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ENGINE WITHOUT A GOVERNOR: THE EARLY YEARS OF THE BRITISH SOUTH AFRICA COMPANY

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IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS as in household economy, 'cheapest' can be most expensive. British Imperial policy in the nineteenth century was consistently dominated by an emphasis on austerity. The consequences were not infrequently heavy impositions on the British taxpayer when the paucity of resources employed by the Imperial government in pursuit of great purposes led to catastrophes. The locale was usually southern Africa. There the contrast between available means and avowed ends was tremendous. Economy measures contributed to a succession of Kaffir Wars each more expensive than its predecessor, culminating in the war of 1850-3 which cost the Imperial government hundreds of thousands of pounds and produced a revulsion in Parliament against further responsibility for those 'barbarous and sanguinary wretches', the African tribes on the frontier.¹ The resultant withdrawal from the Orange River Territory and the Transvaal would have been economical had it not subsequently collided with the development of British interests and ambitions in the interior of southern and central Africa; the return of the Imperial factor to the area from which it had receded cost thousands of lives and millions of pounds.

This conflict between British pretensions and the means which Parliament was willing to provide was fundamental to the revival of the chartered company as an agency of expansion. When the 'scramble for Africa' began, British statesmen sought to meet the competition of Germany and France with minimum cost to the Treasury and minimum governmental responsibility. Private initiative, as manifested by Alfred Dent, Goldie, Mackinnon and Rhodes, seemed to offer the attractive prospect of accomplishing both ends. With the first three, the assumptions were vindicated to a considerable degree; in the case of Rhodes they were soon demonstrated to be bankrupt.

The early British South Africa Company has been described with a variety of epithets of greater or less validity. It has been called a 'colossal stroke of thievery',² 'a stock-exchange swindle',³ 'the African bubble'⁴; the uncomplimentary names are legion. One metaphor was not used which was perhaps most appropriate of all; it was an engine without brakes or governor. It was well designed for offensive action but it had no controls which could help to prevent a major collision. Much analysis has been devoted to the

¹ J. S. Galbraith, *Reluctant Empire*, Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1963, p. 249.

² F. Ashton, 'Mr. Rhodes as Capitalist Conspirator', *Progressive Review*, 2, 7.iv.1897, 58.

³ *Truth*, 31.viii.1893.

⁴ *Daily Chronicle*, 31.x.1893.

causation of the Jameson Raid and the degree of culpability of Rhodes and of Chamberlain. But the nature of the mechanism which was created in 1888-9 was such that a debacle was highly likely, for the British South Africa Company was characterized from its origins by institutionalized irresponsibility. The third Earl Grey, whose nephew Albert had asked him for advice about joining the projected chartered company, analysed the dangers of the company with the acuteness which characterized his long life as an observer of Imperial policy. The creation of such a powerful private association, he said, would have been unnecessary had the government earlier adopted a policy of firmly establishing its authority in areas where it desired to exert influence. But the African peoples of Matabeleland and Mashonaland were exposed to 'urgent and very serious dangers' from a flood of adventurers seeking another Rand in their territories, and a single authority with defined powers could be a means of avoiding the worst excesses provided that it was kept under control by the Imperial government.⁵ That control was rarely exercised and it was in the nature of Imperial policy that it not be.

In the 1880s and 1890s concern for the welfare of the Africans was an article of faith for the British government, but like other articles of faith which had become conventional it had lost its energy and force. The preoccupation of the Foreign and Colonial Offices in 1888-9 was not with Africans but with the control of the resources of the lands beyond the Zambezi; such control, of course, should be established with due regard for the principles of English justice. The founders of the British South Africa Company had the requisite financial power and avowed a commitment to keep out 'unscrupulous adventurers' from its area of jurisdiction.

The Company represented an amalgamation of two rival groups each of which had the capacity to frustrate the objects of the other. In England, a syndicate headed by Lord Gifford and George Cawston, backed by such men of substance as Baron Nathan Rothschild, had sought the blessing of the Colonial Office for a charter, and its overtures had been received with favour. In South Africa, Rhodes had achieved similar influence with the local Imperial authorities, and by the coup of the Rudd Concession in October 1888 had strengthened his position against his London-based rivals whose agent Edward Maund had lost the race. The London group was blocked by Rhodes, but they could also bar his way by their influence in Britain. The sensible answer to the stalemate was the amalgamation which followed.

The board of directors reflected the antecedents of the Company. It included Gifford and Cawston and Rhodes and Beit, with Rochfort Maguire as Rhodes's alternate. In addition, at the behest of the government, three members of the aristocracy were added to represent the public interest: the Duke of Abercorn, a friend of Lord Salisbury, the Duke of Fife, son-in-law of the Prince of Wales; and Albert Grey. Most of the board showed little interest in the operation of the Company beyond its effects on their

⁵ Durham University, Dept. of Palaeography, Grey Papers, 190/8, 'Remarks on proposed grant of a Charter to amalgamated South Africa Company', 11.vii.1889.

personal fortunes. In London Cawston and Grey were active directors, Cawston in the financial area and Grey as liaison with government. But from the beginning authority was confided in Rhodes to make decisions committing the Company in Africa with virtually no restriction from the home board. Rhodes essentially had the scope to exercise his judgment without restraint short of large levies on the Company's assets or serious embarrassment to the Imperial government. Grey was not greatly overstating when he credited Rhodes with 'doing *everything* — supplying the foresight, the executive ability and the funds to make the Charter a success.'⁶ The results, given Rhodes' temperament and megalomania, were predictable. His collisions with the Portuguese foreshadowed the antecedents of the Jameson Raid, the important difference being Lord Salisbury's intervention in the Portuguese dispute for reasons of high policy before a major confrontation occurred.

Rhodes' position *vis-a-vis* his directors was not unlike that of some powerful Imperial governors in their relationships with the home government. There were, however, important differences which made him even more of an irresponsible force. No governor had at his disposal a large personal fortune to be used at his discretion or could draw as Rhodes did on the resources of the De Beers diamond syndicate. As Prime Minister of Cape Colony between 1890 and the Raid he was also able to support his personal ambitions on behalf of the South Africa Company. And no governor compounded his irresponsibility by confiding plenary authority on a subordinate as did Rhodes with Leander Starr Jameson.

Rhodes reposed utmost confidence in Jameson. At the time of Jameson's negotiations with Lobengula in 1890 over the right of the Pioneers to enter Mashonaland, Rhodes remarked that, 'Jameson never makes a mistake.'⁷ Rhodes was guilty of misjudgments of other subordinates but none with the consequences of his misplaced faith in Jameson.

The fault was not Jameson's in the sense that he wilfully deviated from Rhodes's intentions. On the contrary, Jameson was devoted to the execution of Rhodes's objects as he understood them. Rhodes gave him great discretionary authority; they discussed plans in occasional visits and through telegraphic communication, but it was left to Jameson to use his judgment in carrying out the details. As Rhodes said to Jameson in one of these telegraphic interchanges, 'Your business is to administer the country as to which I have nothing to do but merely say "yes" if you take the trouble to ask me.'⁸

⁶ Hist. Mss. Collect., GR1 1/1 Grey Papers, Correspondence and Other Papers, General, 26.iii.1894-20.vi.1919, Scrap in Grey's hand, quoted in G. Sims, *Paladin of Empire: Earl Grey and Rhodesia*, Salisbury, Central Africa Historical Association, 1970, Local Series Pamphlet No. 26, p. 10.

⁷ T. Fuller, *Cecil John Rhodes*, London, Longmans Green, 1910, p. 75.

⁸ A 1/3/10, Administrator's Office, In Letters, L. S. Jameson, Demi Official Letters received by C. J. Rhodes, 16.ii.1892-22.viii.1892, memo. of conversation held 15.v.1892; these telegraphic conversations were usually held on Sundays when the lines were not occupied with other business.

In his administration of Mashonaland, Jameson acted within the broad guidelines of rapid development of the revenues of the territory and avoidance of native troubles which would disrupt that development. He, like Rhodes, expected that there would be an eventual war with the Matabele but hoped to postpone it until the white population was strong enough to make the outcome quick and certain. Though they speculated about the possible peaceful absorption of the Matabele into the labour supply for the mines and the white farms, they recognized that this transformation of the Matabele was unlikely until their military power had been broken. Rhodes and Jameson, however, wanted to select the time. Rutherford Harris reflected something of the Rhodes-Jameson line when he wrote to Johan Colenbrander: mentally when they [the Matabele] knocked me in the eye the 2nd day I was there I made the same resolution as no doubt you did, that when the bell really rang for their disappearance from the stage, that I wd. be there to help them leave — but that day is still 2 years at least distant — possibly it will never come or they may accommodate themselves to their environment as the Swazies have . . .⁹

Whether or not Jameson believed that he had an agreement with Lobengula that the Matabele would not raid into Mashonaland, he was prepared to capitalize on the attack of the impis in the vicinity of Fort Victoria to crush the Matabele power. His actions after his ultimatum to the impis to retire were those of a man bent on war; his conjuring up of phantom impis threatening the white population was clearly designed to justify military action to the imperial authorities.¹⁰ In making the decision to break the Matabele Jameson acted without specific instructions from Rhodes, trusting to his vindication after the fact.¹¹ The easy triumph over the Matabele demonstrated Jameson's perspicacity and he basked in the approval of the settler population and in that of Rhodes. In September 1893 Rhodes had expressed the view that 'I would much rather it had been postponed for a year, but as Lobengula has brought it to a head and not me, I consider Dr. Jameson has acted quite rightly in every step he has taken.'¹² When the Matabele were routed and Lobengula was in flight, endorsement was succeeded by unqualified praise. Jameson had by his initiative rid the Company of an incubus and opened the way for the economic development of Matabeleland. The experience of 1893 had fateful consequences two years later.

In his land policy Jameson also acted with considerable independence within certain broad guidelines. Both the general policy and his execution of it deeply affected the future of Rhodesia. The financial position of the Company in its early years was precarious, its liquid assets were exhausted

⁹ Hist. Mss. Collect., CO4 1/1, J. W. Colenbrander Papers, Correspondence and Other Papers, General, 17.xiii.1883-4.x.1917, 9.ii.1892.

¹⁰ LO 5/2/30, London Office, In Letters, Cape Town (Kimberley), 27.ix.-25.x.1893 Jameson to High Commissioner to Jameson, 2.x.1893; other correspondence in this file supports this assertion.

¹¹ S. Glass, *The Matabele War*, London, Longmans, 1968, pp. 103-5.

¹² LO 5/2/28, London Office, In Letters, Cape Town (Kimberley), 3.vii.-9.viii. 1893, R. Harris to London Office, 9.viii.1893.

by the costs of administration and the multitudinous expenses involved in the opening up of a new country. Without Rhodes's pledges of his personal fortune, the condition would have been desperate indeed. The assets which could transform the situation from near bankruptcy to prosperity were gold and land. The first was prospective; the hope of rich gold discoveries buoyed up shares and attracted syndicates to Mashonaland:

The most important single element which determined the nature of economic and political development in Southern Rhodesia, has been the over-estimation at the end of the 19th century of its mineral resources on the part of the British South Africa Company and the persistence of such an overestimation for roughly 15 years.¹³

Given the limitations in funds the only practicable policy for the founders of the Company to absorb rivals or to reward supporters seemed to be the allotment of shares or the assignment of mining claims or land grants. When Eduard A. Lippert in 1891 succeeded in delivering a concession from Lobengula of the right to alienate land he received in compensation not only 30 000 shares of Chartered Stock but 75 square miles in Matabeleland and 50 square miles in Mashonaland. These land rights he and his associates in turn sold to a syndicate which hoped to profit by the re-sale of the land to settlers.¹⁴ Land was lavishly used as compensation to the Pioneers of 1890, to the volunteers in the Matabele War, to favoured individuals and to syndicates which indicated that they were prepared to invest their capital in the development of Rhodesia. The land rights of Pioneers and volunteers were not for the most part used by their initial recipients for the cultivation of their estates; on the contrary, most of them fell into the hands of speculators. Land rights like gold claims and shares, became a paper asset to be bought and sold rather than a precious resource to be assigned with safeguards that it would be used for developments. This practice in the early years of the Company was regarded as scandalous by the administrators who came into office after Rhodes and Jameson were swept out of control in the aftermath of the Jameson Raid. William Milton who was sent to Mashonaland in 1896 to try to establish an efficient administration wrote that 'the country has been very nearly ruined by the Honourable and military elements which are rampant everywhere.'¹⁵ One of the most notable of those to whom Milton referred was Sir John Willoughby whose deeds of valour on behalf of the Company had been handsomely rewarded. In addition to mining claims Willoughby had been assigned 600 000 acres of Mashonaland on the condition that he raise £50 000 capital for the development of his land.¹⁶ But there was no disposition to force Willoughby and others to comply with the terms of their contracts. Officials shied away from the ugly word 'forfeiture',

¹³ G. Arrighi, *The Political Economy of Rhodesia*, The Hague, Mouton, 1967, p. 19.

¹⁴ A 1/13/1 Administrator's Office, In Letters, Rennie-Tailyour Concession, 4.1895-21. xii.1896 Secretary Matabeleland and Mashonaland Syndicate to B.S.A.C., 4.iii.1895.

¹⁵ Hist. Mss. Collec., MI 1/1/1 [Milton Papers, Correspondence and Other Papers, Official, c. 1896-8.v.1930], Milton to wife, 18.ix.1896.

¹⁶ LO 3/1/13, London Office, Out Letters, Administrative and Commercial, 7.iv.-26. v.1893 London Office to Cape Town, 14.iv.1893.

as the already doubtful future of Rhodesia would be further compromised by such severe measures.¹⁷

The London board in 1893, before the Matabele War, expressed its concern to Rhodes about the lavish manner in which land was being assigned. They cited among others the following examples:¹⁸

Northern Territories Exploring Company Ltd.	300 square miles north of Zambezi, 6 000 acres coal grant north or south of Zambezi.
Copenhagen (Mashonaland) Company Ltd.	100 000 acres Mashonaland.
Chartered Gold Fields Ltd.	100 square miles north of the Zambezi, 6 000 acres coal grant north or south of Zambezi, 200 000 acres Mashonaland.
J. W. Doré	30 000 morgen (c. 60 000 acres) north of Zambezi.
Mashonaland Agency Ltd.	30 000 acres.
Moore's Rhodesia Concession	75 square miles Mashonaland.
North Charterland Exploration Company Ltd.	10 000 square miles north of Zambezi.

The Board's complaint reflected the fact that it had not been an active factor in land policy and that the actual decisions had been made in South Africa. Milton placed the entire blame on Jameson who, he said, had 'given nearly the whole country to the Willoughby's, White's and others of that class so that there is absolutely no land left of any value for the settlement of Immigrants by the Government.' Jameson, he suggested, 'must have been off his head for some time before the Raid. The worst is that Rhodes will not clear himself at Jameson's expense.'¹⁹

Rhodes as Milton portrayed him was a noble leader who refused to censure an erring subordinate. But Jameson was carrying out land policy in accordance with what he thought were Rhodes's wishes. Rhodes frequently instructed Jameson to make lavish land grants and occasionally Jameson was moved to express a mild caveat about giving away so much of the arable and pastoral land of the high veld to individuals who could not develop it effectively.²⁰

Jameson's fault was not that he violated what he thought were the intentions of Rhodes but that he was an incompetent administrator. When he was removed from office, his successors found appalling acts of misfeasance during his tenure. The Surveyor-General, Duncan, for example, had been awarded, allegedly with Jameson's sanction, 1 000 square miles for relinquishment of his private practice. This same surveyor had left the land-descriptions in a shambles.²¹ As H. Wilson Fox of the London Office wrote to Milton:

¹⁷ A 1/5/1, [Administrator's Office, In Letters, London Board, Demi Official, 11.ii.-17.xii.1898], Memorandum 'Beneficial Occupation of Land', n.d. [1898].

¹⁸ LO 3/1/28, London Office, Out Letters, Administrative and Commercial, 27.iv.-8.vi.1893 London Office to Cape Town, 25.v.1893.

¹⁹ MI 1/1/1, Milton to wife, 18.ix.1896.

²⁰ LO 5/2/17, London Office, In Letters, Cape Town (Kimberley), 10.ii.-16.iii.1892 Jameson to Rhodes, telegrams 10 and 12 iii.1892.

²¹ Correspondence on this subject is in L 1/1/1, Land Settlement Department, Out Letters, Confidential, 8.v.1897-30.xii.1902.

'More of the Augean stable of the past to sweep up I suppose you will say. It certainly is hard that the cleaning of all the dirty corners left by Jameson should fall on your shoulders.'²²

The evidence is impressive that Jameson was a poor administrator. Furthermore, neither he nor Rhodes had any concern for the safeguarding of the land rights of the Africans. A few years later, Rhodes wrote to Milton that he had noticed that the total African population of Matabeleland and Mashonaland was nearly 500 000 and that they cultivated 600 000 acres. This, he thought, was almost incredible. 'It seems such an enormous extent of land for the number of people, representing over an acre a head, including men, women, and children.'²³ This acreage for a half million Africans was of the same extent as that granted to Sir John Willoughby's syndicate, although neither Rhodes nor Jameson would have seen the comparison as relevant. They were preoccupied with the development of the resources of the country, and their policy, however loosely it was carried out, was to seek to attract capital and settlers by offering attractive terms.

For the disasters of the 1890s associated with the Chartered Company it is easy to assign culpability to Rhodes and to Jameson. Their actions obviously were central. But others by their inaction also contributed. The charter provided for various controls which were never exercised and restrictions which were never enforced. The Colonial Office did not oversee the operations of the Company. Lord Olivier, who as a young official observed these early years, wrote later that the Colonial Office 'looked on hypnotized by the aura of impeccable personages whose figures decked the Company's office-window . . . That Office, indeed, had no more control over the Chartered Company than the League of Nations has now over a mandated Power (the relations are closely parallel) and had far too much delicacy to act in any manner that might have been rebuffed as inquisitorial. Short of revoking the charter, it could do nothing.'²⁴

The London directors also were derelict. With the exception of Earl Grey, the 'public' members of the board showed only a languid interest in any aspects of the Company's business other than the effect of the fluctuations of its shares on their personal fortunes. They translated their indifference into a policy of complete confidence in their dynamic Managing Director. Perhaps given the distance from which they sat, they could not have been effective in any event, but the indictment stands that they did not try. After the Jameson Raid, the Duke of Fife resigned from the Board and delivered a bitter attack on Rhodes and Jameson for having planned the invasion without the knowledge of the directors.²⁵ But Fife and others had sat on the Board for years

²² A 1/5/1, Fox to Milton, 14.x.1898.

²³ MI 1/1, Rhodes to Milton, 5.xii.1901.

²⁴ S. Olivier, *The Anatomy of African Misery*, London, Hogarth Press, 1927, p. 51 and note.

²⁵ *The Times*, 31.iii.1898.

without protest against Rhodes' independence of action. Rhodes was a power without effective controls, Jameson was a loyal subordinate who thought he knew Rhodes's mind and acted accordingly. This combination was highly dangerous; how dangerous was amply demonstrated in December, 1895.



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