

# John Morley and India: Anti-Imperialist Thought in Practice

Matthew Fisher

---

*Matthew Fisher is reading for an MPhil in Modern British History at Magdalene College, Cambridge, having completed an undergraduate History degree at Durham University. A pianist and former organ scholar, his current research examines ideas of empire, civilisation, and Britishness in universities in the late nineteenth century.*

---

The recent upsurge of interest in the history of the British Empire has produced a wealth of literature that often presents empire and imperialism in a hegemonic light, couched in a dichotomy that sets the ‘oppressor’ against the ‘oppressed’, the ‘coloniser’ against the ‘colonised’, and so on. Underpinning fashionable postcolonial discourse, this binary terminology can obscure important nuances of political thought in its proper historical context, such as how prominent figures who were governing the Empire yet at the same time opposed imperialism could articulate their ideas. In this article I consider the case of John Morley, a lifelong anti-imperialist who had pursued a career in journalism before entering politics in 1883 as a radical MP. His appointment as Secretary of State for India in the new Liberal government of December 1905 presents an apparent paradox, for as one of Irish Home Rule’s staunchest advocates he had built a reputation as a committed opponent of unjust British rule. Drawing on archival manuscripts and published writings, I argue that Morley’s five-year tenure at the India Office towards the end of his active life was not, as has often been seen, an aberrant postscript to an otherwise principled career in politics but was consistent with a coherent political philosophy he had developed over his lifetime.<sup>1</sup>

Morley was first and foremost an intellectual. He wrote extensively: in addition to his editorship of the *Fortnightly Review* and the *Pall Mall Gazette*, he compiled biographies of philosophers and politicians in an oeuvre that encompassed Cromwell, the major figures of the French Revolution, Burke, Cobden, and finally Gladstone. In doing so, he was a rare example of someone who had expounded a developed critique of imperialism who then had the opportunity to put it into practice in holding political office. It is a truism that he compromised his position as an anti-imperialist in its strictest sense by agreeing to participate in imperial government. Yet this is not the criterion against which he should be measured. A comparison with John Stuart Mill is instructive. Like Morley, albeit to a far greater extent, Mill had set out his theory before entering politics. Renowned as an exceptionally principled politician, he was

nevertheless able and willing to compromise, justifying doing so on the grounds of utility and progress.<sup>2</sup> So too with Morley, often labelled as a ‘disciple’ of Mill, who inherited these ideas from him and recognised similarly that short-term expediency and long-term progress were not incompatible priorities.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, it is important to draw a distinction between imperialism and empire. Opposing the former entailed a criticism of ‘mis-rule’: a phenomenon that primarily manifested itself in despotism, militarism, and unchecked bureaucracy. Opposing the latter, however, necessitated a deeply held belief in its inherent illegitimacy. Few, save a small band of radicals, were prepared to go this far in this period. I therefore suggest that Morley was not anti-*empire*, for he accepted its continued existence as a fact—one that was ultimately compatible with his liberal ideals. He was, however, anti-imperialist in the sense that that connoted at the time—directly opposing the imperialist conduct of his Conservative predecessors in government.

The lack of a detailed study within the last 50 years of this important figure in Liberal politics has led to a certain amount of scholarly oversight. Passing mentions of Morley often dismiss him as an anachronistic intellectual cul-de-sac of Gladstonianism or, in one bizarre assessment, as a ‘New Liberal’.<sup>4</sup> I seek to remedy this by giving prominence to Morley’s biographies and historical studies, which reveal much about the workings of his mind and the themes he prioritised. When Morley concluded of Gladstone ‘always let us remember that his literary life was part of the rest of his life, as literature ought to be’, he could just as easily have been referring to himself, such was the apparent centrality of a literary-historical

---

1 For this traditional interpretation, see Stephen E Koss, *John Morley at the India Office, 1905–1910* (Yale University Press 1969).

2 Dennis F Thompson, ‘Mill in Parliament: When Should a Philosopher Compromise?’ in Nadia Urbinati and Alex Zakaras (eds), *J.S. Mill’s Political Thought: A Bicentennial Reassessment* (Cambridge University Press 2007) 167–68.

3 John Burrow, *Whigs and Liberals: Continuity and Change in English Political Thought* (Oxford University Press 1988) 22.

4 David Boucher, ‘“Sane” and “insane” imperialism: British idealism, new liberalism and liberal imperialism’ (2018) 44 *History of European Ideas* 1189, 1192.

mindset to his way of thinking.<sup>5</sup> As he agonised over the decision to exchange his literary career for politics, so too, he mused, must it ‘sometimes have occurred to Burke to wonder whether he had made the right choice when he locked away the fragments of his history, and plunged into the torment of party and Parliament.’<sup>6</sup> The transition from a man of letters to a man of action was a rare one. Morley therefore presents a unique opportunity among anti-imperialist politicians because of the volume of his literary output before his time as India Secretary, much of which was written before he was even contemplating a career in politics. It gives us crucial insight into Morley’s underlying philosophy and principles, shows his consistency of thought, and lays bare the ambiguities of liberalism’s compatibility with empire.

### Morley’s anti-imperialist philosophy

John Morley’s views on imperialism developed over the course of his distinguished literary and political career, the product of sustained engagement with a wide range of notable intellectuals. Positivism, a philosophy to which Morley subscribed for a period around the late 1860s, was an important influence on his writings, for it emphasised the importance of individuals as forces that shaped general progress.<sup>7</sup> While he sought to distinguish between history and biography, the two became inevitably commingled.<sup>8</sup> For Morley, the study of ‘great men’ was the study of history, and thus a key determinant of his worldview. His early works in particular are in part attempts to construct a coherent system of thought for himself after a personal crisis surrounding his loss of faith.<sup>9</sup> Morley was therefore selective in the ideas he chose to highlight in, and adopt from, his subjects.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, his writings are indispensable to understanding the development of his philosophy. Of these, for the topic at hand the most important of his subjects are Burke, Cobden, and Gladstone. Together with Morley’s close friend John Stuart Mill, these three figures were the greatest influences in shaping Morley’s thought on imperialism and India.

Morley was actively engaged in the question of Indian government as early as 1867, when he published his *Historical Study* of Edmund Burke. In it, Morley ponders two fundamental questions: whether rule by a European power over India can be justified, and the extent to which the governing empire is obliged to uphold moral standards. While his focus is on the iniquities of East India Company rule, ‘stained with every vice which can lower and deprave human character’, he recognises these are to a considerable extent counterbalanced by the noble ideal of spreading Enlightenment values.<sup>11</sup> Crucially, he argues, a hasty departure from India regardless of motive would ‘leav[e] the country and its inhabitants to disaster and confusion far worse than any we have ever inflicted upon it.’<sup>12</sup> If Burke formed the sole basis of Morley’s thought on India, then it was not anti-imperialist in the strict sense of the term.<sup>13</sup> Burke offered perhaps a more incisive critique of empire than all Morley’s liberal

forebears.<sup>14</sup> However, his criticisms focused on the conduct of Warren Hastings – imperialism in practice – not the legitimacy of the entire enterprise, as conceived theoretically.<sup>15</sup> Morley recognised that it was ‘a noble and philosophic conservatism rather than philanthropy’ that underpinned Burke’s tirade against Hastings.<sup>16</sup> The desire to preserve underpinned Morley’s view too: that of upholding the supremacy of Parliament to guard against unencumbered despotism.<sup>17</sup> Morley’s anti-imperialism, in so far as he derived it from Burke, was therefore not a blanket rejection of empire per se but rather a strongly articulated opposition to misrule.

Morley also valued Burke’s pragmatism. He took to heart Burke’s famous maxim that ‘nothing universal can be rationally affirmed on any moral or any political subject’, proclaiming that ‘politics is not a science of abstract ideas, but an empirical art.’<sup>18</sup> As he wrestled with his desire to construct a coherent set of ideas for himself in *On Compromise* (1874), it was Burke’s conclusions that he was drawn to: ‘all government ... is founded on compromise’, for ‘man acts from motives relative to his interests; and not on metaphysical speculation.’<sup>19</sup> His *Historical Study* of Burke, written at a time when he was attracted to positivism, duly reflects Comte’s progressive view of history.<sup>20</sup> But by his later, more strictly biographical, study of Burke in 1879, Morley had retreated from the positivist position, which encompassed a comprehensive and doctrinaire anti-imperialism.<sup>21</sup> Instead, he credited a greater understanding of the Indian situation ‘to the seeds of justice and humanity which were sown by Burke and his associates.’<sup>22</sup> Despite his radical streak he was, like Burke, inherently suspicious of sudden or revolutionary change.<sup>23</sup> It was the ‘desperate absurdity’ of Rousseau’s social contract, he opined, that turned men into revolutionary ‘fanatics’, with all the disastrous consequences that entailed.<sup>24</sup> Morley’s version of anti-imperialism did not mean the repudiation of British rule over any dependency, if the alternative was worse. ‘Practical morality’ took precedence over ‘abstract truth’, ‘duties’ over ‘barren rights.’<sup>25</sup> Both Morley and Burke felt a responsibility to reconcile themselves to the circumstances, however unfavourable, of British rule in India and to act accordingly.<sup>26</sup> Praising Burke for putting anti-imperial principles above party interests, Morley held fast his view regardless of the prevailing current of thought within the Liberal party.<sup>27</sup> Yet his anti-imperialism was always pragmatic, tempered by the reality of British rule in India and an aversion to revolution.

Although Morley never wrote a biography of Mill, his association with Mill is nevertheless key to understanding Morley’s views on the relationship between liberalism and imperialism. In *Considerations on*

5 John Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone*, vol 3 (Macmillan 1903) 550.

6 John Morley, *Burke* (Macmillan 1879) 207.

7 David Hamer, *John Morley: Liberal Intellectual in Politics* (second edn, Edward Everett Root 2019) 17, 43.

8 John Morley, *Edmund Burke: A Historical Study* (Macmillan 1867) v–vi.

9 Hamer (n 7) 45.

10 Koss (n 1) 129.

11 Morley (n 8) 197–99.

12 *ibid* 199–200.

13 Daniel I O’Neill, ‘Rethinking Burke and India’ (2009) 30 *History of Political Thought* 492, 493.

14 Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (University of Chicago Press 1999) 155.

15 O’Neill (n 13) 522–23.

16 Morley (n 6) 131.

17 Koss (n 1) 84.

18 Morley (n 8) 20.

19 Edmund Burke, ‘Speech on Conciliation with America’ (as cited in John Morley, *On Compromise* (Chapman and Hall 1874) 174–75).

20 Christopher Kent, *Brains and Numbers: Elitism, Comtism, and Democracy in Mid-Victorian England* (University of Toronto Press 1978) 118.

21 Gregory Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics: British Critics of Empire, 1850–1920* (Cambridge University Press 2010) 61–63.

22 Morley (n 6) 135.

23 Emily Jones, *Edmund Burke and the Invention of Modern Conservatism, 1830–1914: An Intellectual History* (Oxford University Press 2017) 91.

24 John Morley, *Rousseau*, vol 2 (Macmillan 1886) 137.

25 Morley (n 8) 22–23.

26 *ibid* 200.

27 *ibid* 27.

*Representative Government* (1861), Mill had asserted that India was a long way from being ready for representative government and had justified enlightened despotism as the best means of governing the country until it had matured politically.<sup>28</sup> In 1865 Morley met Mill for the first time and soon found himself a part of his literary circle. By 1874, he had turned Comte aside and was instead more attuned to 'Millism', placing intellectual nonconformity and liberty at the heart of *On Compromise*.<sup>29</sup> Morley was much more in accord with Mill than with Burke in general political sentiments. On the subject of British government of India, however, Mill's preparedness not only to sanction empire in the name of progress but also to defend the East India Company was a step too far for Morley.<sup>30</sup> He had excoriated it in *Burke*, for 'commercial transactions' were 'as ruinous for the natives as it is possible to conceive'; 'the courts were more terrible to the native than the worst wrongs which they pretended to redress'; and the overall venture was characterised by a policy of 'oppression and corruption'.<sup>31</sup> While Mill's contrary viewpoint can be partially explained as a result of his background as a civil servant in the East India Company, this demonstrates that Millism did not provide Morley with the complete set of ideas he was searching for. Instead, considering Mill highlights Morley's selectivity in forming his own, independent view of imperialism.

The theme of selectivity continues when one considers the influence of Richard Cobden on Morley. A leading figure in the transition of the radical movement from Chartism to its more moderate parliamentary form in the Liberal party, his arguments in favour of free trade and in opposition to state interference in both domestic and foreign policy resonated with Morley.<sup>32</sup> His laissez-faire worldview spawned a following that reanimated in the era of New Imperialism—notably Hobson's *Imperialism* (1902). Cobden's critique of empire was economic rather than moral: his opposition to imperial defence spending and foreign intervention was always viewed through the lens of domestic wellbeing.<sup>33</sup> Morley was indeed concerned with practicalities—particularly the diversion of government expenditure from domestic affairs and the effect this might have in allowing the state to grow to a size unpalatable for liberals such as himself.<sup>34</sup> It has been suggested that by 1880 Morley's political philosophy was nothing more than 'Cobdenism'. However, this elides the complexities of Morley's thought, particularly given the extent to which the politics of free trade permeated Liberal discourse in this period.<sup>35</sup> As Morley himself noted at the time, he did not fully subscribe to Cobden's all-encompassing laissez-faire worldview.<sup>36</sup> He was also less of an ideologue than Cobden: in the aftermath of the Indian Mutiny, Cobden rejected the idea that India could ever be successfully ruled from Westminster, arguing that self-government was preferable even if the quality of governance itself was worse.<sup>37</sup> Morley, on the other hand, saw a moral responsibility

in providing India with good governance, overriding the view of Cobden in favour of Gladstone's more pragmatic approach.<sup>38</sup>

Gladstone emerged as the dominant figure in Morley's mind in the latter half of his career. United in their determination to enact Home Rule for Ireland, the pair held firm in their views as the imperialist faction of the Liberal Party came into the ascendancy in the 1890s. Morley's 1903 *Life of Gladstone*, considered his magnum opus, was an attempt to monumentalise his hero and cement his intellectual legacy.<sup>39</sup> Gladstone had imparted to Morley a sense of constitutional duty in preserving the existing empire, a disapproval of unnecessary expenditure and a phlegmatic acceptance that ideals are rarely realised.<sup>40</sup> In return, Morley approved of Gladstone as 'in substantial accord' with Cobden on colonial policy.<sup>41</sup> If the two shared an ideological taproot in the form of Cobden, Gladstone was more influential on Morley in practice as a result of the close personal relationship they developed.<sup>42</sup> It is therefore through the lens of 'Gladstonianism' that we should understand Morley's support for Home Rule and the Boers.<sup>43</sup> It is possible to overstate Gladstone's influence: Christianity was central to Gladstone's views on empire, for he perceived imperial policy in terms of what could be defended as 'moral' within Christian values. By contrast, Morley, who experienced an intense personal crisis after losing his faith while at Oxford, was an agnostic and was forever after mistrustful of the role of religion.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, this did not stop Morley from taking Gladstone as his political role model.

Thus, Morley's nuanced views on imperialism were indebted to a rich and varied intellectual heritage. He admired Burke's pragmatic attitude and zealous critique of bad governance, while Mill taught him that as long as it was in the best interests of the governed, ruling over another nation was not incompatible with liberalism. His study of Cobden reinforced his opposition to expansion and annexation, and a sense of constitutional duty and responsible government he gained from Gladstone tempered his earlier radicalism. He nonetheless shared Gladstone's abhorrence of militarism and financial profligacy. His anti-imperialism, therefore, was not a negative philosophy purely concerned with opposing British rule over parts of the world, but a set of beliefs encompassing the justification of government, liberty, pacifism, and political expediency. Morley's strongest convictions were those of non-interventionism and opposition to any form of rule that could be considered militarist or despotic. These were principles that ran throughout his literary and political career.

### Morley at the India Office

Morley's appointment to the India Office tested his willingness to sustain these principles. Gokhale, the President of the Indian Congress, acknowledged this when he laid down the following challenge to Morley as he took office:

28 JS Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (Parker, Son, and Bourn 1861) 320–21, 329–30.

29 Hamer (n 7) 24.

30 Mill (n 28) 339.

31 Morley (n 8) 211–14.

32 Miles Taylor, *The Decline of British Radicalism, 1847–1860* (Clarendon Press 1995) 341–42; Hamer (n 7) 309–10.

33 Bernard Porter, *Critics of Empire: British Radical Attitudes to Colonialism in Africa, 1895–1914* (Macmillan 1968) 10–13.

34 Hamer (n 7) 311.

35 Stanley A Wolpert, *Morley and India, 1906–1910* (University of California Press 1967) 20; Anthony Howe, *Free Trade and Liberal England, 1846–1946* (Oxford University Press 1997) 111.

36 John Morley, *The Life of Richard Cobden*, vol 1 (Chapman and Hall 1881) vii.

37 Morley (n 36) vol 2, 207.

38 Koss (n 1) 128.

39 Michael Bentley, *The Climax of Liberal Politics: British Liberalism in Theory and Practice, 1868–1918* (Edward Arnold 1987) 129.

40 Morley (n 5) vol 3, 539; Koss (n 1) 22.

41 *ibid.*

42 See, for example, Morley's candid account of their holiday together in Biarritz: Morley (n 5) vol 3, 463–89.

43 Koss (n 1) 11.

44 Theodore Koditschek, *Liberalism, Imperialism and the Historical Imagination: Nineteenth-Century Visions of Greater Britain* (Cambridge University Press 2011) 314–16; Hamer (n 7) 1–4.

He, the reverent student of Burke, the disciple of Mill, the friend and biographer of Gladstone, will he courageously apply their principles and his own to the Government of this country or will he too succumb to the influences of the India Office around him, and thus cast a cruel blight on hopes, which his own writings have done so much to foster?<sup>45</sup>

Morley's writings had clearly raised hopes among the Indian intellectual elite that his arrival in the India Office could pave the way for self-government. Yet if one takes Morley as an 'anti-imperialist' at face value, then his position in charge of the 'jewel in the crown of the empire' presents an absurdity that he himself recognised, lamenting on one occasion that 'Curzon magnanimously receives me into the bosom of the Imperialistic Church'.<sup>46</sup> This would seem to represent a disavowal of his influences. John Bright, for example, Cobden's Anti-Corn Law League partner, had turned down Gladstone's offer of a position at the India Office on the basis that no Radical could accept it with good conscience.<sup>47</sup> Morley criticised other Radicals' dogmatic adherence to principles, suggesting they often committed the 'fatal error' of 'tak[ing] some single general principle of liberalism ... without regarding the whole case of Indian rule'.<sup>48</sup> Morley at the India Office was not, however, a completely new man who cast aside his earlier beliefs, to be viewed as entirely separate from the man who had championed Irish self-government so vehemently. Instead, his decision to focus on overseeing incremental reform was consistent with Mill's views on compromise, for it emphasised the goal of long-term progress.<sup>49</sup>

Nevertheless, Morley had recognised the iniquity of attempting to govern from halfway across the world, not least because it offered no opportunity to gauge public opinion in India.<sup>50</sup> The burden of proof was on him to show—given that he decried the 'familiar' and 'miserable failure of English statesmen to govern Ireland', a long list of which he was a part—why the government of India presented a different proposition.<sup>51</sup> When questioned in the Commons over his motivation, his invocation of Mill's approval of British rule over India was a weak defence.<sup>52</sup> He had, however, always taken after Burke in holding that 'we ought never to press our ideas up to their remotest logical issues, without reference to the conditions in which we are applying them'.<sup>53</sup> With Gladstone's ideas of duty foremost in his mind, he recognised that the India Office offered him an opportunity to make a significant contribution to politics, something that had escaped him in his previous cabinet post as Chief Secretary for Ireland with the defeat of Home Rule. Moreover, in his defence of Liberal values amidst an increasingly imperialist party, he can be seen as completing what Mill left unfinished in his time as an Indian administrator.<sup>54</sup> Accepting the post, therefore, was a compromise of the principle of anti-imperialism in its strictest definition, but not a betrayal of the system of values he had developed.

45 GK Gokhale, 'Benares Congress Presidential Address' in *Speeches of the Honourable Mr. G. K. Gokhale* (G. A. Natesan 1918) 512.

46 British Library, Papers of John Morley as Secretary of State for India (1905–1911) [hereafter 'Morley Papers'], MSS Eur D573/2, John Morley to Lord Minto, 26 December 1907.

47 Koss (n 1) 52.

48 Morley Papers, MSS Eur D573/2, Morley to Minto, 8 November 1907.

49 Thompson (n 2) 195–96.

50 Morley (n 8) 198.

51 Morley (n 5) vol 2, 200.

52 HC Deb 6 June 1907, vol 175, col 880.

53 Morley (n 19) 175.

54 Wolpert (n 35) 14–15.

Once in office, Morley remained continually aware of the apparent contradictions of his position as India Secretary. Anxious to preserve the integrity of his Liberal principles, he was insecure about the criticism his actions could draw from radical members of the House of Commons.<sup>55</sup> If his biographies were each a veneration of political exemplars, then his of Cromwell was ultimately a homage to the House of Commons, which at that time he believed to possess the 'best intellect of the country'.<sup>56</sup> Yet as time wore on in his secretaryship, he became increasingly exasperated with the inability of the Commons to hold him properly to account. 'If there were only a single man of great capacity ... in command of the parliamentary forces on Indian questions', he wrote to the viceroy, Lord Minto, 'they would produce a mighty different impression from the dismal and ineffectual Cottonians, and it would do us more good than harm, though the dose might be unpleasant'.<sup>57</sup> Even the role of the House of Commons itself presented contradictions. Its essential function was the service of British, not Indian, interests, and so the actions of a minister beholden to it alone could easily be construed as despotism in India. Morley, however, accepted the vagaries of Parliament as part and parcel of the liberal democracy he strove to uphold.

Morley's chief legacy as Secretary of State for India was the Indian Councils Act 1909. Known as the 'Morley–Minto reforms', it increased the representation of Indians on government councils and introduced communal electorates in an attempt to conciliate Hindu–Muslim divides. Morley's exasperating failure to deliver an Irish Home Rule Bill, to which he had devoted considerable time in the 1880s and 1890s, undoubtedly caused him anxiety over reform of political representation in India.<sup>58</sup> This memory was, for Morley, 'enough to quench any futile ambition to play the part of constitution-monger' in India, causing him to be 'sceptical about political change'.<sup>59</sup> He believed it to be important to 'persevere with liberal and substantial reforms' but also recognised the practical constraints on the scope of reform, arguing that 'we shall have tried the best experiment within our reach' with the introduction of native council members.<sup>60</sup> By having Minto, whose preference was for an aristocratic council, initiate the reform bill, Morley secured the support of the conservative-minded House of Lords by presenting it as the product of one of their own. Rather than as abandoning principles to achieve limited, watered-down reform, therefore, it is more constructive to see Morley as attempting political manoeuvres to achieve his goals to the fullest extent possible.

Significant though the Morley–Minto reforms were, Morley did not envisage them as part of a grand plan for Indian self-government. His distaste for the Raj should certainly not be overlooked, as he continued to see it as 'intensely artificial and unnatural': a 'cast-iron bureaucracy' that he predicted simply 'won't go on for ever'.<sup>61</sup> In his ideal world, Britain would never have involved itself in Indian government. When he wrote in his biography of Burke that Burke felt 'it would have been better for us and for India ... if the battle of Plassy [sic] had been a decisive defeat', it is as much Morley's own

55 Hamer (n 7) 346.

56 John Morley, *Oliver Cromwell* (Macmillan 1899) 271.

57 Morley Papers, MSS Eur D573/2, Morley to Minto, 12 April 1907.

The Cottonians were followers of the Radical MP Henry Cotton with a special interest in Indian affairs.

58 Morley (n 5) vol 3, 350–51.

59 Morley Papers, MSS Eur D573/3, Morley to Minto, 26 March 1908.

60 Morley Papers, MSS Eur D573/3, Morley to Minto, 7 June 1908; MSS Eur D573/2, Morley to Minto, 2 August 1907.

61 Morley Papers, MSS Eur D573/2, Morley to Minto, 15 August 1907; MSS Eur D573/3, Morley to Minto, 6 June 1906.

sentiment that shines through—one which he echoed many years later to Minto, ‘wish[ing] that the hero had got the worst of it at Plassey. What trouble it would have saved us two!’<sup>62</sup> Yet to argue that the Morley–Minto reforms were a watershed moment is to exaggerate their importance as well as to underestimate Morley’s political pragmatism. His earlier idealism had been tempered by his experience of political frustration.<sup>63</sup> Morley was wary of looking too far into the future; instead, he believed, ‘our only business is to do what we can to make the next transition’.<sup>64</sup> Any long-term intentions contained within the reforms were to gradually increase the participation of educated Indians in administering the government.<sup>65</sup> Morley clearly saw this evolutionary path as preferable to an Indian version of the Irish home rule policy.

Morley’s position highlights the tensions between various strands of liberal thought over the issue of Indian self-rule. Historians such as Moore have assumed that the ‘liberal objective of self-government’ was Morley’s ultimate aim.<sup>66</sup> The essence of liberalism, after all, is the pursuit of individual freedoms, including that of representative government. Mill, however, had contended that the principles of liberalism could only be successfully applied in countries where civilisation had developed to a necessary extent that allowed rational and free debate.<sup>67</sup> Morley followed along these lines of distinction by stating it was not ‘desirable or possible, or even conceivable to adapt English political institutions to the Nations who inhabit India’.<sup>68</sup> Yet liberal intellectuals in India, educated in a canon of Burke, Macaulay, and Mill, had interpreted the Liberal landslide in the 1906 election as a decisive step towards self-government.<sup>69</sup> Such radical change was destined to be unfulfilled during Morley’s tenure. With a policy founded on the Gladstonian tenets of ‘peace, retrenchment, and reform’, Morley instead sought gradual, evolutionary progress by allying with the moderates in Congress to advance their position at the expense of the radical faction led by Bal Gangadhar Tilak.<sup>70</sup> His overriding concern was to avoid revolution. In the mould of Gladstone, he saw sudden and radical political change as a direct threat to the interests of Indian prosperity and wellbeing.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, the underlying fear of many contemporary critics of imperialism was that political and social unrest in the empire could be imported back to England, where it would pose a threat to domestic liberties.<sup>72</sup> Thus, Morley’s emphasis on orderly reform was predicated on the prevention of political revolution.

The second major issue that preoccupied Morley during this time was the balance of power between the Government of India at Simla and the India Office at Whitehall. He had theorised about this relationship as early as 1876, when he argued that the excesses of the

Lytton viceroyalty demonstrated the need to augment the powers of the India Secretary in order to make India properly accountable to Parliament.<sup>73</sup> Strengthening the government’s control over India was not an autocratic measure but a natural consequence of his beliefs in the supremacy of the House of Commons. Burke had taught him that the deployment of able administration was of the utmost importance and that accountability was fundamental to government as he conceived it—as a trust.<sup>74</sup> In these regards, Morley was to be frustrated: he found the conduct of the Indian administration in the deportation of the prominent nationalist Lajpat Rai to have displayed an ‘indifference ... to the rooted maxims, principles, and traditions of home government’ that was ‘wholly indefensible’.<sup>75</sup> He thus transferred the prerogative to appoint lieutenant-governors to the India Office in London, confirming Whitehall’s precedent authority—constitutionally established only after a dispute between Curzon and Kitchener that led to the former’s resignation and replacement by Minto.<sup>76</sup> Again Morley’s pragmatism comes to the fore. When Minto invoked the principle of the ‘Free hand’ of men on the spot, Morley deployed the trump card of Minto’s great-grandfather, the first Earl of Minto, Governor-General of India from 1807 to 1813, as a ‘friend and disciple of Burke’ who would therefore rigidly oppose such a principle.<sup>77</sup> The liberal justification for this centralisation could be found in Mill, who suggested that transferring powers from errant administrators to London could effectively quarantine violence.<sup>78</sup> While Morley was suspicious of Whitehall’s tendencies towards mechanical bureaucracy, overly cautious and lacking in imagination, there was no danger of it lurching into despotism, given its immediate accountability to the House of Commons.<sup>79</sup> Paradoxically, by centralising it in London, Morley was attempting to defend his conception of liberal government.

Morley’s most strongly held conviction through his time at the India Office was his opposition to militarism. He was quick to warn Minto against ‘anything with the savour of “militarism” about it’ in one of his first letters to the viceroy.<sup>80</sup> This was a deeply held principle, rooted in early critiques of empire by figures such as Montesquieu that presented Rome as a warning of moral decline directly resulting from excessive militarism.<sup>81</sup> Gladstone, Morley noted, had articulated such ideas in colonial policy as early as the 1840s, railing against the maintenance of ‘a great military expenditure’ as ‘the climax of the evil’ of colonial misrule.<sup>82</sup> It had taken on a greater significance with the advent of New Imperialism, as anti-imperialists of all shades became fearful that arbitrary rule in the colonies would be imported into England.<sup>83</sup> Morley agreed with Cobden that to ‘play the part of despot and butcher’ in India would cause a deterioration

62 Morley (n 6) 134; Morley Papers, MSS Eur D573/2, Morley to Minto, 3 October 1907.

63 Bal Ram Nanda, *Gokhale: The Indian Moderates and the British Raj* (Princeton University Press 1977) 226.

64 Morley Papers, MSS Eur D573/2, Morley to Minto, 15 August 1907.

65 Syed Razi Wasti, *Lord Minto and the Indian Nationalist Movement, 1905–1910* (Clarendon Press 1964) 219–20.

66 RJ Moore, *Liberalism and Indian Politics, 1872–1922* (Edward Arnold 1966) 101.

67 Eric Stokes, *English Utilitarians and India* (Oxford University Press 1959) 298.

68 Morley Papers, MSS Eur D573/1, Morley to Minto, 6 June 1906.

69 Stokes (n 67) 298–99; Nanda (n 63) 223.

70 Morley Papers, MSS Eur D573/3, Morley to Minto, 15 April 1908; Moore (n 66) 84.

71 Koss (n 1) 141.

72 Miles Taylor, ‘Imperium et Libertas? Rethinking the radical critique of imperialism during the nineteenth century’ (1991) 23 *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 1, 17.

73 Koss (n 1) 17.

74 Wolpert (n 35) 48–49; Karuna Mantena, ‘The Crisis of Liberal Imperialism’ in Duncan Bell (ed), *Victorian Visions of Global Order: Empire and International Relations in Nineteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge University Press 2007) 115.

75 Morley Papers, MSS Eur D573/3, Morley to Minto, 15 May 1908.

76 Wolpert (n 35) 33, 67.

77 Morley Papers, MSS Eur D573/3, Morley to Minto, 17 June 1908; Morley, Burke (n 6) 138.

78 John Morley, ‘On Presenting the Indian Budget’, House of Commons, 6 June 1907, in *Indian Speeches, 1907–1909* (Macmillan 1909) 22–23; Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton University Press 2016) 232–33.

79 Arnold P Kaminsky, *The India Office, 1880–1910* (Mansell 1986) 77.

80 Morley Papers, MSS Eur D573/1, Morley to Minto, 16 January 1906.

81 Duncan Bell, ‘Empire’ in Mark Bevir (ed), *Historicism and the Human Sciences in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge University Press 2017) 215.

82 Morley (n 5) vol 1, 360.

83 Taylor (n 72) 15.

of national character at home.<sup>84</sup> Yet while he set about curtailing military spending and dismantling the redistribution scheme set up by the Commander in Chief, Lord Kitchener, the Whitehall–Simla relationship continued to cause problems, causing Morley to remonstrate that ‘this country cannot have two foreign policies.’<sup>85</sup> Though Minto was no Curzon, he saw little reason to rein in the growth of the empire. Morley, by contrast, believed firmly in the principle of non-aggression. The policy of Lord Ripon, who had been appointed by Gladstone as viceroy in 1880 and attempted to halt further imperial annexations, served as a guiding principle, but Morley’s beliefs had always gone further.<sup>86</sup> In Egypt, where Morley identified a dichotomy between the ‘oppression common to oriental governments’ and higher ‘western standards’, Gladstone had seen military force as necessary to prevent a ‘state of anarchy’ that both so abhorred.<sup>87</sup> Morley, by contrast, sought pacifism wherever possible: his only act of aggression was to authorise two punitive expeditions against the Zakka Khel and Mohmand tribes on the north-west frontier, though with strict instructions against seizing territory or advancing the frontier in any way.<sup>88</sup> Despite these incursions, he successfully avoided any formal expansion of Indian territory.

Morley was less successful in upholding certain principles of liberty. He sanctioned a number of repressive measures in an attempt to preserve law and order during a time of increasing unrest. Taking ‘Order *plus* Progress’ as his mantra, he sanctioned two press acts in the wake of riots in Bengal, which implemented strict censorship and suppressed basic freedoms.<sup>89</sup> This bore faint echoes of Lord Lytton’s 1878 Press Act, which Gladstone had found abhorrent and made a priority to repeal when he re-entered office.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, as Morley continued to uphold Curzon’s partition of Bengal as a ‘settled fact’, he approved the deportation of nine protesters under a law of 1818 which had removed the right of habeas corpus.<sup>91</sup> He sought to justify his actions in legal rather than moral terms, for he drew a distinction between despotic acts of coercion and proportionate legal measures.<sup>92</sup> It is also clear that Morley wrestled with his conscience over this issue. ‘Deportation’, he mused, ‘is an ugly dose for Radicals to swallow.’<sup>93</sup> As Morley had recognised in Gladstone’s politics, ‘policy is mastered by events ... the minister finds he is fastened to an inexorable chain.’<sup>94</sup> Such measures of repression, by their very nature illiberal, represented Morley’s greatest compromise of his principles.

Morley had justified accepting the position of India Secretary on the grounds that it offered him a last opportunity to redeem his Irish failure and enact meaningful reform. By taking the Gladstonian triptych of ‘peace, retrenchment, and reform’ as his guiding maxim, he aimed to halt expansion, reduce military expenditure, and increase moderate participation in politics. Instead of an Indian form of Home Rule he might once have pursued, Morley offered to Minto an overarching policy of ‘Order *plus* Progress’ as a political *via media* that could chart a sensible course between ‘two stupid ideas, that we have nothing to do but to keep the sword sharp, or on the other hand that we have nothing to do but to concede One

Man One Vote.’<sup>95</sup> His programme of reforms was limited, for he perceived self-government as impracticable, and he saw upholding partition and acts of repression as necessary for the survival of Liberalism in government. As he was at pains to stress to Minto, he was not planning the revolution in government that some expected. In fact, the avoidance of revolution of any kind—whether that be popular unrest on the streets of Calcutta, an overzealous Congress, or domestic turmoil—was central to his pursuit of an orderly, reforming administration.

## Morley in context

Morley’s relationship to unresolved debates over empire highlights the complexity of the intellectual inheritance that shaped his position on India. Burke posited the existence of a universal law of nature that obliged nations to uphold moral and political standards in their interactions with each other.<sup>96</sup> In so doing, he emphasised the inherent ‘common humanity’ of European and Asian civilisations alike.<sup>97</sup> Yet Morley subscribed to the Whiggish distinction between ‘civilised’ and ‘barbarous’ peoples—the very theory that Hastings had deployed to justify despotic rule in Asia.<sup>98</sup> He saw the question of Indian governance as intrinsically different from Irish governance, arguing that principles could not be applied interchangeably between the two.<sup>99</sup> This distanced him from the positivist critique of empire prevalent amongst radical MPs: Cotton was of the view that the ‘Indian question and the Irish question are inseparable’, with no difference in their situations other than Ireland being at that time ‘riper’ for reform.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, Morley’s civilised–barbarian distinction aligns him more with the nineteenth-century liberal thinkers in the tradition of Locke, whose dismissal of the existence of distinct native political societies vindicated support for empire.<sup>101</sup> This ran counter to the idea of an ‘ancient constitution’ of India that had prevailed in the eighteenth century and underpinned Burke’s ideas of equality.<sup>102</sup> Along with Cobden’s non-interventionism, motivated by economic self-interest, and Gladstone’s moralism, these were all positions that stemmed from different philosophical roots. Therefore, to view Morley as the inheritor of a ‘liberal tradition’ of thinkers that had developed in a linear fashion over the course of the nineteenth century would be misleading.<sup>103</sup> Nevertheless, having synthesised these varied ideas into a cogent view on empire, he continued to be guided by them during his time in office.

Translating a critique of empire into practice was not done only by Morley. As Gladstone had found, it was easy to proclaim the ‘equal rights of all nations’, but more difficult to reconcile this with maintaining a peaceful liberal international order.<sup>104</sup> The competing claims of foreign and domestic policy created particular tensions for the Liberal party. Gladstone’s boldly reformist policy platform of the 1870s had been part of a wider strategy to reorient the Liberal party into a more electorally appealing prospect following the

84 Morley (n 36) vol 2, 216.

85 Morley Papers, MSS Eur D573/1, Morley to Minto, 6 July 1906.

86 Wolpert (n 35) 88.

87 Morley (n 5) vol 3, 73–74.

88 *ibid* 89–90.

89 Morley Papers, MSS Eur D573/2, Morley to Minto, 31 October 1907.

90 Moore (n 66) 30.

91 HC Deb 26 Feb 1906, vol 152, col 844; Wolpert (n 35) 102–06.

92 Morley (n 5) vol 3, 71.

93 Morley Papers, MSS Eur D573/2, Morley to Minto, 16 May 1907.

94 Morley (n 5) vol 1, 544.

95 Morley Papers, MSS Eur D573/2, Morley to Minto, 31 October 1907.

96 Jennifer Pitts, ‘Boundaries of Victorian International Law’ in Bell (ed, n 74) 70.

97 Frederick G Whelan, ‘Burke on India’ in David Dwan and Christopher Insole (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Edmund Burke* (Cambridge University Press 2012) 179–80.

98 See, for example, Morley Papers, MSS Eur D573/1, Morley to Minto, 9 February 1906.

99 Morley (n 78) 17–19.

100 Cited in Claeys (n 21) 67.

101 Mehta (n 14) 120–21.

102 Mantena (n 74) 116.

103 Porter (n 33) 18.

104 HCG Matthew, *Gladstone, 1875–1898* (Clarendon Press 1995) 123–24.

Second Reform Act.<sup>105</sup> In this way, domestic concerns often came to dictate aspects of imperial policy. This could work both ways: if Gladstone's approach stressed low government expenditure and the preservation of law and order at home, Mill's defence of colonisation began from the benefits he saw it as offering to the British state and to the working class in particular.<sup>106</sup> Even critics of New Imperialism who appeared primarily concerned about its economic impact, such as Hobson, were driven by concerns over politics at home.<sup>107</sup> They self-consciously echoed Cobden and Bright, who, framing their non-interventionist approach to anti-imperialism in terms of domestic stability, rejected the idea of a moral responsibility for improving the condition of the Indian people.<sup>108</sup> Morley, on the other hand, sometimes accused of adopting the 'Little Englander' mentality, in fact bridged the gap between anti-imperialists and colonial reformers by achieving meaningful reform whilst subscribing to a Cobdenite view.<sup>109</sup>

Morley's tenure at the India Office can illuminate the relationship between theory and practice in Edwardian liberalism more generally. Morley liked to contrast the 'loose free-and-easy way in which politicians form their judgments, with the strict standards of proof, evidence, fact, observed by a conscientious critic or historian', suggesting even Gladstone fell short of such standards.<sup>110</sup> A spirit of compromise was undoubtedly necessary, however, to ensure the survival of a Liberal government in the aftermath of the Liberal Imperialist split and the Boer War.<sup>111</sup> During the preceding ten years of Conservative government, the critics of New Imperialism—Morley included—had been vociferous in their denunciation of missteps such as the Jameson Raid, but they struggled to turn this into concrete policy.<sup>112</sup> The landslide Liberal victory in the 1906 election offered a turning point. For Morley, the 'centre of gravity' in politics was 'utterly changed'.<sup>113</sup> His reformist agenda at the India Office, however, was an anomaly in Liberal foreign and imperial policy, for elsewhere—under the supervision of Edward Grey at the Foreign Office—little progress was made in rolling back ten years of Conservative pro-imperialist policy.<sup>114</sup> Edwardian liberalism marked a turning point between the radical legacy of Cobden and Bright and a more social-democratic conception of the state, which did not augur well for Morley's rather elitist form of progressivism.<sup>115</sup>

Morley's approach must be understood in the context of the Indian nationalist movement. It is easy to dismiss the influence of Indian politicians on Morley on the basis that he never actually visited India. Yet the British Committee of the Indian National Congress, representing its interests in London, ensured its concerns could be aired in Whitehall. The election of Congress co-founder Dadabhai Naoroji as an MP in 1892 had created an explicit link between the Liberals and the nationalist movement in India.<sup>116</sup> Gokhale spent a

great deal of time in London lobbying Morley in an attempt to give impetus to proposals for self-government, to an extent that alarmed Minto and the Whitehall civil servants.<sup>117</sup> Armed with a liberal university education, he approvingly cited Mill and Gladstone to advance his arguments.<sup>118</sup> With such moderate leaders at the helm, it was only in 1906 that the formal goal of *Swaraj* (self-government) was adopted by Congress.<sup>119</sup> But the partition of Bengal—and Morley's steadfast support for that policy—caused a deepening rift within Congress between the moderates and the radical faction led by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, who increasingly viewed any form of British rule as intolerable.<sup>120</sup> Tilak was a dangerous threat to the government, as by articulating a demotic nationalism grounded in Hinduism he could appeal to popular discontent.<sup>121</sup> This undoubtedly had an impact on Morley's policy, for the increasingly strident rhetoric emanating from the nationalists stoked fears of a popular revolution. Morley sought to placate the Indian intelligentsia but was apprehensive about social issues and the wider Indian populace.<sup>122</sup> Furthermore, the prospect raised by Lajpat Rai of an alliance between Congress and the Labour party alarmed Minto's conservative sensibilities.<sup>123</sup> The rift in Congress therefore handicapped Morley in the extent of reform he was able to achieve.

Morley's relationship with the development of Indian theories of liberalism is important in understanding the results of his time in office. He recognised the formative influence of Burke and Mill upon the Indian intelligentsia, who, he warned, had become 'intoxicated with the ideas of freedom' as a result.<sup>124</sup> Yet Mill's argument that despotism was a legitimate means by which to raise mankind from nature into a state of civilisation not only had been taken to heart by the Liberal Imperialists but facilitated exactly the sort of 'un-British' despotism that Naoroji denounced.<sup>125</sup> Many Indian liberals had therefore always been suspicious of Mill's utilitarian liberalism.<sup>126</sup> This was problematic, for it was precisely as a utilitarian liberal that Morley had tried to interpret Burke.<sup>127</sup> Moderates such as Gokhale instead argued that political representation was a necessary precondition for social reform.<sup>128</sup> Yet from the perspective of the British Committee, representing the interests of Congress in London, there was a 'basic tension ... between linked-up agitation and sustaining a liberal in office'.<sup>129</sup> This tension between revolution and evolution in the differing strands of liberal thought helps explain why Morley made so little headway with the Indian elite, for his instincts lay with Burke. In prioritising order, Morley forewent certain principles of liberty in favour of pragmatic political change,

105 Peter Cain, 'Radicalism, Gladstone, and the liberal critique of Disraelian "imperialism"', in Bell (ed, n 74) 232.

106 Bell (n 78) 213.

107 David Long, *Towards a New Liberal Internationalism: The International Theory of J. A. Hobson* (Cambridge University Press 1995) 72.

108 Porter (n 33) 19.

109 Taylor (n 72) 15.

110 Morley Papers, MSS Eur D573/1, Morley to Minto, 9 November 1906.

111 George L Bernstein, 'Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman and the Liberal Imperialists' (1983) 23 *Journal of British Studies* 105.

112 Porter (n 33) 56.

113 Morley Papers, MSS Eur D573/1, Morley to Minto, 25 January 1906.

114 Ian Packer, *Liberal Government and Politics, 1905–15* (Palgrave Macmillan 2006) 53–54.

115 GR Searle, *The Liberal Party: Triumph and Disintegration, 1886–1929* (Macmillan 1992) 85; Burrow (n 3) 74.

116 Matthew (n 104) 127.

117 Nanda (n 63) 233–35.

118 Gokhale (n 45) 497–99.

119 Hugh Tinker, *Viceroy: Curzon to Mountbatten* (Oxford University Press 1997) 44.

120 Gordon Johnson, *Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism: Bombay and the Indian National Congress, 1880 to 1915* (Cambridge University Press 1973) 133.

121 Sanjay Seth, 'The critique of renunciation: Bal Gangadhar Tilak's Hindu nationalism' (2006) 9 *Postcolonial Studies* 137.

122 Nanda (n 63) 228.

123 Nicholas Owen, *The British Left and India: Metropolitan Anti-Imperialism, 1885–1947* (Oxford University Press 2007) 80.

124 Morley, 'To Constituents', Arbroath, 21 October 1907, in Morley (n 78) 41.

125 Stephen Holmes, 'Making Sense of Liberal Imperialism' in Nadia Urbinati and Alex Zakaras (eds), *J.S. Mill's Political Thought: A Bicentennial Reassessment* (Cambridge University Press 2007) 320–22.

126 CA Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge University Press 2011) 245.

127 Jones (n 23) 82–83.

128 Bayly (n 126) 249.

129 Owen (n 123) 50.

driven by a preoccupation for domestic stability rather than a genuine concern for India.

## Conclusion

Over the course of his life, John Morley had articulated an anti-imperialist viewpoint that drew on the thought of several major figures whom he profiled in biography. Viewing the study of thinkers and their ideas as paramount preparation for politics, he approached debates over empire from a literary perspective. He combined Burke's ideas of good governance with the free trade and non-interventionism of Cobden and Gladstone's practical doctrine of peace, retrenchment, and reform to mount a critique of imperialism. He rejected Mill's defence of empire, but took after him in other ways, such as in his defence of political compromise. Grounding his policy in a record that stretched back to his *Historical Study* of Burke in 1867 and his friendship with Mill, he modified his views over time but never expunged these early formative influences, for his historicist views were a foundational element of his thought. Thus, his arrival at the India Office in 1905 was not a *volte-face* in the changing political climate of the Edwardian period. Instead, as with the major anti-imperialist figures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Morley was chiefly concerned with opposing militarism, despotism, and profligate spending. In particular, it was Burke's position that Morley most closely resembled, for Burke recognised the deep injustices of empire while at the same time avoiding proclaiming that imperial rule itself was inherently illegitimate. Self-consciously radical in domestic politics, Morley was nevertheless operating in the wider tradition of liberalism and the ambiguous stance on empire this entailed. To this end he approached Indian policy always with its potential effects on domestic politics in England at the forefront of his mind.

The chief implication of this complex intellectual endowment was that Morley was never fully aligned with the moderate Indian liberals who looked to him to fulfil their wishes. During his time as India Secretary, Morley was forced to compromise on important tenets of liberal freedom. He prioritised maintaining law and order above laissez-faire liberty, for his overriding concern was to avoid a popular revolution. He successfully pursued a policy of economic and military retrenchment and achieved measured yet meaningful constitutional reform, though his failure to stick by the rights to a free trial and a free press were out of keeping with his expressed philosophy. Burke's practical moralism could only guide him so far in the complexities of political circumstance. He presented an easy target for dogmatic radicals because of his earlier writings and public position on Irish Home Rule. Yet even if self-government had been his ultimate aim, the deck was stacked against him. Fulfilling the expectations of a decisive shift away from the imperialist policy of Curzon required a degree of control over the Indian Civil Service that Morley simply did not have, and which a conservative viceroy impeded. The complexity, size, and logistics of the bureaucracy meant no one man could effect a revolution from the inside. The alternative, revolution from the outside, was one of Morley's worst fears, for it would overturn the principles and institutions he held dear: Gladstonian liberalism, the authority of the House of Commons, and the rule of law. Imperial retrenchment, rather than imperial dismemberment, was in actuality his overarching aim.

This in turn raises the question as to whether there was a theoretically coherent alternative to Liberal Imperialism at this time within the Liberal Party. I have suggested that the influence of Mill on Morley at this time is greater than has previously been considered—likely because he was not the subject of a Morley biography—indicating

the pervasiveness of Mill's ideas amongst liberals on all sides of debates on imperialism. Moreover, the extent to which Morley was influenced by Burke suggests that the study of the latter's politically diffuse impact merits further consideration. Though he departed from Burke in questions of civilisation, Burke's principles of evolution over revolution, constitutional traditionalism, and practical moralism were not only at the heart of Morley's philosophy but were also the ideas to which he adhered most in office. Liberal though he certainly was, his inclinations on the nature of government in practice may have been more conservative than he would have liked to admit.