple: an end to Jewish immigration and land sales and a representative council that would pave the way for an independent Arab state.

London responded with another commission, led by Lord Peel. It arrived in October 1936 and there was a lull while it went about its work. Its report was published in July 1937 and came up with a drastic but inevitable seeming solution – the partition of Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state. The Jews gave qualified backing to the plan. The Arabs rejected it outright and now, as the security arrangements for MacMichael's onward journey to Jerusalem made plain, the revolt was back in full swing.

Just before ten o'clock the High Commissioner's party boarded a special train. The authorities were expecting trouble. As the engine steamed slowly away from the harbour, it was preceded by a flatbed trolley, mounted with a machine gun manned by kilted soldiers of the Royal Scots Fusiliers. Others stood guard at regular intervals along the track. For the first few miles three Royal Air Force aircraft weaved in formation overhead.

No matter how fiercely the rebellion burned, it was clear that the Jews were in Palestine to stay. As the special train passed Tel Aviv and swung onto the spur line that climbed up to Jerusalem, it came within sight of the settlement of Rehovot. It was the home of the scientific research centre run by Dr Chaim Weizmann, the Russian-born Manchester University chemistry lecturer who was Zionism's most effective lobbyist in Britain and the president of the World Zionist Organization. A few days before he had been visited by 'William Hickey' of the *Daily Express* – the pseudonym of the

influential boulevardier Tom Driberg. The journalist had been impressed by the 'sun-bathed orange groves, orchards, Riviera-like gardens, the white-walled Institute where seventy scientists from many countries are working, the garden city beyond …'[4] In the subsequent piece, Weizmann had delivered his judgement on the partition plan. He was prepared to accept it 'on the "half a loaf" principle' and believed that 'with slight improvements, most Jews' would do the same.

Even so, he made it clear that the territory allotted to the Jews – a strip running from north of Tel Aviv to south of Haifa – was not nearly big enough to absorb Europe's persecuted masses. 'No territory you could produce would hold them,' he said. 'There are five or six million of them – in Germany, Hungary, Romania, Poland. You can't fight a tidal wave. All we can do is salvage the children. Concentrating on young Jews, I anticipate bringing one and a half million of them into Palestine in the next twenty years.'

When Driberg suggested that this was fanciful, Weizmann retorted: 'It may be sentiment but we have converted the sentiment into dynamic power.' It was the English, he said, who were sentimental – 'sentimental about the Arabs. They admire picturesque inefficiency. It is the tourist attitude. We may be spoiling the landscape but five years ago all this was bare desert.' Driberg was convinced. 'It is this spectacular success of the Zionist colonisation,' he concluded, 'that has made the clash acute. The Arabs are in retreat from the land.'

It was true that many British officials had a soft spot for the Arabs, a combination of affection shot through with condescension. Before taking the job, MacMichael had sought the counsel of Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, until recently commander of the Royal Air Force in the Middle East. He had given freely of his advice. 'One sees the Arab seated under a tree and playing on his pipes to encourage his sheep and goats to graze,' he mused.[5] 'One goes down to Tel Aviv and one sees all the bustle and blatancy of a mushroom-like town. From the purely economic point of view, far more wealth is being

produced and circulated in Tel Aviv than by any number of Arabs playing to their goats. But one may be permitted to wonder which method really does more ultimate good in the world, and I fancy the Arab is feeling the same sort of thing.'

His paternalistic sympathy was matched with a Victorian belief that to spare the rod was to spoil the child. 'As of course you know, what the Arab appreciates is swift punishment,' he wrote. 'Any delay he regards as weakness.'

MacMichael did know. His high, donnish forehead, receding chin and quiet manner disguised an outlook that was as hard and sharp as flint. Familiarity with colourful, oriental cultures did not incline him to leniency towards colourful, oriental rebels. He had a strict sense of racial hierarchy with the Sudanese of the Upper Nile who lived in a state of 'semi-simian savagery' at the bottom and the British at the top. MacMichael, wrote a historian of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, combined 'great intelligence, extensive study and experience [and] a commanding ability in debate' with 'a rigidity of standards, and a public presence of icy reserve'.[6] He brought to every problem 'logic, orderliness, orthodoxy' and a keen awareness of protocol. The daytime temperature in Khartoum averaged 99 degrees Fahrenheit, yet he insisted on his officials being properly attired in jackets and ties when dealing with natives, for 'any informality of dress and manner … might be resented and undermine authority'.

MacMichael's orthodoxy was one of the main reasons he had been chosen for the Palestine job. With the Arab revolt showing no signs of abating, London needed a man who could be relied on to follow instructions and take hard measures. That had not been the style of his predecessor. Wauchope was unpopular with his officials, the military and ultimately his chiefs back in London, whose belief that he was too soft on the rebels had hastened the decision to retire him.

As Ormsby-Gore made clear in his welcoming letter, there could be no question of backing down in the face of force. 'We have to

remain in Palestine for strategic reasons and for reasons of political prestige,' he declared. He did not hide from MacMichael his opinion of Wauchope's administration, which had been 'weak and poor to say the least of it'. The situation required 'firm' as well as 'wise' handling.

A tougher strategy against the rebels was already evident. During Wauchope's absence on sick leave his Chief Secretary, a genial, indiscreet but above all efficient Cornishman called William Battershill, moved to impose some grip. The government approved his request for a crackdown and on 1 October 1937 those members of the Higher Committee who had not already fled were rounded up, put on a British warship in Haifa and deported to the Seychelles. The Mufti, who Battershill discovered on first greeting him 'had a hand like a piece of damp putty',[7] took refuge in Jerusalem inside the Haram ash Sharif. The compound enclosed the Dome of the Rock, the shrine that marks the spot from where Mohammad made his night journey to heaven on the white steed Buraq and a place so bristling with religious sensitivities that it was a no-go area for British hobnailed boots. From there he soon escaped, disguised as a woman by some accounts, and made his way to French-controlled Lebanon, to carry on agitating.

Martial law was imposed and henceforth rebels were tried by military courts which could impose death sentences for the mere possession of a firearm. The Palestine garrison had been steadily reinforced since the troubles before and was now 20,000-strong.

The most important element in the struggle against unrest was not the army but the police. The Palestine Police Force (PPF) was set up in 1920 with a small number of British officers controlling a much larger native force of Arabs and a smaller number of Jews. It had failed to prevent, and struggled to contain, the persistent outbreaks of violence. Late in 1937 two colonial police veterans, Charles Tegart and David Petrie, were brought in to devise a strategy against the revolt and to carry out reforms.

Their most dramatic proposals were to build a network of reinforced concrete forts at key points around Palestine and a barbed-wire barrier along its northern and eastern frontiers to stem the flow of arms, fighters and supplies from Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. They also called for the strengthening of the Criminal Investigation Department. It was clear that the police would continue to play the lead role in gathering information about political subversion in Palestine. They, after all, lived in the place. The RAF had a permanent presence in the country and air force intelligence officers made some contribution to the information picture. The army units, though, came and went, and military intelligence resources had anyway been drastically run down after the war. On the recommendations of Tegart and Petrie, the CID would be transformed into a vigorous, systematic and efficient service aimed at penetrating the workings of the multiple organizations – Jewish and Arab – that threatened to undermine the rule of the Mandate.

The authority of the British was being challenged everywhere. It was essential to demonstrate confidence and resolve and remind the local populations where the balance of power lay. As MacMichael's train laboured up the switchback track that led through the stony slopes of the Jerusalem hills, three RAF aircraft appeared overhead once more, swooping and wheeling through the thunderclouds glowering over the Holy City. By the time it pulled into Jerusalem station at 2 p.m., the heavens had opened and when the band of the Black Watch had played a few bars of the national anthem Sir Harold and his party were whisked off to Government House.

There, in the ballroom, 200 guests were waiting. Sir Harold's finery was matched by the costumes of many of the assembly. Soldiers, policemen and airmen were in full dress uniform. Prince Naif, son of King Abdullah of the British protectorate of Transjordan, wore Bedouin costume. The *Palestine Post*'s reporter declared that it was the assembled patriarchs, priests and rabbis who 'presented the most striking picture, rivalled only by the Moslem religious dignitaries in their red tarbushes, white turbans and black capes'.[8]

They stood as Sir Harold signed the royal commission of appointment and Chief Justice Trusted, wearing full-bottomed wig and purple cape, gave his welcoming speech. According to the *Post*, it was 'very brief and delivered with deliberation and emphasis'. After paying tribute to each of Sir Harold's four predecessors in Palestine, he concluded with an observation with which the new High Commissioner was by now all too depressingly familiar: 'Many major problems await your excellency's consideration,' he rumbled, 'and we cannot doubt that you are faced with an arduous task.'

Sir Harold's reply was short and frank. He was not going to make a speech as he had only been in Jerusalem for half an hour and was starting work in a country of which he knew 'practically nothing'. That night, in a twelve-minute broadcast to the people he now governed, he again protested his ignorance, saying he was 'sure of little but the incompleteness of my own knowledge of conditions and personalities'. He nonetheless laid down the principles on which he would govern. The first was 'the duty to maintain the authority of His Britannic Majesty and the firm establishment of law and order'.

This uncompromising message was softened by a declaration of his good intentions to all. 'The motives that will actuate me will be simple ones of good faith and honest endeavour to do what is best for all concerned with firmness and impartiality', he said. 'Nor does impartiality present difficulties for me, for the problem is not one upon which I have any preconceived ideas or bias.'[9]

It was not impartiality, though, that the Arabs and Jews wanted from the British. As MacMichael would soon learn, each side would be clamouring for his undivided support. After delivery, the speech was re-broadcast in Arabic and Hebrew. There was nothing much in it to indicate to the listeners that this cold, efficient man held the key to the Palestine conundrum. Looking back over the day, the *Palestine Post* was reduced to taking comfort in superstition. 'There were three good omens in connection with His Excellency's arrival in Haifa', it reported on its front page. 'A rainbow was seen over the

Bay of Acre as the *Enterprise* drew near the harbour. As Sir Harold entered the transit shed, a dove flew the length of the building. An old Arab proverb welcoming an honoured guest says "when you came, the rain came".[10]