

The Legend of the Great Game

A persistent theme in the writings of Elie Kedourie was his mistrust of large, seemingly attractive concepts or ideas, ideas which were lightly advanced and quietly incorporated into political or historical folklore without being subject to the close and critical scrutiny which he rightly believed to be an obligation of statesman and historian alike. One such concept is that of the 'Great Game'. In an edited extract from his Elie Kedourie Memorial Lecture delivered on 16 May 2000, Professor M.E. Yapp of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, examines some aspects of this famous phrase.

The best known use of the term 'great game' is that by Rudyard Kipling in *Kim*. It is often said that *Kim* is a novel about the conflict of Russian and British agents in Central Asia. This is not so. The episode of the clash with the Russian and French agent (at the time of writing it was the Franco-Russian alliance which was regarded as the principal international threat to Britain) is a relatively minor, slightly absurd incident in a book which is, first and foremost, a plotless, picaresque novel about India and, secondly, a study of the rival attractions of the life of adventure and the life of reflection. In the novel Kipling uses the term 'the great game' (more often simply 'the game') frequently, and it is worth exploring carefully what he meant by the phrase. First, it should be noted (as, indeed, early critics observed) that the term is used to signify secret intelligence work within and outside India. Lurgan Sahib reflects on 'the Great Game that never ceases day and night throughout India'. E.23 investigates a conspiracy between an Indian princely house and an unnamed dignitary presumed to be the Ottoman Caliph. Second, apart from the use by Lurgan Sahib (which is unvoiced) the term is used in *Kim* almost exclusively by Indians or in Indian situations. It is used most frequently by the Pathan horse dealer, Mahbub Ali, by E.23, an Indian from the North West province, by the Bengali babu, Hurree Chunder Mookerjee, and by Kim himself, but only when he is dealing with Indians and speaking to them, presumably, in Hindustani. On one occasion we are told specifically, when Kim reflects on the great game, that he is thinking in Hindustani; and on another occasion that Kim thought in the vernacular: 'How can a man follow the Way or the Great Game when he is always so pestered by woman?' It may be presumed that Kipling, who had little opinion of games, intended his readers to understand that the associations of the Great Game would be different in an Indian language from those it attracted in English. For Kipling, I would suggest, the Game is an abstract concept, one which ranks with other loaded and capitalised concepts such as the Law, the Road,

the Wheel, the River, the Search and, of course, the Way, with which the Game is frequently juxtaposed. Above all, the great game stands for life and action. In the words of the most perceptive critic of Kipling, Bonamy Dobree, 'man is playing a Great Game of "to be or not to be" in the face of an indifferent universe.'

The use of the term 'great game' in what is now its most familiar meaning of Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia is fairly recent and became common only after the second world war. It was not wholly unknown before that period, but it was rare. It is used, for example, by Maud Diver – who took it from J.W. Kaye, author of *Lives of Indian Officers* (1867) and a *History of the War in Afghanistan* (1857) – in certain novels published between 1908 and 1913, but it is not used with this meaning by John Buchan, whose character, Sandy Arbuthnot, would seem to be the *beau idéal* of what most readers would think of as a Great Gamesman, and who employed gaming metaphor more frequently than any other image. The attempt by various writers to trace the phrase back in its current meaning through Kipling to Kaye has given it a spurious pedigree and suggested that the concept is much older than in fact it is.

Well, you may think, this is all very well and even mildly interesting, but what does it matter? If the reality of Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia, of the action and counteraction of secret agents existed, of what consequence is it that the convenient term by which we know the phenomenon best did not exist, at least with that meaning, until recently? My reply is that the patterns of our historical comprehension are shaped by the terms in which we think of events, that Anglo-Russian rivalry did not exist to the extent which has been suggested and which the use of the term has fostered, and the consequence of presenting a picture of continuous Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia from the early nineteenth century has been to distort our understanding of the defence of British India, of the relation between British and British Indian

Members of the Kedourie family decided in 1993 to establish a Fund in memory of the distinguished modern historian and political philosopher, Elie Kedourie, elected a Fellow in 1975. The Fund's principal purpose was to establish an annual lecture in modern history, preference being given to subjects in Middle Eastern and modern European history, reflecting Professor Kedourie's own interests.

foreign and defence policy, and even of the nature of British rule in India.

Two models of the Great Game are derived from J.W. Kaye. One, which is linked to Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia, he bequeathed to us inadvertently. The second model, which was concerned with internal control in India, was that which always represented the reality in British India. The most important element in the debate about the defence of India, although it was disguised by the character of the debate, was not the external enemy but the internal threat. What caused the shortage of troops and what multiplied the need for reinforcements were the needs of the garrison of British India. In its innocence, the British government had supposed that a defensive posture in India would require fewer troops than an offensive disposition, but it was to discover that, as the danger from the internal enemy increased as the enemy approached, the reverse was the case.

Strategic discussion has a tendency to gentrification. Foreign armies are more interesting than domestic enemies and soldiers more interesting than policemen. How few books are written about what one may call imperial plumbing and yet there were more policemen than soldiers in British India and it was on policemen that the Raj ultimately rested. In the first place, the police kept control of ordinary crime: the prestige of the Raj

was its greatest defence against the internal enemy and that prestige depended especially on its ability to maintain law and order. Secondly, the police developed, in the later nineteenth century and early twentieth century, a remarkable ability to deal with industrial, communal and political crime, with terrorism and subversion. These important developments in the capabilities of the police have been concealed by the focus on the meaningless, contemporary strategic debate. And when the Raj was run down it was the Indian Police which was the last to be Indianised, after the ICS and the Indian Army, the two services commonly regarded as the main pillars of the Raj.

In being too concerned with the process of, and the motives for the acquisition of empire, with the international and strategic aspects of empire, with the matter of the withdrawal from imperial authority, and with the effects of British rule on the recipients of empire, we have somehow neglected the key element in how empires ran, namely the police. In seeking an image of the great game, we should look not at Kim, but at the policeman, Strickland, who features in *Kim* and who is the true master of what Kipling understood to be the game of policing the Raj. And I would propose as the archetypal figure of the British Indian empire, Ronald Merrick, the sinister policeman who dominates Paul Scott's *Raj Quartet*.

Policeman Ronald Merrick (played by Tim Piggott-Smith) interrogates Hari Kumar (Art Malik) in the Jewel in the Crown, Granada TV's dramatisation of Paul Scott's Raj Quartet.

