

Curtis, Lionel George (1872–1955), *writer and public servant* by Alex May

Curtis, Lionel George (1872–1955), writer and public servant, was born at The Outwoods, near Derby, on 7 March 1872, the youngest of four children of the Revd George James Curtis (*d.* 1904), rector of Coddington church, Ledbury, Herefordshire, and his wife, Frances (*d.* 1913), daughter of the Revd John Edmund Carr, of The Outwoods. His early years were spent at Coddington rectory with his siblings Mary, Charles, and Arthur; family wealth ensured a comfortable upbringing. His parents were evangelical Christians, followers of Pearsall Smith and ‘the Way of Holiness’. In later life Curtis came to question the literalness of their biblical beliefs, but he inherited their evangelical fervour and their conviction that ‘the distinctions ... between religion and politics ... are false’ (May, 62).

Curtis was educated at the Wells House, Malvern Wells, and Haileybury College. He was not noted as a particularly gifted student. In 1891 he entered New College, Oxford; he obtained third classes in classical honour moderations in 1892 and in *literae humaniores* in 1894. He left Oxford with little idea of what career he wished to follow, but with a circle of friends who were to remain devoted to him for the rest of their lives.

While an undergraduate, Curtis had developed an interest in the ‘social question’, reading F. D. Maurice and spending two vacations trudging the roads disguised as a tramp in order to gain firsthand experience of the working of the poor law. On leaving Oxford, he worked for three years for the Haileybury Guild, managing a boy's club in the East End. Through this work he met and was much influenced by Octavia Hill and Canon Barnett. A recommendation from the latter secured Curtis's appointment in 1897 as part-time secretary to Leonard Courtney. Curtis combined devilling for Courtney with studying law. He was eventually called to the bar by the Inner Temple in 1902. Meanwhile, on Courtney's recommendation, he gained brief but valuable experience in municipal affairs as private secretary to Lord Welby, vice-chairman of the London county council, in 1899.

South Africa, 1899–1909

On the outbreak of the South African War in October 1899, Curtis's brother Arthur, a captain in the Royal Artillery, was among those who were swiftly besieged at Ladysmith. Curtis himself enlisted in December 1899, with his friends Max Balfour and Lionel Hitchens, in the cyclists' section of the City Imperial Volunteers. For the next six months the three companions performed a variety of tasks, from carrying dispatches to commandeering cattle, but only once came under enemy fire. Curtis's letters home—published in 1951 as *With Milner in South Africa*—testify to his boyish sense of adventure, but also to his respect for his Boer opponents. He was discharged following the capture of Pretoria, in June

1900, and returned home to administer the estate of his brother Arthur, who had died of typhoid three days after the relief of Ladysmith.

Curtis returned to South Africa in October 1900, determined to play a part in the reconstruction of the war-torn colonies. Through a combination of perseverance, luck, and Oxford connections, he obtained an interview with Sir Alfred Milner, who agreed to take him on his staff as assistant imperial secretary. One of his tasks was to draw up a plan for the new Johannesburg municipality, and in April 1901 he was appointed acting town clerk. The appointment of someone so young and inexperienced was widely criticized, but over the next two years Curtis's hard work and organizing ability won him the admiration of many former critics. The apprehension that he would serve the interests of the wealthy mine owners was soon confounded: indeed, it was largely through Curtis's persistence that the boundaries of the new municipality were drawn to include the mines. Nevertheless, Curtis's self-assurance often created friction. At one point the *Transvaal Critic* described him as 'a malapert young gentleman sitting on the necks of the Town Council as he dictates to the universe' (Lavin, *From Empire to International Commonwealth*, 52).

Curtis was promoted assistant colonial secretary of the Transvaal, with responsibility for municipal affairs, in February 1903. As in Johannesburg, he had to create a system of municipal government more or less from scratch. Again, his efficiency won him many admirers, while his abrasive personality caused problems. In October 1905 he was given responsibility also for 'Asiatic' affairs. Convinced that unlimited Indian immigration would mean the end of a 'white' South Africa, he pressed for a system of registration and fingerprinting designed to exclude further immigrants. Curtis's proposals brought him into conflict with the Indian community, led by Mahatma Gandhi, but they were largely embodied in the elected Transvaal assembly's first piece of legislation, the Asiatic amendment ordinance of 1907. By then, however, he was no longer a member of the Transvaal civil service, having resigned in September 1906 in anticipation of self-government, and following a dispute over departmental responsibilities.

Curtis was only one of a number of young Oxford graduates whom Milner had recruited to work in the administration of the new colonies. Sir William Marriott described them, caustically, as 'Milner's Kindergarten' [see *also* Milner's Kindergarten]. The name stuck, and was adopted by the members of the group themselves. The Kindergarten became an unusually tightly knit group of friends, drawn together by background and education, and united by shared values and a common veneration for Lord Milner. In South Africa they lived and holidayed together, and many evenings were spent in earnest discussion of political and social problems. Besides Curtis, the Kindergarten included his New College friends—for whom he had found employment with the Johannesburg town council—John Dove, Richard Feetham, and Lionel Hitchens; other members included Robert Brand, George Craik, Patrick Duncan, William Marris, J. F. (Peter) Perry, Geoffrey Robinson (later Dawson), and Hugh Wyndham. After

1905 they were joined by Philip Kerr, and, following Milner's replacement by Lord Selborne, Dougal Malcolm. The Kindergarten bond was a powerful one, and endured long after the majority of the group had left South Africa.

Milner's long-term aim in South Africa was to unite the various colonies as a loyal dominion under the British flag. The failure of his schemes to attract British settlers, and what he saw as the premature grant of self-government to the former republics, led him to be pessimistic after his retirement. The Kindergarten, by contrast, saw the unification of South Africa as the key to economic prosperity (and therefore British immigration), but also to that reconciliation between British and Afrikaners which was essential for future imperial loyalty. 'I have always told you that I am much more of a pro-Boer than you', Curtis wrote to Milner (Lavin, *From Empire to International Commonwealth*, 77). Milner was persuaded to secure funds for the Kindergarten from the Rhodes Trust (set up under the terms of Cecil Rhodes's will), and Curtis—by now acknowledged as 'the Prophet' of the group—was set to work on a memorandum setting out the case for unification. With minor amendments by Selborne, and after a wrangle between the latter and the Colonial Office, the memorandum was published on Selborne's authority (and supposedly in response to a request from the Cape government, orchestrated by Curtis) in July 1907.

The publication of the Selborne memorandum was the trigger for a rapid movement towards the unification of South Africa. The Kindergarten helped the movement in a variety of ways. Curtis, now a nominated member of the Transvaal upper house, organized closer union societies throughout the four colonies, and engaged in dextrous backroom persuasion. Kerr edited *The State*, the organ of the movement. Brand and Duncan advised the Transvaal delegation to the National Convention. By June 1909 a constitution had been agreed, and Curtis returned to England to lobby for its passage unamended through the British parliament. In August parliament passed the South Africa Act, and on 31 May 1910 the Union of South Africa was established. Selborne wrote to Curtis that 'the main credit for this work must always be yours' (May, 35). Ignoring the largely independent role of local politicians, Curtis also believed that the unification of South Africa was the direct outcome of the persuasive power of the Selborne memorandum, reinforced by the activities of the closer union societies.

The Round Table, 1909–1916

As early as 1907, Curtis wrote to Selborne that South Africa was a 'microcosm' of the British empire and that, once unification was accomplished, the Kindergarten might 'begin some work of the same kind in respect of Imperial Relations' (Lavin, 'Lionel Curtis and the idea of the commonwealth', 99). During the summer of 1909 Milner organized a series of meetings for Curtis with potential sponsors and collaborators, and sufficient agreement was reached to hold the first meeting of the Round Table at Plas Newydd, Lord Anglesey's estate in Anglesey, over the weekend of 4–5 September 1909. Among those present, besides Milner and the

available Kindergarten, were lords Howick, Lovat, and Wolmer, and F. S. Oliver. The Round Table was soon joined by Leo Amery, Lord Robert Cecil, Reginald Coupland, Edward Grigg, and Alfred Zimmern, but the core of the group remained, until the Second World War, the Kindergarten.

The aim of the Round Table was deceptively simple: to ensure the permanence of the British empire by reconstructing it as a federation representative of all its self-governing parts. Curtis depicted this as the logical outcome of the movement towards self-government in the dominions, and the only alternative to disruption and independence. The Plas Newydd meeting endorsed Curtis's strategy for achieving the aim (based on the Kindergarten's experience in South Africa) and agreed to appoint him general secretary of the Round Table and Philip Kerr editor of its eponymous journal, at salaries of £1000 each. Curtis was in fact to remain employed by the Round Table, except for a brief period when he was employed by the Colonial Office, until 1931, when he came into a substantial inheritance from his mother's side.

The two Round Table employees, together with William Marris, set out on a tour of Canada immediately, in September 1909. They returned with similar impressions, but radically different conclusions: Kerr believed that any attempt to stampede Canada into imperial federation would be counter-productive, whereas Curtis believed that time was of the essence. This was only the first of numerous disagreements within the Round Table, during which Curtis's colleagues attempted to restrain his ardour. Undeterred, he set out on a tour of the dominions—South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, then back via Canada—writing up his arguments as the first of a series of Round Table Studies, and forming branches in all the major centres of population. Through high-level contacts and his own remarkable persuasive skills, Curtis was able to recruit members from among the leading figures in each dominion. Nevertheless, his activities aroused considerable suspicion, which was not helped by his habit of masquerading as a South African, and his lack of candour concerning the extent to which the branches were intended to be propaganda, and not merely study groups. The movement suffered an early setback at the Imperial Conference of 1911, when, having read Curtis's memorandum, the prime minister of New Zealand, Sir Joseph Ward, made an impassioned but confused plea for imperial reconstruction, only to be savaged by his prime ministerial colleagues.

Curtis's Round Table Studies failed to convince many of his fellow Round Tablers either in the dominions or in the London group. Particular sticking points were his insistence that any imperial government should have the power of direct taxation, and that India and the dependencies should come under the control of the dominions as well as of Britain. His elaboration of the 'principle of the Commonwealth'—the idea that the empire existed in order to promote self-government, in the dependencies as well as the dominions—only made matters worse. Various of his colleagues described the principle as illogical, unhistorical, dangerous, and irrelevant to the movement's fundamental aim.

Curtis's reaction to such criticism was not to modify his ideas, but to embark on an even more ambitious programme of 'studies'. His year as Beit lecturer in colonial history at Oxford, in 1912–13—which prompted the Beit professor, H. E. Egerton, to complain that he felt like a country rector with the prophet Isaiah as his curate—gave Curtis the opportunity to add academic substance to his arguments. Thereafter, he set to work on a three-volume study of the imperial problem, tackling, respectively, its history, its contemporary manifestations, and its possible solutions; he also worked on a shorter volume, designed for popular consumption.

By the outbreak of the First World War, Curtis had still to finish any of his projected volumes. The arguments within the Round Table remained unresolved, and were exacerbated by the circumstances of the war. Many believed that the dominions' war efforts made a reconstruction of the empire unnecessary; Curtis, by contrast, argued that unity would have prevented—and, without institutional change, was unlikely to survive—the war. The original plan was for Curtis to publish his volumes on behalf of all the Round Table groups, and as the fruit of their collective research. This proved impossible, but Curtis was authorized to publish, under his own name, *The Commonwealth of Nations, Part One* (his historical examination of the empire and of the principle of self-government) and *The Problem of the Commonwealth* (the one-volume argument for a federation of the empire), both in 1916.

The publication of Curtis's books aroused considerable interest in the press. Few public figures were willing to endorse his conclusions, but many admitted the force and cogency of his arguments. Curtis immediately set out on a tour of the dominions, to arrange for local publication and stimulate debate. His hopes that the Round Table groups would convert themselves into propagandist organs were soon disappointed: the groups (particularly in Canada) showed themselves anxious to distance themselves from his views. Even in England, the majority of his colleagues tempered sympathy with scepticism. Eventually they committed what for Curtis was the heresy of admitting co-operation to be a more fruitful line of advance than federation, at the time of the 1917 imperial war cabinet and conference. By then, however, Curtis's interest had shifted elsewhere.

Empire to Commonwealth

Curtis arrived in India in November 1916 to promote his books and attempt to form Round Table groups there. He ended up staying until February 1918, unable to resist embroiling himself in the debate on the constitutional future of the country. His interest in India had first been aroused by Marris, and in 1912 and 1915 he had taken part in discussions with a group of experts collected by the Round Table, to find ways of meeting Indian demands for self-government and equality of status within the empire without endangering stability or British interests. In 1915 he suggested the system which he later called 'diarchy', whereby responsibility for a range of subjects could gradually be transferred from

a British-controlled provincial administration to a parallel, Indian-controlled one—or, if necessary, back again. He persuaded Indian civil servant Sir Frederick William Duke to draw up a scheme for Bengal, and sent copies to the viceroy and the India Office. When he arrived in India, therefore, he came already armed with a constitutional blueprint.

Curtis expounded the case for 'diarchy' in a series of *Letters to the People of India* and *Indian Studies* in 1917, and scored a notable success by persuading a group of Europeans and Indians from Bengal to sign a widely publicized Joint Address. Following Edwin Montagu's declaration of August 1917 and his arrival in India in November, Curtis met the secretary of state on numerous occasions, and lobbied vigorously for the adoption of his scheme, with considerable success. Back home, he brought his influence to bear on the joint select committee charged with examining Montagu's report, driving its chairman, Lord Selborne, at times to distraction. The resultant Government of India Act of 1919 (the Montagu–Chelmsford reforms) differed in several respects from Curtis's original proposal but incorporated the most important element of his scheme. Lord Amptill commented in the House of Lords that, 'but for the chance visit to India of a globe-trotting doctrinaire with a positive mania for constitution-mongering, nobody in the world would ever have thought of so peculiar a notion as that of "Dyarchy"' (Lavin, *From Empire to International Commonwealth*, 135).

Curtis's interest in the question of trusteeship led him to publish an influential article in the *Round Table* of December 1918, setting out the case for a system of mandates under a League of Nations, and advocating Anglo-American cooperation as the basis for post-war international stability. On the strength of this he was appointed a member of Cecil's League of Nations section at the Paris peace conference. His contribution to the conference at an official level was perhaps less significant than his unofficial work promoting the idea of an Anglo-American institute of international relations, to guide official thinking after the war. This resulted, in 1919, in the founding of the Institute (later the Royal Institute) of International Affairs in London and, slightly later, of the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. Curtis was acknowledged as the 'father' of the British Institute (Gathorne-Hardy, 1): it was he who organized the first meetings, secured funds from Sir Abe Bailey and others, and persuaded Colonel R. W. Leonard to purchase 10 St James's Square (Chatham House) as its permanent home. He resigned as secretary of the institute in 1930, to prevent it being seen as a 'one-man show' (May, 241), but he remained a councillor and a member of the endowment committee. In 1944 he was honoured by being made a president of the institute.

In June 1921 the *Round Table* published another influential article, written by Curtis and John Dove after a visit to Dublin, which advocated ending the Anglo-Irish conflict by giving the fullest measure of dominion self-government to the south. This resulted in Curtis's appointment as second secretary (and in effect constitutional adviser) to the British delegation at the Anglo-Irish treaty talks of

October to December 1921, and as adviser to the colonial secretary on Irish affairs until October 1924. In the latter capacity he worked to ensure the observance of the treaty obligations on both sides, and was instrumental in securing the appointment of an Irish boundary commission, in accordance with the terms of the treaty, and with his friend Richard Feetham as chairman, in May 1924.

Meanwhile, on 16 April 1920 Curtis had married his former secretary, Gladys Edna (*d.* 1965), known as 'Pat', the youngest of ten daughters of Prebendary Percy Richard Scott, of Tiverton. In June 1924 she lost a child in late pregnancy, in circumstances which left her unable to conceive again. She was a devoted wife, who endured with fortitude Curtis's alternations of enthusiasm and neglect.

Prophet of federalism

In May 1921 Curtis was elected to a fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford, where he joined many Kindergarten and Round Table colleagues, and was one of few fellows to earn the friendship of T. E. Lawrence. He and Pat moved to Hales Croft, Kidlington, a house converted for them by Herbert Baker, which was to be their home until his death. After resigning from the Colonial Office, he engaged with enthusiasm in university politics and fund-raising. He was largely responsible for the founding of the Oxford Society in 1930, and for securing the gift of the Wytham Abbey estate to the university. He was also involved, with Reginald Coupland, Kerr, and others, in unsuccessful attempts to found an Oxford school of government or of African studies. His interest in environmental questions found expression in short-lived but intense campaigns against sky-writing and ribbon development.

Through Chatham House, Curtis was closely involved with the organization of a series of unofficial Commonwealth relations conferences, and with the Institute of Pacific Relations. His interest in the Far East (which he regarded as the most probable storm centre of future conflict, and therefore the testing ground of international and imperial co-operation) resulted in his acting as adviser to the municipal council of the Shanghai international settlement in 1929–30, and publishing *The Capital Question of China* in 1932. In 1935 he unsuccessfully attempted to persuade the British government to hand over control of its South African protectorates to South Africa, arguing that only by having responsibility for all the consequences of their 'native' policy would South Africans come round to a more liberal view. He published a longer version of his controversy with Margery Perham in *The Times* as *The Protectorates of South Africa* (1935), gallantly allowing Perham the last word. His interest in Africa also resulted in his securing funds from the Carnegie Foundation for an *African Survey*, which he persuaded Lord Hailey (now a member of the Round Table) to write.

Curtis's main work between the wars was writing a new series of Round Table studies, eventually published as *Civitas Dei* (3 vols., 1934–7). This was a long and at times rambling discourse on the idea of commonwealth from the time of Aristotle onwards. His assertion that he saw the hand of God in the British empire was derided by his more sceptical colleagues (who once again refused Curtis's work the Round Table imprimatur), but it was well received, especially in liberal Anglican circles.

Curtis's empire federalism remained undimmed after its decisive rejection by the Imperial Conference in 1921, but it gradually became submerged in a vision of an international commonwealth, based on a union of the Western democracies and their empires. With the failure of appeasement (which he warily criticized) [see Cliveden set], federalism regained its currency, and Curtis once again engaged in federalist activism, promoting Clarence Streit's book *Union Now* and joining Lord Beveridge and others in sponsoring federal union. His attempts to convert the latter from what he considered its excessively Eurocentric orientation led to frequent internal conflict, and eventually to Curtis's leaving the group.

Curtis spent the majority of the Second World War in Oxford, co-ordinating the work of Chatham House's foreign research and press service (at Balliol College), and organizing servicemen's league groups. Ostensibly as the outcome of the latter, he published a series of pamphlets advocating immediate federation between the British Commonwealth, the United States, and the surviving Western democracies. The Round Table's rejection of his creed embittered him, but with funding from Sir Malcolm Stewart and others he maintained his output of pamphlets after the war. Notably in *The Master-Key to Peace* (1947) and *The Open Road to Freedom* (1950), he argued that atomic power and the cold war had brought a federation of the Western democracies within the realm of practicable possibilities. He joined the executive committee of United Europe in 1947, and attended the Hague conference in 1948, where he argued for a wider framework of federation which would include the British Commonwealth and the United States. His work for international peace was recognized by his nomination for the Nobel peace prize in 1947; in 1949, the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of Chatham House, he was made a Companion of Honour.

Curtis died at his home in Kidlington on 24 November 1955, and was buried in the chapel of All Souls College on 26 November. Tributes from around the world testified to the enormous range of his influence. He was not an original thinker, but he was a persuasive writer and even more persuasive in person. As Lord Salter later recalled, 'neither I nor others ... often succeeded' in 'resisting what Lionel Curtis wished [us] to do' (Salter, 239). His influence was at its height in the years before, during, and immediately after the First World War, largely as a result of his contacts through the Kindergarten and Round Table. In later years he ploughed a more lonely furrow, and came almost to relish his image as a prophet scorned.

ALEX MAY

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Wealth at death

£19,908 7s. 8d.: probate, 13 Feb 1956, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*

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