CHAPTER 1

THE AFTERMATH OF THE REVOLT
1858–69

I

Writing to his friend the Governor-General and Viceroy, Charles Canning, in India on 23 July 1859, Gladstone reported that the Cabinet had been informed the previous day ‘that that mutiny which may also be called rebellion, civil war, or whatever else is most formidable, was now really at an end’.¹ It had in fact been much more than a mere mutiny. What had started as a rising of the Indian soldiers in the Bengal army gradually gathered support till it became the only large-scale revolt in India in the nineteenth century. The Indian sepoy (soldier) had some specific causes for discontent; but he was also in most cases only a peasant in uniform, and he could not but be affected by the general mood in the villages from which he came. Many of the soldiers of the Bengal army were Brahminds or Rajputs, and nearly a third of them had their homes in Oudh. They knew of the harsh and impatient manner in which the East India Company had set aside families which had been respected as royal for centuries. They were aware of the economic and social changes which were taking place in the country, of the landholders who had been deprived and of the local industries which had been destroyed. They themselves had at times been marched in haste to stop such practices as the immolation of widows. So in 1857, when they mutinied, they incited as well as batten on sympathy from all the discontented. The army voiced grievances other than its own; and the movement spread beyond the army. The conservative and feudal elements in Bengal, Bihar, the then North-West Provinces and central India acted together, when the opportunity arose, in an effort to restore the past. Canning himself recognized the nature and seriousness of the rising. ‘The struggle which we have had has been more like a national war than a local insurrection. In its magnitude, duration, scale of expenditure, and in some of its moral features it partakes largely of the former character.’²
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The outbreak took most of the British in India completely by surprise. Statesmen in Britain, with less knowledge of detail, had shown more prescience. Canning in 1856, on the eve of his departure for India, had spoken of the possibility of such a rising.8 Palmerston, despite his indifference to Indian affairs, was aware that the maintenance of the Indian empire might well become a military problem. ‘No man can pretend to say that we may not have to defend India in India.’4 But British officials, civil and military, had expected no violent uprising. ‘None are more surprised at what has happened at Meerut than those who know the Sepoys best—and I have lost, entirely, all confidence in the Commanding Officers of Regiments, who with scarcely an exception swear to the fidelity of their men.’5 Taken aback, these officials now moved to the other extreme; filled with alarm and fear, they demanded dire vengeance. But Canning stood firm and refused to sully justice with indiscriminate reprisals. With little support from Britain, where public opinion had been greatly stirred by the reports of the savagery of the rebels,6 he did all he could to curb the racial feelings which had been aroused. Responsible opinion in Britain gradually came round to his side, and the man of whom Dalhousie had written years ago at Oxford that he would never ‘make a figure’7 stood in 1859 upon a pinnacle.8 Canning’s qualities were not spectacular, but they were suited to this crisis.

All sections of political opinion in England were agreed that, once the flames had been quenched, the East India Company should be set aside and the British government should assume direct responsibility for the administration of India. But there was no similar unanimity on the way in which this should be done. Palmerston introduced a bill for the management of Indian affairs in Britain by a president and council; but his ministry fell before the bill could be enacted. On behalf of the second Derby ministry Disraeli brought forward a bill providing for a president and a council elected by a complicated process. This scheme was so severely criticized that Disraeli replaced it by another measure which became the Act of 1858. India would be governed directly by and in the name of the Crown, acting through a Secretary of State. He would be aided by a council of fifteen members, of whom at least nine should have served in India for not less than ten years and have left India not more than ten years before their appointment to the council. This body would be presided over
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by the Secretary of State, who could if necessary overrule their decisions. Nor was he bound to keep them informed of all communications with the Government of India; it was for him to decide what would be kept secret.

In India the central administration continued to remain in the hands of the Governor-General in Council. Being now the representative of the Crown, the Governor-General was given the new title of Viceroy. This was intended to be a purely ceremonial title, for there was no definition of viceregal duties. But Canning, the first Viceroy of India, was pleased with his new designation and expected it to be of use, probably in impressing the Princes and other conservative elements in Indian society. It certainly gave the head of the Indian government an exalted status and in the ninety years that followed it was as Viceroy—the empty title—rather than as Governor-General—the designation of responsibility—that he was best known.

The title of Viceroy was conferred not by the India Act of 1858 but by the Royal Proclamation which was issued on 1 November 1858. Canning was not consulted by the Derby Government in the drafting of this document, but the Queen, who 'is the strongest Canningite I ever saw', ensured that it expressed most of his views. The Princes were assured that their rights, dignity and honour would be respected, and it was declared that Indians would be treated on a par with all other subjects of the Crown. There would be no religious discrimination, land rights would be protected, due regard would be paid to the ancient rights, usages and customs of India and the official service would be open to all. Unconditional pardon would be granted to all who laid down their arms by 1 January 1859, except those who had directly participated in the murder of British subjects or who had sheltered those guilty of such crimes or had acted as leaders or instigators of the revolt. It was only the failure to insist on the immediate return to the ways of peace, the suggestion that the revolt was legitimate for the rest of the year and the promise to protect all rights connected with land which seemed to Canning open to criticism.

The assumption of the government of India by the Crown was marked by no ceremonial durbar; but the Proclamation was read in all the Indian languages and copies were sent to all the Indian
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Princes. The significance was not lost on the Indian people. British civil servants also looked forward to the change; and it was only among the soldiers of the Company’s armies that there was some resistance. Most men, having surmounted a revolt, would have regarded their work as done; but Canning wished at least to commence the task of seeking the objectives laid down in the Proclamation. The general amnesty had been his own suggestion. In September 1858 he had proposed to Stanley that when resistance was melting the rebels should be pursued with pardons. ‘I do not believe that anything short of this forcible pardoning will impress into their minds the truth of our desire to pardon.’ He now instructed the withdrawal of all pending cases which did not involve the murder of British subjects, the harbouring of such criminals or the acting as leaders of the revolt. Sentences already passed would be effective but cases of confiscation should be favourably considered. Canning’s Government were of the view that while literally and legally, British subjects included Indians as well as Europeans, the Proclamation had intended that only murderers of Europeans should not be pardoned; and the local governments were directed to withdraw cases pending against alleged murderers of Indians to preclude the courts holding that the amnesty did not apply to them. This interpretation was approved by the home government.

It was in Oudh, more than in any other part of India which had been affected by the rising, that the military revolt had expanded into a popular rebellion involving all sections of society; and it was therefore here more than anywhere else that the government had thought it necessary to render the success of their arms complete. A large proportion, perhaps half, of those serving in the regiments which had mutinied in Oudh had been killed in the course of the fighting; and few of those who survived dared to come in and surrender. They hovered near the villages with the clandestine support of their friends, and the government thought it likely that a heavier retribution had overtaken them than those who had been killed or had died on the gallows. Oudh, in fact, was thoroughly cowed. The Oudh government reported that all classes except perhaps the fanatical Muhammadan rabble of the towns admitted that they had been beaten after a trial of strength in which all the advantages had been for a long time on their side, and it was generally felt that this conquest had given the British government a
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better right to govern Oudh than annexation had done. Sir James Outram, the Chief Commissioner, and John Lawrence favoured a general amnesty for all rebels and mutineers, but Canning felt that so generous a step would be liable to misconstruction. It should be made clear that mutiny was ‘not a game in which if they get safely through the first hot scurry they may reckon upon escaping scot free’. While hanging and shooting should be reserved for special cases, a large number of those captured should be sentenced to transportation. The Chief Commissioner was informed that it was essential, considering the state of the province and the avowedly hostile temper of nearly the whole population, that criminal justice be administered with an iron hand. He was even authorized to declare that capital punishment would be awarded in all cases of personal violence even if death had not ensued.

It was also decided to disarm the population and dismantle the forts. Outram thought that this could be done without difficulty. The people of India respect power and they can well understand how a strong Government will suffer no armies or strongholds but its own. Popularity is not to be gained by a display of weakness, and if the people would have felt no temporary irritation against, neither would they have entertained any respect for, a Government that despite of the teachings of the late insurrection had left them the power again to attempt its overthrow with the slightest prospect of success. The Chief Commissioner has never met a native really attached to our Government who did not consider the disarming of the population one of the wisest acts of our policy.

Outram directed that officials should go on tour directing villages to hand in their weapons; and if they failed to do so, vigorous searches should be conducted. If the number of arms recovered was less than that of the number of men in a village, it could only mean that the weapons had been buried; for every man was bound to possess at least one sword, spear or musket. Permission to carry arms should be granted rarely, and for some time to come licenses to make and sell arms and ammunition should not be given.

As a result of the stern punishment of the guilty among the rank and file and the disarming of the whole province, by the end of 1858 Oudh was not merely subdued but tranquil. Canning decided that as the whole population of Oudh, with a few exceptions, had taken part against the government, the latter should resume their proprietary right over the whole province and then decide
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what was to be done with it. On 15 March 1858, after the fall of Lucknow, a proclamation was issued confiscating the proprietary right in the whole of Oudh with the exception of six specified estates; but the talukdars—the hereditary landowners—were assured that such of them as had not been accomplices in the cold-blooded murder of Europeans would have their lands restored to them. In addition, the Chief Commissioner was given the discretion to notify any talukdar that if he now came forward to support the government his lands would not be confiscated and even such lands as he had owned before Dalhousie’s general measure of confiscation might be restored to him.

The Oudh proclamation was generally condemned as too harsh, but in fact no greater leniency could have been shown; for under the discretionary powers vested in the Chief Commissioner, a large number of talukdars were not only pardoned but given back all the lands which they had owned. Some 22,658 out of the 23,543 villages in Oudh were restored to the talukdars in return for submission and loyalty in the form of collection and transmission of information. Even active aid in pursuing the rebels was not demanded of them. The denunciation by John Bright of the proclamation and its public censure by Ellenborough were not unfair but irrelevant. Whatever the letter of the proclamation, Canning’s Government had done very much more for the talukdars than even his critics had desired. His Liberal friends, who had sought to defend him by recounting the misdeeds of the talukdars, did not realize that he had sanctioned confiscation because that alone would enable the restoration of the talukdari system. Apart from clearing the ground, it demonstrated British strength. ‘This is native character. You must knock a native down before you pardon him. He will not accept your pardon till he is at your mercy.’ It was a puzzled Sir Charles Wood who, soon after taking over as Secretary of State, wrote to the Viceroy:

I cannot get over the confiscation in Oudh having enabled you to upset so completely all that we have been doing in settling the tenures in that country ever since we took it. It is so directly the contrary of what we supposed was the intention or could be the effect of the Proclamation that it takes one aback . . . I am low about our Indian future as everything seems out of joint.

But Canning was unrepentant. He visited Oudh and at a formal durbar granted the talukdars sanads or title-deeds of permanent
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ownership. He found the talukdars, who had expected to be mowed down by guns or at least permanently dispossessed, enthusiastically loyal, and he conferred on twenty-two of them authority in matters of land revenue on their own estates and the powers of magistrates.

Canning appealed to the British government ‘not to consider humbug what has been done in Oude’. The settlement of Oudh was part of his general scheme of strengthening an Indian aristocracy which would buttress British rule. ‘It is a curse and blunder of that rule that this has never yet been done—and only very feebly and partially attempted.’ His clemency was more than a virtue; it was a shrewd act of policy. When details of the revolt were received in England, the first reaction was that no section of Indian society could be relied upon. All Indians appeared to share a detestation of the British rulers. ‘In no instance is a friendly glance directed to the white man’s carriage. Oh, that language of the eye! Who can doubt it? Who can misinterpret it?’ It was concluded, therefore, that British power in India would have to be based primarily on force. But to Canning this seemed neither desirable nor possible. He realized that as Englishmen would never be more than a small handful in India, they could not hope to govern the country effectively if they distrusted all Indians and proscribed whole classes. ‘Saxon domination’, unsupported by the collaboration of at least some section of the Indian public, would be unable even to retain the Indian empire. In Bengal and Bihar there was not a single European soldier more than at the beginning of the crisis. In Orissa the total number of Europeans was not more than a hundred. Peace and order were being maintained in these areas by the goodwill and loyalist efforts of the upper classes —the rajas, the zemindars and the Indian officials. Though it was, of course, in their interest to support the British, Canning believed that it would be worthwhile to strengthen this interest by trusting them and treating them well. The fact that the British had surmounted the revolt could be no source of complacency. The Sikhs had been loyal but they were not trusted by the Viceroy. There was a feeling among them that they had saved the British but that the latter would not recognize this; so if the Sikhs got another opportunity they would seize it. It was true that the exclusion of Indians from the artillery minimized the dangers. An artillery manned exclusively by Europeans ‘is to India what a Channel
Fleet is to England. As long as it is strong we are all but secure against any attempt at disturbance. It will keep all in check, Sikhs included. But the most probable and most serious danger was the harassment of British power in India in the context of a European war, when the despatch of troops from Britain would cease and perhaps even those already in India would be withdrawn. ‘I believe there is but one way of meeting this danger, and that is to bring the influential classes—the native states first and afterwards our own chief subjects—into that condition and temper in which, when the moment comes, we may as completely as possible throw the reins on their necks and entrust to them the keeping of internal peace and order.’

Towards the Princes Canning adopted a policy of punishing resistance and rewarding obedience. He held two durbars, in Agra and in Lahore, to which the loyal Princes were summoned, confirmed in rank and titles and in some cases given an additional decoration. He also considered restoring to the Nizam some of the territories acquired from him—‘We should show convincingly that we can sometimes relax our grasp upon the good things that come within it’—but finally nothing was done. However, Scindia (the ruler of Gwalior) was enabled to consolidate his principality by an exchange of lands with the British. On the other hand, states like Dhar and Kotah, whose rulers had not adopted a firm attitude of support to the British during the fighting, suffered loss of territory.

To conciliate the Princes further by ensuring continuity of title and possession—disturbed by Dalhousie’s doctrine of lapse—Canning wished to grant them the right to adopt in the absence of a natural heir. ‘There never was’, he wrote to Wood, ‘such a time for the stroke; and if we are to have troubles at home and troops are taken from here, we must lay out all the anchors we can.’ The sanction of adoptions would be a less spectacular measure than the lavish durbars and the bestowal of large rewards, but its effects would be far more general and its results would last for ever. It was the indispensable foundation of the policy of reliance on the great Indian influences, to which Canning wished to dedicate not only the remainder of his viceroyalty but the rest of his life. The British should lose no time in binding to themselves the chiefs and the landholders and impressing on them that the fall of British power would mean no gain to them. Only then would the
empire in India be safe, in the face of either internal convulsions or external threats. Even fanaticism would give way to material interests. Wood was not happy about firmly closing the door to annexations, especially of pleasant hill stations, but he approved of the principle of friendship with the Princes and, fortified by the approval of Stanley and the Queen, assented to Canning’s proposal.

An occasion soon arose for implementing this policy and testing the bona fides of the home government. The raja of Mysore was sixty, had no heir and did not wish to adopt one. He declared that he should be the last representative of his house and that the British government should inherit his possessions. But the India Office entered into direct correspondence with the raja and, according to Canning, jeopardized the arrangement and demonstrated that the Viceroy had no voice in, and not even a knowledge of, decisions taken in a matter under his direct supervision. For the raja was informed that Mysore affairs would hereafter be the responsibility of the government of Madras. Because of Canning’s protest, this particular decision was revoked; but the influence of the Government of India had been weakened and the raja began to reconsider his proposal to bequeath his kingdom. Canning, therefore, wrote a vigorously worded minute protesting against the manner in which the home government had ignored the Government of India. He explained to Wood that personally he would have much preferred to have been silent. ‘But you are sapping the Governor-General’s authority and dispelling the superstitious sort of reverence in which it is held. Half a dozen reversals of my decisions or disallowances of my acts would not operate so effectually towards that end as the complete ignoring of the Governor-General’s office.’ Wood agreed that the autocracy of the Governor-General should be maintained and nothing derogatory to his authority should be done, though he could not understand in what way the viceregal authority had been shaken in this matter of Mysore. He was now anxious to secure possession of Mysore as a bequest or with the consent of the raja, but realized that it could not be forcibly taken. So he urged Canning, who had more influence than any other Englishman with the raja, to do all he could before his departure from India to prevent the raja adopting; and he was greatly disappointed that Canning, instead of confirming the raja’s half-promise to Lady Canning of a bequest,
had been willing to permit the raja to adopt a successor. Lord Elgin, who succeeded Canning in February 1862, was inclined to agree with Canning; but he was informed that the home government were keen that the state should revert to the Crown after the raja’s death, with the exception of any one district which the raja might grant to any relative for whom he wished to provide. The Viceroy was anxious to fall in line with the Cabinet and suggested somewhat uneasily that the raja could perhaps be bribed into abstaining from adoption. But the India Council advised the Secretary of State to restore the administration to the raja and to trust to his avowed intention of making it over to the British on his death. Wood was not pleased with this but could think of nothing better. ‘I am sadly puzzled between what seems to be our honest course, and my wish to secure Mysore.’ It was finally decided not to alter Canning’s decision.

John Lawrence, who came out as Viceroy on Elgin’s death in December 1863, argued that if the administration of Mysore were to be retained in British hands, it was the government’s clear duty and prerogative to refuse to recognize the right of adoption. Cranborne (later Salisbury), Secretary of State in the Conservative Government, replied that he had no particular sympathy for these Princes ‘who will certainly cut every English throat they can lay hands on whenever they can do it safely’; but the government should be scrupulously just to them and give them no reason for saying that Britain treated her promises lightly. He decided that while the raja’s treaty rights would terminate with his death, his adopted son, if he proved fit, might be given a portion of the kingdom under such conditions as the government might impose.

Lawrence welcomed this decision, but Sir Stafford Northcote, who succeeded Cranborne, disclosed that his predecessor had announced his decision without consulting his council. Northcote himself wished to transfer the whole kingdom to the adopted heir on the attainment of his majority on such conditions as the government might like to impose. Lawrence regretted the failure to apply Dalhousie’s doctrine of lapse to Mysore but agreed to abide by Northcote’s decision. So Mysore was saved from absorption.

At the rung below that of the Princes, Canning sought to win the sympathy of the feudal gentry and even created such a class where none existed. In Oudh he had not merely dealt leniently with individual talukdars but had supported the talukdars as a class.