18th Nehru Memorial Lecture, by John Grigg;
Trinity College, Cambridge
11 November 1994

INDO-BRITISH MYTHOLOGY ABOUT THE APPROACH TO INDEPENDENCE

Myths are by definition untrue, though some may contain a measure of religious, moral or poetical truth and others, at a lower level, may in certain circumstances have a practical justification. For instance, it was helpful for the British in 1940 to believe that they had been let down by their French and Belgian allies, when the opposite was more truly the case. Nicholas Harman's admirable book on Dunkirk is accurately subtitled "The Necessary Myth". But however necessary that particular myth (which he explodes) may have been at a moment of supreme national crisis, its persistence in the post war era could only be harmful, not least to Britain itself. When political mythology has served its turn it should no longer be allowed to distort our understanding of the past. Truthful history, anyway desirable for is own sake, is no less so as an aid to realism in regard to the present and future.

In this lecture I shall be concerned with the political mythology that developed during the last phase of British rule in India, and has largely held the field since. Some of it is peculiar to the British side, some to the India; but the most potent myth of all enthrals a great number of people on both sides, and throughout the world. According to this, the Indian national movement under Gandhi's leadership undermined British power and weakened Britain's will to rule to the extent that the Raj ceased to be viable. No single agency has done more to propagate and perpetuate this myth (for such I believe it to be) than Richard Attenborough's film Gandhi, about which I shall have more to say in a moment. The view of history that it presents is flattering to both sides, since it shows India as having produced a uniquely effective as well as uniquely noble leader, and Britain as having been capable of responding creatively to his unprecedented form of national leadership. But one has to ask the awkward question: is it true?

A distinctively British belief, largely through not wholly at variance with the above, is that Indian independence was, almost from the first, the goal of British rule in India, which would in any case have been reached in the mid-twentieth century, give or take a few years. A distinctively Indian belief is that the tragedy of partition which accompanied independence was entirely due to divide-and-rule policies practised by the British, and in no degree the result of inherent communal rivalry or of any failure by Indian politicians to take adequate steps to overcome it. The cumulative effect of these views about the approach to independence, jointly or separately held, has been to generate on both sides an unwarrantable blandness and serious misunderstanding of many vital elements in the story.

My purpose in challenging them will not be to debunk any of the great personal reputations involved, though I shall attempt to suggest that some of them need to be reinterpreted. Above all, I shall be trying to separate truth from myth in a story of which, even when de-mythologized, both sides have more reason to be proud than ashamed - though there are considerable grounds for shame, and still more for regret, on both sides. Moreover, since partition created a third side, I should add that the genesis of Pakistan is rather more complicated than most exponents of Indo-British mythology are prepared to admit.
Returning now to the Gandhi film one has to recognise its immense significance in our audio-visual age. For millions it provided their first and only access to the subject, and for millions more a version of events which is unlikely to be effaced. The film's superb qualities as cinema, combined with Ben Kingsley's marvellous performance in the central roe, must have given the message of the film an impact and influence of vast proportions.

Up to a point the message is not false. Gandhi was a great man, and in many ways an exceptionally good one (just as good as many saints, though the description seems to me not quite right for him). The leadership he gave was difference from that given by any previous national leader, in India or anywhere else. He did make a big impression on many British people and on the world at large, as well as on his own compatriots. His anti- communalism was perfectly sincere, and never more heroically demonstrated than in the last months of his life, ending with his death as a martyr to the cause. His personality was singularly attractive and fascinating, its charm much enhanced by the delightful humour that is well brought out in the film. In all these respects the Attenborough spectacular does not mislead. Yet in other most important respects the message conveyed by it is gravely misleading. By concentrating so relentlessly on Gandhi it suggests that other leaders of Indian nationalism were little more than extras in the unfolding drama, a suggestion aggravated by the bad casting of most of them; in particular, of Jawaharlal Nehru. Most of the British figures in the film are grotesquely unconvincing, and this is true above all of Lord Irwin (Viceroy 1926-31), played by John Gielgud. Quite apart from the fact that Gielgud is always Gielgud, with a voice and appearance so familiar that he cannot effectively impersonate anyone else, the nature of the Irwin-Gandhi relationship is completely misrepresented. The film suggests that Gandhi's salt march in 1930 was not just a public relations triumph (which it was) but a substantive triumph (which it was not). Irwin is made to say to his aides before the march begins "Mr Gandhi will find it needs a great deal more than a pinch of salt to bring down the British empire"; and then, after the march, to receive Gandhi stiffly at Viceregal Lodge to tell him, as if conceding defeat, that he will be invited to London to discuss "independence for India". At about the same time Gandhi says (in the film), "They are not in control; we are".

Historical truth is far removed from this travesty. Irwin's Dominion Status declaration, which is the only conceivable basis for the "independence for India" remark, was made in 1929 the year preceding the salt march. Though it outraged Winston Churchill and others in Britain who regarded the idea of constitutional change in India with abhorrence, it committed the Imperial government (as Dr Gopal has written) "merely in the sphere of ultimate purpose", and "from the British standpoint surrendered no ground". There was no question of an early, let alone immediate, grant to India of the status enjoyed by Canada, Australia and other self-governing Dominions. The declaration was no more than a statement of intent of a kind which, in slightly different terms, had been made before. As for Irwin's direct dealings with Gandhi in the year following the salt march, these took the form not of a single brief, constrained encounter, but of eight meetings running to a total of nearly twenty-four hours. The two men got on extremely well, because they talked the same language, metaphorically as well as literally. Both were highly intelligent, and both were religious as well as worldly. But in Irwin's case worldliness was the stronger factor; if both were, in a sense holy foxes, the British fox proved the foxier. Apart from the psychological advantage of seeming (as Churchill put it) to "parley on equal terms with the representative of the King-Emperor", Gandhi gained little from the talks. Irwin's privately avowed aim was to drive a wedge between him and Congress radicals such as Nehru, and in this he largely succeeded. Whether or not he ever said that it would take more than "a pinch of salt" to bring down the British Empire, the comment was certainly correct.

It has to be understood that India's political independence was not won by Gandhi's leadership, any more than it was voluntarily conceded by enlightened British statesmanship. When it eventually occurred, after the Second World War, it was due to world forces and a fundamental change in the balance of power. Far from accelerating independence, in the sense of getting rid of the British, Gandhi probably delayed it by a quarter of a century. His unique characteristic as a national leader was that he was less concerned to make his people independent, in the commonly accepted sense, than to make them fit for independence. He wanted them to become morally self-governing as a precondition of political self-government, and he wanted

to purge Indian society of indigenous evils, such as Untouchability, more intensely than he desired the removal of foreign rule.

The nobility of Gandhi's distinctive form of nationalism cannot be doubted, and its long-term influence for good, not only in India but worldwide, may well more than compensate for its short-term ineffectiveness. Not that it was altogether ineffective even in the short term. Gandhi did mobilise the Indian masses, inspiring them with a sense of national unity and dignity. He also achieved significant, though limited, results as a reformer. Yet the ambiguities that abounded in his character and thinking in many ways diminished his value as a leader, in the process damaging the national cause that he was so eager to serve. Moreover, his ascendancy within the national movement – deriving partly from his extraordinary personal charm, but above all from his appeal to the masses – made it difficult for other outstanding figures in the movement to prevail against him on the not infrequent occasions when they were right and he was wrong.

Gandhi was ambiguous, for a start, as between his Indian ness and his British ness. Before he was twenty, but when he was already a husband and father, he left his family to spend two and a half years in London. He did so in defiance of caste taboos, showing early the moral courage and force of character that he never ceased to show. His time as young man in England was unquestionably the vital formative period of his life. His training as a lawyer at the Inner Temple, which resulted in his being called to the bar in 1891, stood him in good stead during his fight for India rights in South Africa, the scene of the next phase of his career, and later of course, in India. Much of his philosophy of life derived from what he heard and read in London. Having promised his mother not to touch meat while he was there, he became a confirmed vegetarian under the influence of Henry Salt. He moved in circles where temperance and the simple life were extolled. He read the Bible and found the Sermon on the Mount particularly compelling. It was in London that he read, for the first time, the Bhagavad Gita – in an English translation. And when, soon after his arrival in South Africa, he founded a community dedicated to personal abstinence and manual labour, the immediate inspiration for it was his reading of Ruskin's *Unto This Last* . The *satyagrahi* that he became stood partly in an immemorial Indian tradition, but also in the tradition of English puritanism, with an unmistakably late-Victorian flavour. Throughout his time in South Africa, and for some time after his return to India, he believed very firmly in the British Empire's beneficence. During the First World War he was convinced that Indian support for the British war effort would be rewarded by self-government for India within the empire. Though many other nationalists, including Mohamed Ali Jinnah, felt that cooperation should be given only in return for a guarantee of self-government after the war, Gandhi refused to take advantage of Britain's difficulties. More than that, he offered his services to the viceroy as, in effect, a recruiting sergeant, regardless of his pacifist principles. His subsequent disillusionment may help to explain his very different attitude during the Second World War, when after a time he went too far the other way.

Nevertheless, even when he turned against the empire – shocked above all by the Amritsar massacre in 1919 – his hostility remained intermittent and equivocal; hence his susceptibility to Irwin. His attempt to identify himself with the Indian masses, by living among them and dressing like them, showed the flair for visual self-projection that great leaders have often shown. But it was all the more necessary in his case, granted the extent to which he was more British than Indian. Churchill was missing the point when he referred to him as a half-naked fakir. His thoroughly un-British appearance disguised the profoundly anglicised Indian that he actually was.

This, surely, was one reason for the special bond that came to exist between him and Jawaharlal Nehru. Otherwise their differences of mentality and outlook might well have kept

them apart. Whereas Gandhi was religious and, on many issues, deeply conservative, Nehru was agnostic, secularist, socialist, and orientated towards modern science. Whereas Gandhi believed that anything and everything could be achieved by non-violent methods, Nehru's instincts were by no means pacifist. Yet Nehru grew to revere Gandhi, and Gandhi to look upon Nehru as his favourite political disciple and the man best fitted to lead India in the future. Many of the qualities that they possessed separately had been combined in an earlier giant of Indian history, Raja Ram Mohun Eoy (1770 – 1833) who, like Gandhi, sought to reform and purify Hinduism, but who was also, like Nehru, very keen on science, writing to a British governor-general (as Nehru himself records in The *Discovery of India)* emphasising the need for education in mathematics, chemistry, anatomy and other "useful sciences". Like both Gandhi and Nehru he was much influenced by Western ideas, and not only went to England but actually died there (at Bristol).

A century later Gandhi and Nehru formed a sort of composite of Roy, though both were also natural leaders with the precious gift of charisma. Nehru was the more anglicised of the two, having been brought up in an intensely anglophile home before being sent to England for education at Harrow (which he enjoyed), as he later enjoyed prison) and Trinity College, Cambridge. Gandhi said of him that he was "more English than Indian in thoughts and make-up". Gandhi had spent his childhood and youth in India, in an undilutedly Indian atmosphere, before going, by his own choice, to England and thereafter spending twenty years in South Africa. So he merely had to rediscover India in middle life, whereas Nehru, returning there as a young man, had to discover his native land more or less from scratch. Gandhi, being himself so anglicised, helped him to do so, providing a bridge from one culture to the other.

Though Nehru was the more radical nationalist of the two, he nevertheless shared, in large degree, Gandhi's ambivalence about Britain. Gandhi was aware of this, and appreciated his mixed feelings, knowing that, to Nehru, he did not have to use "British" or "English" as derogatory words. When in 1934, Nehru was showing signs of restlessness at the failure of Congress to make sufficient headway, Gandhi wrote to reassure him of his own enduring commitment to the cause:- "I want complete independence for the country in the full English sense of the term". No greater compliment has ever been paid to the English political tradition than this remark, in a private letter, from such a man as Gandhi to such a man as Nehru.

If Gandhi's cultural ambiguity was a factor robbing him of the necessary single-mindedness as a fighter against alien rule, a more serious liability was his attempted conjunction of the roles of religious and political leader. Another Mr G – Gladstone – with whom he had quite a lot in common, brought religion into politics in such a way as, often, to perplex his supporters and infuriate his opponents. He, like (later) Irwin, was a genuinely religious man who was, nevertheless, primarily a politician. In Gandhi the balance was more the other way, but in him, too, the elements were mixed, and with similar results. Politicians are not meant to be saintly and often have to resort to manoeuvres which, however idealistic in intent, may appear the reverse of saintly, at any rate to those who feel they have been outmanoeuvred. In his activities as the formal or informal leader of Congress Gandhi must often have caused people to react in the spirit of Labouchere's well-known comment on the other Mr G, that he had no objection to Gladstone's habit of concealing the ace of trumps up his sleeve, but did object to the claim that God had put it there.

Yet Gandhi's vulnerability to such sentiments was not the worst consequence of his dual note. More damaging was his incapacity to give the sustained, unrelenting attention to politics that the leader of a huge and singularly complex national movement needed to give. And there was another, even more disastrous, consequence. Though his Hinduism did not preclude – indeed, most emphatically included – deep and genuine respect for other religious, in particular for Christianity and Islam, the mere fact that he was a Hindu revivalist as well as leader of

Congress enabled sectarian fanatics or political enemies in other religious traditions to exploit the fear that Congress Raj would be Hindu Raj. Nehru's secularism was, in this respect, more appropriate to the needs of Congress as a party which, in aspiration if not always in fact, was committed to the idea of a secular Indian state. But he, even more than Gandhi, made the capital error of underrating both the latent force of Muslim feeling and, above all, the formidable political qualities of the main who harnessed it to fatally divisive effect, Mohamed Ali Jinnah.

Jinnah, it must be recalled, was not always a wrecker. In his early career he was as good an Indian nationalist as anyone, dedicated not only to freeing India from foreign rule but to establishing its independence as a united country. He was a member of Congress before he joined the Muslim League, and between 1913, and 1920 was a member of both bodies, regarding their aims as perfectly compatible. In the Lucknow Pact between them (1916) they asserted together the demand for Indian self-government, while Congress accepted the principle of separate electorates and weightage for minorities which was to become such a bone of contention later.

The split that developed between Congress and the Muslim League was largely due to Jinnah's personal incompatibility with Gandhi, and later with Nehru. Like Gandhi, Jinnah was an anglicised lawyer (in his case, from Lincoln's Inn), and both were strong minded men. But there the resemblance ceased. By temperament and conviction Jinnah was an elitist, whereas Gandhi, if not exactly a democrat, was an ecumenical populist with a mission to the masses. It was on that issue that Jinnah was estranged from Congress in 1920. Gandhi's determination to turn it into a mass organisation was anathema to him and he also regarded its claim to inclusiveness as a threat to his own position. He was no religious fanatic, no ayatollah; his commitment to Islam was cultural, not sectarian. But when it became apparent to him that Congress would not deal with him or his League on equal terms, he knew how to appeal to sectarian passion among his fellow Muslims. Willy-nilly the elitist then turned populist, with an effectiveness that few would have predicted.

Jinnah's essentially secular character might have made Nehru more congenial to him than Gandhi, and vice versa. Besides, the two men were even more Westernised than Gandhi. But the barriers between them were Nehru's socialism, his devotion to the democratic ideal, and his conviction that independent India, like Congress, must be unitary and all-embracing. The critical moment was in 1937, when the 1935 Government of India Act came into force. In the elections held that year Congress did extremely well and the Muslim League very badly, winning only 4.8 per cent of the Muslim vote. Congress won 711 of the 1,161 seats it contested, returning with a clear majority in five provinces and as the largest part in three others. Before the elections, when it did not expect to succeed on such a scale, it was glad to cooperate with the League, which campaigned on much the same programme. The tacit understanding was that Congress-League coalition governments would be formed, wherever possible, to exercise the powers devolved under the act. But in the flush of victory Congress treated the League with contempt, offering places in government only in return for virtual fusion with Congress.

Gandhi advised a more magnanimous attitude, but was in one of his periods of semi-detachment from the practical affairs of Congress, and so did not insist. Nehru's view at the time is summed up in his remark "There are only two forces in India today, British imperialism and Indian nationalism as represented by the Congress". Jinnah who had been even more detached than Gandhi, spending four years in England in the early 1930s, but had returned to lead the League, took up Nehru's challenge "No, there is a third party, the Mussulmans". Soon he was able to demonstrate, in a crucial by-election, that his appeal to Muslim fears of

Congress rule was all too potent. His campaign gathered momentum, taking an increasingly separatist form. Three years later he proclaimed the concept of Pakistan.

It is easy to sympathise with Nehru. His desire for a totally non-communal democracy was as admirable as it was genuine. But he gravely underrated the communal factor, just as he underrated the personal force of a proud, wounded and vengeful Jinnah. Nehru was president of Congress at the time and therefore more directly responsible than Gandhi for what, in retrospect, must be seen as a truly calamitous error. But Gandhi was much to blame too, because he failed to exert his moral authority to the full on what proved to be a vital issue.

Before considering the very last phase, from the Second World War to partition and independence, we must now turn to the British response to Indian nationalism, and to British mythology on the subject. Was the imperial government committed in practice to leading India to self-government at the earliest possible moment? Were the only obstacles to the attainment of this worthy goal the perversities and complexities of Indian life, or were these, in effect, a convenient excuse for the perpetuation of British power? A carefully selected anthology of statements by unrepresentative individuals might suggest that the British were, for at least a century, missionaries for Indian self-rule, but even those who might be termed enlightened on the issue had many reservations and viewed the end of the process as remote. Mountstuart Elphinstone, for instance, said in 1854 "We must not dream of perpetual possession" – which was really only another way of saying that the British Raj would last into the far and indefinite future. A few years later one of the most advanced spirits of the age, John Stuart Mill, who had worked for the East India Company, wrote that Indians were not yet, and might never be, fitted for representative government like Canada or Australia. He had in mind concepts of government more in tune with previous Indian experience; certainly not what Gandhi was to call "independence … in the full English sense of the term".

John Morley, the Liberal secretary of state who put through an extremely modest measure of constitutional reform in 1909 wrote privately of his work "We have to do our best to put a broken set of communities on a constructive road; to guide men over a long slow transition". At about the same time Ramsay MacDonald, returning from his first visit to India, published a book on the subject in which he wrote that the country would not be ready for self-government in he foreseeable future. Britain, he said, was the "nurse of India", whose desertion of her charge would leave the country "the prey to disruptive elements within herself … to say nothing of what would happen to her from incursions from the outside". Such was the opinion of one of the most radical politicians of the day, who was even more of a rarity in having taken the trouble to see India for himself. (When MacDonald formed the first Labour government in 1923 he was the first British prime minister to have had direct experience of India since the Duke of Wellington nearly a century earlier).

One other important British politician visited India during the period immediately preceding the First World War. Edwin Montague, as under-secretary for India in the Asquith government, went there ins 1912-13. He went there again in 1917-18, as secretary of state for India under Lloyd George. Meanwhile the First World War and India's contribution to it, together with strong united demands for self-government from Hindus and Muslims, had elicited from the British Cabinet this statement (August 1917):- "The policy of His Majesty's Government, with which the Government of India are in complete accord, is that of increasing association of Indians in every branch of administration and the gradual development of self-governing institutions with a view to the progressive realisation of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire". The words "gradual" and "progressive" inevitably conveyed, and were intended to convey, the message that nothing dramatic was likely to happen for some time to come; and the term "responsible government" was substituted for "self-government" at the behest of Lord Curzon, now a member of the War

Cabinet, but earlier, as viceroy, noted for his implacable opposition to Indian nationalism. Even so, responsible government was the status enjoyed by Canada and other self-governing Dominions within the British Empire, soon to be renamed, so far as they were concerned, the British Commonwealh of Nations. It was the "Dominion status" later proclaimed – or rather re-proclaimed – as India's goal by Irwin.

The formula of responsible government under the Crown derived from Lord Durham's famous report on Canada in 1839, and it is worth recalling the circumstances in which that report came to be written and – more to the point – acted on. The loss of the American colonies was still quite a recent memory, so when, in the 1830s, disturbance broke out in Canada the imperial government was naturally alarmed. The need to make some concessions was recognised, if Britain's remaining large foothold in North America were not to be lost. The extent of the concessions proposed by Durham was neither anticipated nor, perhaps, fully appreciated at the time. But there was a general understanding that something had to be done to avert the threat of further trouble in Canada, and Durham was a major politician whose proposals could not be ignored. If there had been no fear of another North American rebellion, he would not have been sent and nothing would have been done. Ironically, Durham was chosen for the job by Lord Melbourne partly, at least, because he was a potentially dangerous rival whom it was expedient to have out of the country. (For similarly personal reasons Sir William Beveridge was recommended by Ernest Bevin as a suitable man to preside over an inquiry into social insurance in 1941 – because Bevin wanted to get him out of the ministry of labour. Beveridge himself at the time regarded the inquiry as "a backwater". Hence two of the most influential reports in British history.!)

As well as the "responsible government" statement, India's role in the war was acknowledged by representation in the Imperial War Cabinet that Lloyd George set up. But, whereas Canada and other Dominions were represented in it by the prime ministers, responsible to their own parliaments and electorates, India was merely represented by the secretary of state and three nominated "assessors", two of whom were Indian. Much of the same pattern was followed at the peace conference, in which the Dominions participated as effectively independent states, while India remained all too obviously dependent.

In 1919 Montague enacted the reform measure associated with his name and that of the viceroy, Lord Chelmsford. Again, it was a very modest affair. If he had been a free agent he might well have gone the whole hog and introduced self-government on the Dominion model, but unfortunately he was anything but a free agent. The prime minister, Lloyd George, though a fellow Liberal, had never been to India and, whatever he might say, had no sense of urgency about far reaching Indian reform. Had he visited India, as Montague had, his vivid imagination might have grasped the country's political potential. But even then he would have had immense difficulty in persuading his supporters in Parliament to vote for a more adventurous measure. Conservatives always predominated in his coalition, and after the 1918 election did so even more strongly. At all events, the Montague-Chelmsford reforms left the central autocracy intact, while extending, to a very limited degree, both the franchise and the exercise of responsibility by Indians at the provincial level, in a system known as dyarchy. The vote was widened to include only 5 ½ million of the 250 million inhabitants of British India. At the same time a tentative move was made towards involving princely India in the politics of India as a whole, by the creation of a Chamber of Princes.

In the 1924-9 Baldwin government the secretary of state, Lord Birkenhead, was absolutely opposed to Dominion status for India, and an unashamed exponent of "divide and rule" on communal lines. "I have always" (he wrote to the viceroy, Lord Reading) "placed my highest and most permanent hopes upon the eternity of the Communal situation". The rift between Jinnah and Congress was, of course, playing into the hand of those who shared his view on the

British side. But most people were neither as reactionary as Birkenhead nor as progressive as Montague would have liked to be. The inadequacy of constitutional reform in India between the wars was due, above all, to the instinctive reluctance of an established system of government to threaten its own existence, when not otherwise sufficiently threatened. The British Raj enhanced the power of a medium-sized country off the coast of Europe, provided British governments with a valuable dimension of patronage, and gave many individual British people scope for lifetimes' work which might be self-interested, altruistic or (in most cases) a mixture of the two. It would have been against the nature of collective Man to change such a system fundamentally when the pressure to do so could be resisted without much difficulty. The national movement, as led by Gandhi, attracted worldwide attention and admiration, but posed no physical threat. Consequently, the average British view of Indian self-government during the period was similar to St. Augustine's attitude to chastity – that it would come one day, but not yet.

A striking contrast should be noted between two events which occurred at much the same time: the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921 and Gandhi's decision, in February1922, to stop a campaign of mass civil disobedience when a mob led by Congress volunteers set fire to a police station at Chauri-Chaura in U.P., causing the death of 22 policemen. Under the Anglo-Irish Treaty the Twenty-Six Counties of Southern Ireland obtained Dominion status, after two years of terrorist violence in which policemen were among the principal targets. There are many differences between the two situations, and one cannot be at all sure that an Indian Michael Collins would have won Dominion status for India at that time, by using the methods that Gandhi nobly spurned. In any case, Collins did not win the all-Irish republic he sought, and the Treaty only happened because the British government's counter-terror was effective against him (as he admitted), while at the same time sickening British public opinion and so making it ready to accept compromise. Nevertheless, one has to observe that 3 million people within easy reach of the main forces of metropolitan Britain obtained Dominion status, while 300 million people thousands of miles away did not.

The two chief developments on the British side between the Montague-Chelmsford reforms and the Second World War were the Simon commission and the 1935 Government of India Act. The Simon Commission outraged Indian opinion by consisting only of British members, including the future Labour prime minister under whom Indian independence – and partition – would come about, C R Attlee. While he was in India with the Commission Attlee wrote to his brother Tom (echoing, and slightly misquoting, Danton) that what was needed in British policy towards the country was "l'audace, toujours l'audace". But there was nothing audacious about the report that the Commission issued, and it is curious and rather piquant that Attlee signed it. In view of his later reputation one might have expected him to produce a one-man minority report arguing the case for immediate Dominion status. But the 1930s were not the 1940s, and even later he was, as we shall see, less audacious then mythology would have us believe.

The 1935 Act raised the franchise to about a quarter of the adult population, and made provincial autonomy almost complete. But the discredited concept of dyarch was retained in the plan for a central government, which was to come into being as part of an all-Indian federal scheme. In fact, this scheme was never implemented (for reasons not wholly attributable to the British), but if it had been it would have fallen a long way short of Dominion status. Essential power at the centre was not to be transferred. Nehru's description of the Act as a "charter of slavery" may have been somewhat over-polemical, but nobody could describe it as a charter of freedom. Many of its provisions were useful and have survived in the constitution of independent India. But at the time it was bound to appear yet another measure to frustrate India's legitimate desire for full self-government.

At the outbreak of war in 1939 the British government had the chance to redress, by a single gesture, much of the harm done by inadequate constitutional reform. Despite the feelings stirred during the previous two decades, there was a massive willingness, even on the part of active nationalists, to support the British and democratic cause. In the circumstances it would have been overwhelmingly appropriate for representative Indian leaders to be consulted before India's participation in the war was proclaimed. Morally, if not legally, this was clearly what should have been done. Instead, the viceroy Lord Linlithgow, issued a proclamation without seeking, first, to associate Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah or any other Indian leaders with it. And he did not respond positively when Nehru wrote to him soon afterwards:-

> I want … to tell you how much I desire that the long conflict of India and England should be ended and that they should cooperate together. I have felt that this war, with all its horrors, has brought this opportunity to our respective countries and it would be sad and tragic if we are unable to take advantage of it.

Nehru of all people deserved to be taken seriously when he wrote such a letter. Nobody had a better record of principled opposition to the Nazi and Fascist dictators. While British politicians were visiting them and going to indecent lengths to appease them, he refused invitations to meet them. Even Churchill, so hostile to Nehru the nationalist, as to Nehru the socialist, appreciated his anti-appeasement record enough to send him, just before the war, a message of goodwill through an intermediary. Penderel Moon's comment on the missed opportunity of September 1939 sums it up well:-

> A simple straightforward statement in general terms that a war for freedom could only end in the freedom of India might have swung Nehru, and with him the whole of Congress except (extremists such as Subhas Chandra Bose), in favour of cooperation. But Linlithgow was opposed to any definition of war aims, nor were the members of Chamberlain's Conservative Government men who could supply in regard to India the imaginative insight that Linlithgow lacked.

The result was that, far from cooperating, the Congress provincial ministries resigned, though Gandhi as yet would not embarrass the government by any resort to civil disobedience. One should add that the breach between Congress and Jinnah was already, perhaps, too deep to bridge. If the two had stood together the viceroy might have had to give way, but when Nehru proposed to Jinnah that they should make a joint approach, he was rebuffed.. Linlithgow wrote to the secretary of state (Zetland):- "If Mr Jinnah had supported the Congress demand and confronted me with a joint demand, the strain upon me and His Majesty's Government would have been very great indeed". But Linlithgow should have taken the initiative in proposing to them, before announcing that India was at war, that they should sink their differences and work together in a common cause, offering them at once a share of real responsibility. It is to the credit of Attlee and the Labour Opposition in Britain that they condemned this crass failure of statesmanship.

The Second World War changed everything. The Japanese victories in 1941-2, culminating in the surrender of Singapore, fatally damaged Britain's imperial prestige, while showing how insecure were the foundation on which, for some time, it had been based. In 1942, when the Japanese were at the gates of India, a member of War Cabinet, Sir Stafford Cripps, was sent to India with what amounted to a clear pledge of Dominion status after the war, and meanwhile an offer of close involvement for Indian leaders in many aspects of war direction, though not outright control of the armed forces and national defence. For Jinnah, there was no explicit assent to Pakistan, but provision that the provinces of British India, like the princely states, would be individually free to decide their own future.

The Cripps offer was not at first turned down by Jinnah, and among the Congress leadership several key figures, including Nehru and C R Rajagopolachari, were disposed to accept it, if only as a step in the right direction which would inevitably lead to others before long. But Gandhi intervened decisively against it. His experience after the First World War made him reluctant to accept a promissory note from the British government, and in any case he was more single-mindedly unwarlike than he had been during the First World War. While Nehru and others were acutely conscious of the need to defend India, by force of arms, against the Japanese, Gandhi favoured opposing them by non-violent methods. So at length the offer was rejected by the Congress Working Committee, and also, for other reasons, by Jinnah.

When Cripps received his assignment the analogy of Durham's mission to Canada was mentioned. But Cripps carried less weight than Durham. He was sent to India with a package that had already, in substance, been put together by the home government; his freedom to negotiate was limited. Yet, while he lacked the authority to dictate, he was not ideally fitted for a diplomatic role, and his known partiality for Congress did not make him the best man to deal with Jinnah.

The only hope of a breakthrough at that moment lay, probably, in a visit to India by Churchill himself. He had the idea of flying out, but was dissuaded from doing so by Linlithgow and the secretary of state, Leo Amery. They were alarmed less by the views on India that he had for so long held, than by the very different ones to which he might be converted on the ground. His only experience of the country had been as a young cavalry officer in the 1890s, when he saw virtually nothing of its inhabitants beyond the barracks and the camp. But his mind was capable of big imaginative leaps, which could be disastrous but were quite often inspired. Direct contact with the Indian leaders might have resulted in inspiration, and if he had seen what needed to be done he, unlike Cripps, had the authority to do it. Moreover, he might have inspired them to work together. But he was headed off, Cripps was sent, and another opportunity was missed. Worse still, his unreconstructed attitude ensured that further wrong decisions would be taken about India during the rest of the war.

First, however, a grave mistake was made on the Indian side. This was the "Quit India" campaign which followed the failure of the Cripps mission. The motivating force behind it was Gandhi, and the whole episode must be regarded as one of the least creditable of his career. Convinced that the British were on the run, and remembering, no doubt, his disappointment in the First World War, when he had backed their war effort at a time of crisis in the hope of post war satisfaction, he persuaded Congress to issue an ultimatum. "Either they recognise India's independence or they don't … there is no question of one more chance … it is open rebellion". Nehru and a number of others were deeply unhappy about the policy, but felt obliged to go along with it. A few, however, - and most notably Rajagopolachari, despite a close family tie with Gandhi – opposed it openly, arguing that, in the absence of agreement between Congress and the League, ending British rule would result in chaos which the Japanese would be able to exploit. Jinnah, for his part, denounced Gandhi's plan, saying that he was trying "to coerce the British Government to surrender to a Congress Raj".

But Gandhi was not to be deflected, and he carried the All-India Congress committee with him by an overwhelming majority. After the vote he uttered dangerously ambiguous words:- "Here is a *mantra* …'Do or die'. We shall either free India or die in the attempt; we shall not live to see the perpetuation of slavery". His intention was that the rebellion should be non-violent, but the words "Do or die" were clearly open to misinterpretation, and the disturbances that followed, though sporadic and in no sense a properly organised rebellion, involved a good deal of violence – far exceeding the solitary incident at Chauri-Chaura which had so horrified him twenty years before. Meanwhile he and other Congress leaders had been arrested and imprisoned: in his case, in the Aga Khan's palace at Poona (where the *Gandhi* film shows him,

without any explanation of the reason for his being there). Early in 1943 he tested the nerve of the government with a fast which many though he would not survive. But Linlithgow did not blink, and in the end Gandhi was not among the thousand or more Indians who died, to no avail, in the campaign.

"Quit India" succeeded only in weakening Congress and giving Jinnah every opportunity to build up the Muslim League's strength. The government was able to use its war emergency powers to telling effect, but only because the vastly expanded Indian armed forces, together with the police, remained firmly loyal to the government. Or rather, they remained loyal to India, at a time when the country was manifestly facing a deadly external threat. The British Raj did not collapse in 1942-3, because most Indians wisely felt that the top priority was to keep the Japanese out.

After his negative triumph against Gandhi, Linlithgow's long and, on the whole, unfruitful viceroyalty came to an end. Churchill tried to persuade Anthon Eden to take the post, because (rather like Melbourne and Durham) he wanted Eden out of the country. But, after much dithering, Eden declined. The name of Lord Louis Mountbatten was mentioned, but he was appointed, instead, to the South-East Asia Command. Churchill's eventual choice was the commander-in-chief in India, Field-Marshal Wavell. Wavell was an intelligent, honest and scholarly man, with quite progressive instincts. But he did not have the instincts of a politician. Indeed, he had a strong distaste for politics, and was inclined to be taciturn in company. Such a man was unlikely to make much headway with the highly articulate leaders of a nation that revels in talk and argument, at a time of supreme political ferment. In appointing him Churchill said "that it would probably be a war appointment, and that he would make a political appointment after the war". In other words, there was to be a moratorium on politics in India until the war was over.

In 1943 it was very late – perhaps already too late – to save the unity of India. All the same, one cannot resist the thought that there might still have been just a chance if either Eden or Mountbatten had then become viceroy, rather than Wavell. Eden was a top politician with a following in all parties and a proved gift for negotiation. He would have wanted to make a success of his mission, and he had the stature to defy Churchill, as he did, for instance, over de Gaulle and the Fighting French. Mountbatten, though younger and not a professional politician had very similar talents. But Wavell was appointed, and yet another opportunity was missed.

We come now to the very last phase of the story, and one point has to be made at once, with emphasis; there was no way Britain's position in India could be maintained after the Second World War. Whichever party had been elected in 1945, the practical consequence in India would have been much the same. Until 1939 Britain was still – just – a superpower, but in 1945 the country was enfeebled and bankrupt. Its people were looking inwards to their own problems, and had lost whatever enthusiasm they may once have had (never, in fact, all that much) for imperial power. In the post war world there were two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, who were agreed at least in being opposed to all empires other than their own. The question was not long whether the British would have to leave India, but when and in what circumstances.

The Labour government elected in1945,and led by Clement Atlee, was committed to the principle of transferring power, but not to transferring it in the absence of agreement between the Indian parties. Yet the elections soon held in India showed how little chance there was of agreement, granted the polarisation of opinion. The Muslim vote was overwhelmingly won by Jinnah, who therefore became all the more intransigent in his demands. For the rest, Congress maintained its strength. In March 1946 Attlee decided to send a three-man Cabinet mission, in which Cripps was the dominant figure. The Mission stayed in India for seven weeks, but its

attempts to secure inter-party agreement came to nothing. Instead, it produced a plan of its own, which amounted to partition of the country under the guise of unity. There would be a central government, but responsible only for foreign policy, defence and communications. Jinnah accepted the plan, though probably only for tactical reasons. Nehru, as president of Congress, prevaricated, which gave Jinnah an excuse to withdraw his acceptance. (It was perhaps unfortunate that Nehru was Congress president at this moment, rather than the more hard-headed and realistic Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. Patel had very strong grassroots support, but Gandhi intervened to secure the post for Nehru).

At the end of July 1946 the Muslim League, in its so called Bombay Resolutions, reasserted its intention to settle for nothing less than an independent Pakistan, while also declaring that it would promote its cause by "direct action". An interim government was formed by the viceroy, but this never functioned as a unified body, even when the League agreed to take up its quota of seats. Meanwhile violence and unrest were growing throughout the country. The viceroy – still Wavell – could see that the government's policy of seeking an agreed settlement before withdrawing was doomed, and in September he put forward a plan for a phased withdrawal to be completed by the end of March 1948.

Since this plan, known as "Breakdown", very largely foreshadowed the actual course of events, Attlee's reaction to it may surprise those who take too simple a view of his role. He rejected it outright. Though withdrawal from India "might eventually become a necessity", for the time being the plan was quite unacceptable. "World opinion", he said, "would regard it as a policy of scuttle unworthy of a great power".

About three months later he changed his mind, influenced by unmistakable evidence that the situation in India was getting out of hand. In early 1947 he sacked Wavell and appointed Mountbatten, essentially to give effect to Wavell's policy. He had offered Mountbatten the post (though without telling Wavell) the previous December, since when he had been discussing the practical implications. Though he had come round to the idea of a time-limit, he did not at first want this to be too precise; but Mountbatten insisted on precision, and eventually accepted the viceroyalty only when he had a clear instruction that power was to be transferred by 1 June 1948. He also obtained a very wide, if not exactly plenipotentiary, freedom to negotiate.

Mountbatten was the right choice, however unjust and ungracious the manner of Wavell's supersession. It was now definitely too late to save the unity of India, as Mountbatten soon discovered. But the situation called for resourcefulness, flair and panache, and with those qualities the last viceroy was richly endowed. Of course, he has his critics, among whom a brilliant young historian, Andrew Roberts, is the most recent as well as the most savage. In Robert's book, *Eminent Churchillians*, the essay on Mountbatten is a comprehensive denunciation in which no redeeming features are allowed, and his viceroyalty is treated with special venom. The ultimate verdict of history is likely to be far more charitable. Any assessment of Mountbatten's performance in India should take fully into account the extreme volatility and danger of the situation he found there. It should also be based on a proper understanding of the political background. In my view, Roberts fails on both counts, and his attack therefore seems to be grossly unfair.

Though Mountbatten undoubtedly – and inevitably – made mistakes, his achievement as a whole is impressive. He may have given insufficient attention of warnings of trouble in the Punjab at the time of partition, and if so must share the blame for one of partition's most tragic consequences. But he cannot be blamed for partition itself, which was the supreme tragedy. Of all the major figures in the approach to independence he, surely, was the least responsible for what Gandhi called the "vivisection" of the country. Moreover, if he had not taken the

decision he did to advance the date for transferring power to August 1947, the carnage would almost certainly have been on a vastly greater scale. Once it was recognised that partition had to happen, there was nothing to be said for delaying its implementation. The longer the delay, the more deadly the consequences were likely to be. In many other ways Mountbatten acted with unique effectiveness; for instance, in his handling of the princes. But his most important contribution was to grasp the sad necessity for partition, and then to implement it with the utmost urgency.

Some who condemn the speed with which he acted argue that partition might have been avoided if anyone other than Jinnah had been leading the Muslim League – which is, indeed, very arguable – and that in 1947 Jinnah was a dying man. But this was not known at the time, and he did not, in fact, die until September 1948, several months after the date originally fixed for the transfer of power. Even if Mountbatten had known that Jinnah was dying, he could only have played for time, and time was against him. While he waited for Jinnah's death millions of ordinary Indians would have died, while the country dissolved in chaos.

Yet to claim that Mountbatten came reasonably close to making the best of a bad job is not to pretend that what happened to India in 1947 was a resounding triumph for him or anybody else. Jinnah got only what he called a "moth-eaten Pakistan". Nehru's tryst with destiny was redeemed "not wholly or in full measure" (a considerable euphemism). Gandhi was heartbroken. The British, in leaving India, had to partake in destroying the proudest achievement of their period of rule: the country's unity.

Could the story have been different, or were all concerned in it the prisoners of an ineluctable fate? Is it entirely fanciful to picture an alternative scenario? I think not and will try, very briefly, to suggest what it might have been.

At the beginning of the present century India had a talented nationalist elite, which was still united; all the religious communities, if not all social cadres, were represented in it. If the British desire to work towards Indian self-government had been wholehearted and unqualified, that was the time when, at the very least, the reforms enacted in 1935 should have been brought in. Dominion status might then have followed naturally after the First World War. Failing spontaneous action on the part of the British – which, for elementary human and political reasons, was hardly to be expected – the same result might well have been achieved if in 1918 Indian nationalists had been more militant and had given the British government a serious fright, such as the Canadians had given ninety-odd years before. Instead, Gandhi's leadership in the immediate post war period was irritating without posing any real threat to the British while it divided the national movement – fatally, as events were to prove – through the alienation of Jinnah.

A fully self-governing and united India could have carried out its own internal reforms during the interwar years, establishing its own democratic structure. It could also have made its influence felt in the world. If, as I believe it had decided of its own free will to enter the war in 1939, as Canada and the other Dominions did, it would have gained so much prestige, as well as power, by 1945 that its right to a seat at the world's top table could not have been denied. Since China then became a permanent member of the UN Security Council, India must have become one too.

Indian leaders whose practical abilities were consumed, over twenty-five years, in largely futile campaigns of civil disobedience would, instead, have spent the best years of their lives governing their own country. Patel was one natural ruler whose gifts would have been properly employed; and many others could be mentioned. Jinnah's difficult personality might have been transformed by the exercise of power, for Acton's hackneyed *mot* is surely

misleading: impotence quite as much as power, tends to corrupt. Gandhi would have been free to act as the conscience of the nation, without the complication of political leadership, and without having to fight, as it were, on two fronts.

As for Nehru, in whose honour this lecture is given, how would he have developed in the 1920s and 1930s, if India had been free? My belief is that responsibility would have moderated his views without weakening his idealism. In the Second World War he might have emerged as a major international figure. With India behind him, and more than two million Indians under arms, he should have counted for more – as an Asian leader – than Chiang Kai-Shek, while his record and personal qualities would have made him an outstanding spokesman for democracy. We might never have had his splendid *Autobiography* and other fruits of his incarceration as an agitator. But there would have been much to compensate for such losses.

Alas, it did not happen. We have to deal with historical reality. But history permits us to speculate about what might have happened. It does not permit us to perpetuate myths about what did.