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‘Who Said “Imperialism?” A Reply to Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace.’

Dr. Wallace’s letter on Practical Politics, printed in this issue of the *Clarion*, is very welcome. For in this letter Dr. Wallace says, very clearly and concisely, all that our good friend Allen Clarke seems to have been trying to say. The one source of astonishment in the matter, so far as I am concerned, is that Dr. Wallace should have thought it necessary to say all this to *me*. It is indeed strange that Dr. Wallace should have fallen into the same error as Allen Clarke, and imagined it necessary to lecture me upon the evils of Imperialism. Dr. Wallace says in his final paragraph:

I greatly regret being obliged to differ so radically from a man I admire and respect so much as I do Robert Blatchford; but, as I am known to be a Socialist and a constant reader of the *Clarion*, it might be thought that my silence would imply some degree of agreement.

I have read Dr. Wallace’s letter very carefully, and I cannot see where he “differs radically” from Robert Blatchford. He may differ from the Robert Blatchford who has been conjured up out of his own imagination, but from the real Robert Blatchford he differs little, if any at all.

He says I offer the alternative of defending or abandoning our foreign possessions as if there were no other way, and he says there is another way, and when he describes that other way, it is one of my alternatives—the alternative of abandonment. For if we give up Gibraltar, Malta, Cyprus, the Orange Free State and the Transvaal, what does that amount to but the abandonment of our foreign possessions.

And if we are to give up those of our possessions, why not all? Why not Egypt, and India, and Wei-Hai-Wai, and the Channel Islands, and Ceylon?

Well, here we will get rid of one imaginary point of difference. I am quite willing that we should give up India and Africa, and Malta, and Gibraltar, and all the other foreign possessions, and that we should grant self-government to Ireland. I agree that we obtained most of our possessions wrongfully, and that we have no moral right to hold them. I thought everybody knew that I held these views.

But theories and facts do not always fit together. Dr. Wallace seems to feel that it would be difficult to give up these possessions now. He feels that the British people are not ready for such a policy. He says:

But, it will be replied, all this is foolish talk: it will be a century before the British people will be persuaded to give up its possessions and its power; and, in the meantime, if we do not defend ourselves we shall not have the opportunity of being so generous, hardly shall we keep our own liberties. I have not so low an opinion of my countrymen as to believe that they really *wish* to keep other peoples subject to them against their will; that they are really *determined* to go on denying that freedom to others which is so dear a possession to themselves. And if there is not now a majority who would agree to act at once as I suggest, I am pretty confident that there is, even now, a majority who would acknowledge that *such action is theoretically just, and that they would be willing to do it by degrees, and as soon as it is safe, etc. To look forward to it, in fact, as an ideal to be realised, but not just now.*

Well, he and I are here quite in accord. I am as willing as he is to do these things “by degrees, and as soon as it is safe.”

Dr. Wallace then goes on to appeal for action. He says:

Now, what I wish to urge is, that it is of the most vital importance to us, now, that all who agree with me that there can be no national honour or glory apart from justice and mercy, and that to take away people’s liberty and force our rule upon them against their will, is the greatest of all national crimes, should take every opportunity of making their voices heard. If, for instance, every Socialist in our land, and I hope a very large proportion of workers and advanced thinkers who may not be Socialists, would agree to maintain this as one of their fundamental principles, to be continually brought before the people through the Press and on the platform, to be urged on the Government at every opportunity, and to be made a condition of our support of every advanced Parliamentary candidate, we should create a body of ethical opinion and feeling that would not only be of the highest educational value at home, but which would influence the whole world in their estimate of us. It would show them that though our Government is bad—as all Governments are—yet the people at heart are honest and true, and that it will not be very long before the people will force their Governments to be honest also.

I, for one, agree with Dr. Wallace that there can be no national honour nor glory apart from justice and mercy, and I have said so a score of times in the plainest and warmest language I could command.

Dr. Wallace tells me that our Governments have dealt wickedly with India, and have brutally and basely trampled on savage races and weak nations. He tells me that our Governments have extorted heavy taxes from the people, and have wasted the money on incompetent officers and a hopeless muddling of the army. He reminds me of our unjustifiable conduct towards Russia. It is all true. I know it is all true. I have said it many times myself. Am I not a “Little Englander”?

But let us be practical. Our Governments have done wrong. They have plundered India, and Egypt, and the West Indies, and Canada, and the Cape, and the Transvaal, and the Orange River Colony, and Gibraltar, and Malta, and many other places from the Indians, the French, the Spanish, the Africans, the Dutch. They have oppressed and robbed the Irish. It is true. I admit it.

But what is to be done? We think—we “Little Englanders”—that it would be right to give up many of our possessions. But it would be difficult, and it would be dangerous.

As I said before, to whom are we to give up India? We did wrong to take India, but having taken it we are responsible for it. To whom are we to yield it? To the Indian races? Would that be for the good of India? Could the Indian races govern the country? Could they hold it? Would Russia invade the country? If Russia conquered India would the Indian races be better off or worse off under Russia than under England?

Dr. Wallace says that India *ought* to be able to govern herself, and would be able if we had done right by her, and kept our pledges. Yes. But we did wrongly by her, and we broke our pledges. And there is India, as we have made her. What can we do for India, *as she now is*? Our forbears wronged India, and we are sorry for their crimes. But the crimes were committed, and the results are with us. What can we do *now*? How can we best atone to India? If we could give India self-government and independence that would be well. But would it be safe? Would it be good for India? Or would it mean what I said it would mean, a Russian conquest and a worse state of things for India than the state we now deplore?

I agree again with Dr. Wallace as to our arrogant and high-handed action in claiming the command of the sea. I do not know any good reason why one nation should claim command of the seas, nor why the other nations should permit her to establish such a claim.

But we have to recognise facts. We have to recognise the fact that as things stand to-day we must carry on trade or starve. And we have to recognise the fact that the statesmen of Russia and of Germany are not Tolstoys, nor Dr. Wallaces, nor Robert Blatchfords, nor Allen Clarkes. That is to say, they are not honest and peaceable men, but are men trained to "think Imperially." They do not know the difference between greatness and bigness, they are full of vainglory, and hold it as a divine ordinance that the strong should rule and rob the weak.

Now I put the case as I see it, and I ask Dr. Wallace for his opinion. We, the British, hold very valuable colonies. We hold Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. The Germans want colonies. Suppose we act as Dr. Wallace seems to wish us to act. Suppose we reduce our fleet and give up command of the sea. What is to prevent Germany or Russia from making some pretext for war? Then our commerce would be crippled, our food supplies would be cut off, and we should be starved into surrender.

Would that be in any way a benefit to civilization? Would it be in any way a benefit to the human race?

What, then, is my own idea. My own idea is that the British people should put themselves in a position to defend their country and their colonies, and at the same time, by diplomacy, by propaganda, by treaties, arbitration courts and alliances should do all in their power to come to equitable arrangements with the other nations and to foster international friendship and universal peace. But Dr. Wallace knows, if Allen Clarke does not, that these tremendous changes cannot be effected in a few days, nor by the stroke of a pen. He knows, and we all know, that such tremendous economical and political revolutions hastily attempted would result in terrible disaster. I think, as most Socialists think, that England would do well to regenerate her agriculture. But we all know that we cannot persuade the nation to attempt that policy, and we all know that until that policy is carried out we must keep our trade routes open or starve.

Dr. Wallace censures our British Government severely. I agree with him. But does he really think, I ask, that our Governments have been worse than those of other nations? To me it seems that, bad as we British are, we are no worse than our continental neighbors. And to me it seems that the hatred of England by foreign politicians is due less to righteous indignation at our crimes than to envy of our success. I may be wrong, but I cannot help feeling that in European politics one must be strong as well as just: indeed that one cannot really do right unless one *is* strong.

And now let us return to the original subject of discussion. Dr. Wallace says that after acknowledging that our Governments have wasted millions and muddled the defences, I am asking the people to give more millions to the same incompetents to use in the same way. For he says I urge immediate action, and that means that the present Government must control that action.

And then later on in his letter, Dr. Wallace, admitting that our Government is bad and will not do right to other nations, asks for an appeal to public opinion to put pressure upon the Government in favour of international righteousness.

Here Dr. Wallace is acting just as I am acting. I have not appealed to the Government on the subject of the national defences. I know they are incompetent: hopeless. I have appealed to the British People to put pressure on the Government, and to insist on a proper scheme of national *defence*.

It is *defence*, gentlemen, I am asking for, not “blood-and-iron bluster and defiance.”

What is the claim of the real militarist school? What is the evident design of the Imperialist ruling classes in this country?

The Volunteers and Militia have been snubbed and mishandled, and the army has been muddled and mismanaged. And now we are told that the army is not big enough, and that the auxiliary forces are no good. And the moral? The moral is conscription.

Well, I know that the Army and the auxiliaries are inefficient. I believe that invasion is possible. I am convinced that we are not in a position to defeat a big and resolute invasion. And as the Imperialists declare that only by means of conscription can the nation be rendered secure, I have taken the trouble to show them that the nation can be made quite safe without conscription.

The difference between a conscript army and a citizen army is vital. Allen Clarke and many others of the narrow peace party cannot apparently see the difference.

The Germans have a conscript army. Their Army is a vast fighting machine under the direct control of the Kaiser. If the Kaiser and his Ministers and generals make war upon another nation the German Army must march blindly to the attack, just as the Russian Army is now marching blindly against the Japanese.

But our citizen army would be an army for home defence, and would not be an inarticulate and brainless machine at the control of Cabinet or King. In no case could it be hurled against a foreign shore, or be sent blindly into a war of which it knew nothing.

It is defence I am asking for, not bluster and defiance. It is defence I want against the bluster and defiance of German generals and statesmen whom I judge by their words and deeds.

Short-sighted, well-meaning men, like our friend Allen Clarke, cry out that I am for putting into the hands of the ruling classes a weapon with which to terrorise the people. But I am really suggesting that the people should be armed in order that to oppress them would be impossible.

Then I am accused of insulting the German people. How have I insulted the German people? I have nothing against the German people. But the German people are a fighting machine under the control of the Kaiser and his generals and statesmen, and I want our people to be ready to defend themselves against an attack which the Germans would be obliged to make if their rulers so determined.

Allen Clarke persists that “Militarism” degrades and brutalises men. Perhaps militarism of the Russian and German type may. But military training such as I advocate would not. It would very much improve the more ignorant section of the people.

Again, Allen Clarke talks about invasion as no man could talk who had read anything about the invasions of France and Holland and Germany in the past. He and all of his party would denounce a

British invasion of Germany as wicked. It would be wicked, and so would a German invasion of England be wicked.

He asks me to reconcile my professions of philanthropy with my demand for an army of defence. To me the reply is obvious. I would not rob, nor oppress, nor insult, nor injure any man, nor any nation. But I would resist by force of arms, if needs be, any attempt of any foreign nation to conquer, or plunder, or oppress my own country.

Mr. Clarke says that if his wife and children were attacked by a murderer, he does not know what he would do, nor what would happen. That is just what I thought. The fact is he does not really know his own mind.

At the end of his letter he quotes a statement of an older man than I, to the effect that the “twaddle about invasion” is an “old bogey” of fifty years’ standing. It is an old bogey of a hundred years’ standing. But conditions have very much changed. An invading fleet now is not dependent on the weather. It can move very rapidly. Fifty years ago Germany was not united. She had no fleet. She had not an enormous and highly trained army. She had not enough mercantile marine to carry her troops. She had not an ambitious imperial policy. She was in danger from France and Russia. Allen Clarke’s friend may be older than I, but he is talking nonsense.

Briefly, my case is as follows. We, as a nation, are justified in defending ourselves against a foreign invasion. Germany is, rightly or wrongly, suspected of a design to invade us. Germany has an overwhelming army ready to move. She has all the means ready to carry that army over to our shores. She has a strong fleet in the North Sea, and is steadily increasing it. We have no army of sufficient size or quality to repulse an invasion if once an enemy landed in force upon our shores. We ought to have such an army, and we ought to have it *now*. We shall never get it if we trust our Government to provide it. We shall never get it unless we can convince the people that it is necessary. But it is quite possible that we may be trapped into conscription. Conscription would be a danger. A citizen army is the alternative to conscription. I uphold the plan of a citizen army because I believe it would be a good thing for Socialism, and because I regard the conquest of England or the ruin of the British Empire as a disaster to human progress.

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*The Alfred Russel Wallace Page*, Charles H. Smith, 2015.