Introduction: better men

Men made the Empire, according to countless stories consumed by
late Victorian and Edwardian readers, and, according to other stories just
as numerous, the Empire made men. The divergent emphases of these
two propositions suggest a muddled reaction to the range of doubts that
stories of men and Empire were called upon to relieve: could the strained
and far-flung Empire, increasingly beset by powerful economic and
military rivals, be preserved by Britain's stout, manly spirit? Or was it
that the men of a degenerate metropole required a stiff dose of the frontier
to scour off the accumulated weaknesses of an over-civilized life? The
confusion of the causal priority of manliness and Empire, however, does
not diminish the significance of a broader cultural conviction that the two
were mutually constitutive, that they made and reaffirmed each other.
This book examines a wide range of accounts of the exploits of British
heroes across real and imagined frontiers, but it is ultimately concerned
with a broader story of ideological change. Its real subject, in other words,
is not men and Empire but the ideas of masculinity and imperialism,
and the cultural synthesis they achieved between 1870 and 1914. The
historical specificity of this frame is crucial, not only because the connec-
tions between masculinity and imperialism were more pronounced at
this time than ever before, but also because new understandings of each
of these ideologies were consolidated during the same period. By the
late nineteenth century, the standard of manliness was carried by new
champions; paragons of midcentury manliness, such as the entrepreneur,
the missionary, and the affectionate family man, had been elbowed aside
by the untamed frontiersman, the impetuous boy, and the unapologetic-
ally violent soldier. Imperialism, meanwhile, rose to the center of popular
consciousness just as its political justifications were fundamentally trans-
formed. Emerging arguments about the meaning of manhood and
the purpose of Empire turned to each other for cultural authority, and
popular literature, which was undergoing changes of its own, mediated

1

the combination and disseminated to a wide and enthusiastic audience new fantasies of an imperialist masculinity.

Reflecting ruefully on these cultural transformations, Charles Masterman, Liberal journalist and soon to be MP for West Ham North, blamed the work of popular writers. These "Apostles of the New Imperialism" had successfully contrived a great betrayal of the literary mission: "Literature, after its long alliance with the party of reform, had deliberately deserted to the enemy."[1] Midcentury literature, Masterman argues, had been cosmopolitan, humanitarian, progressive – in a word, liberal. The new literature, by contrast, was above all imperialist, and imperialist in a "frankly Tory" way, one which "branded Liberalism as but a gigantic fraud by which the weak deluded the strong."[2] Not long ago, sanguine liberals had imagined an end to war, a brotherhood of nations united by trade, and the radiation of the "sweet reasonableness of the English character" across the globe. Now, bloodthirsty reactionaries "clamoured for the ancient Barbarism; and delighted in war; and would spread English civilization, not by a diffusion of its ideas but by the destruction of its enemies."[3] It was not even clear, Masterman goes on, that the values literature had come to embrace were English at all. If at some moments the New Imperialists crowed about English supremacy, at others they "neglected and despised the ancient pieties of an older England, the little isle set in its silver sea. Greatness became bigness; specific national feeling parochial."[4]

Masterman writes with the hyperbole of a frustrated partisan, but there is considerable substance behind his generalization about literature's turn to the aggressive, illiberal politics of the New Imperialism. The popular genres examined in this book, including pirate stories, military adventures, mummy tales, and lost-world fiction, all captured the imagination of enormous readerships and asked them to identify with heroes transformed by encounters with a vast, exotic, and savage world. Civilized England, as many of their protagonists thought, seemed narrow and dull by comparison. And though the point is only hinted at in Masterman's critique, much of this literature was also explicitly and self-consciously masculine. Aimed at a readership of men and boys, these stories centered on interactions between male characters; women – especially British women – were driven to the narrative margins, leaving questions of masculine identity to be decided by relations between and within male groups rather than by reference to feminine virtues. The new conventions of popular literature, moreover, emerged in the context of the romance revival of the 1880s, itself a highly gendered rejection of what were thought to be enervating feminine themes of contemporary realism and its delicate,

over-refined studies of character. In place of these, masculine romance would offer imaginative and exhilarating yarns that would speak to what Andrew Lang called "the savage within us," and "the old barbarian under our clothes."[5] Lang's claim that popular romances spoke to an abiding savagery in male nature corroborates Masterman's point that literature had abandoned progressive themes and "clamoured for the ancient Barbarism," but it also raises one of the most intriguing and overlooked dimensions of the New Imperialist masculinity: the extent to which it was articulated around images of foreign men – even non-white, uncivilized colonial subjects – as exemplars of proper manliness.[6]

Restlessly searching for aspirational models of better men, the New Imperialists often turned their eyes abroad, even to the enemies they confronted and the peoples they had conquered. If we are surprised by the diversity of places in which they claimed to discover such men, it may be because our expectations have been conditioned by the axioms of postcolonial cultural criticism. One of the most central of these, after all, has been the thesis that the Western imperial imagination is founded on the imperative to differentiate unconditionally between colonizers and their subjects, and thus to produce justificatory stereotypes about colonized peoples – their violent barbarism, their irresponsible childishness, their superstitious ignorance – that emphasized their distance from the civilized nations who were thereby entitled to rule them. In light of this thesis, the many counterexamples examined in this book pose a fascinating conundrum: at the very moment of Britain's greatest colonial power, the zenith of its cultural arrogance and racial chauvinism, the Empire was bolstered by fantasies of a manhood that transcends the distinctions of border and breed. Why is it that relationships between men, even if only imaginary, could function as an exception to the imperial rule? Through an analysis of popular literature aimed at men and boys, I show that the same stereotypes that had been used to denigrate the colonial Other were adapted by late Victorian and Edwardian men to crystallize new masculine ideals and give form to emerging cultural desires that were unrepresentable in the images of manhood they inherited from their fathers. The exotic barbarian was held up to male audiences as a figure with whom they had much in common, and who might therefore hold the keys to both a reinvigorated individual life and an empire made fierce enough to withstand the pressures of late nineteenth-century geopolitics.

The phrase "better men" reverberates through the wide range of popular texts considered in this book, appearing so frequently, I will suggest, because it promised an answer to urgent questions about the ideals of

masculinity and the global networks of power that shaped it. The note was struck most famously by Rudyard Kipling, Masterman's chief example of the literary "Apostles of the New Imperialism." Kipling's memorable line "You're a better man than I am, Gunga Din," provocatively recognizes superior masculine qualities in a foreigner who would once have been easily derided. The following chapters will explore many variations on this theme, beginning with an explication of "Gunga Din." I will argue that the force of Kipling's line for his contemporaries depends on a profound reorientation of the very notion of better manhood, one promoted by changing imperial politics: where early and mid-Victorian ideals of masculinity emphasized narratives of personal development (I am a better man than I was), later imperialist stories stressed continual competition (I am a better man than he is). This agonistic model could imagine putatively savage peoples as important players in a perpetual masculine contest, and not only as the opponents of British men but also as their counterparts or guides. At the same time, the dream of unceasing competition between men could naturalize and support the increasingly aggressive values that characterized the politics of imperialism from the 1870s to the First World War.

Asked to describe the Victorian ideal of manhood, most of us would probably conjure an image from the middle of the nineteenth century, say, 1860 or so: an earnest, mature, hard-working, morally upright paterfamilias, frock-coated and (in that decade) full-bearded. The prominence of this type represents the triumph of decades of ideological work through which middle-class values, drawing on liberal economics and evangelical seriousness, supplanted the older and increasingly disreputable image of gentry masculinity while appropriating and reworking some of its terms of approbation, such as gentlemanliness and chivalry.[7] The middle-class hero of midcentury, unlike his gentry predecessor, could make a virtue of trade and commerce, and – especially after the exhortations of muscular Christianity[8] – join in the strenuous crusade of social transformation. But his chief struggle was moral and internal. As both Herbert Sussman and James Eli Adams have shown, the master value of midcentury manliness was self-discipline, the ability to resist temptation and channel the springs of male energy to laudable ends. This inward drama was popularly staged as a narrative of moral maturation (as in David Copperfield's eventual mastery of his "undisciplined heart")[9] whereby a liberal developmental ideal of self-culture steered the natural impulses of boyhood into a carefully regulated manliness. No other challenge a man faced mattered more than this primary struggle for moral self-discipline: "the highest virtue,"

as Samuel Smiles advised, was "the victory over ourselves."[10] Charles
Kingsley's similar point suggests how the manliness of self-discipline could
be used in an imperial context to differentiate English virtue from the
behavior of unmanly savages: "To be bold against the enemy is common to
the brutes; but the prerogative of a man is to be bold against himself."[11]
The same quality of self-discipline used by Malthus to distinguish civiliza-
tion from barbarity had become a means of defining manliness against
the primal competitiveness of the savage.

Self-mastery was the close corollary of another key masculine ideal,
autonomy, which was itself an affirmation of liberal individualism over
the old aristocracy's hierarchical network of obligations, patronage, and
deference. Yet for all his isolating independence, the manly struggler
against himself was at least allowed the support of his domestic circle.
The importance of family relationships to masculine identity has long
been obscured by the inertia behind the stereotype of separate spheres,
the starkly gendered division between masculine public activity and
the feminine sanctuary of the household. But as we have been reminded
by such influential histories as Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's
Family Fortunes and John Tosh's *A Man's Place*, domestic life in its
real and idealized forms was a central pillar of middle-class masculine
identity. As Tosh puts it, "The Victorian ideal of domesticity was in all
respects the creation of men as much as women. 'Woman's sphere' was a
convenient shorthand, not a call to exclusivity."[12] The comfortable
household signified not only a man's success as a breadwinner, but also
a haven in which his manly character could be bolstered by the moral
influence of his wife or expressed through his divinely sanctioned author-
ity, as when he led the household in prayer. Domesticity thus offered
men profound pleasures of its own: "only at home could a man be truly
and authentically himself. While the workplace and the city crippled
his moral sense and disturbed his human relationships, home gave play
to feelings of nurture, love and companionship, as well as 'natural' forms
of authority and deference; it nourished the whole man."[13] The domestic
ideal framed interpretations of the Empire as well, so that the civilizing
mission was often represented as an effort to reproduce its gender
norms overseas. Thus British outrage over the Sepoy "Mutiny" in
1857 was fanned by accounts that emphasized its assault on domesticity.
The Indian rebels who had violated British homes and murdered women
and children were unmanly, but Henry Havelock, the great masculine
hero of the Mutiny's suppression, was celebrated as a man of "warm
domestic sympathies."[14]

What became of our ideal man of 1860? Scholarly investigations
of gender and sexuality during the later Victorian and Edwardian periods
have been engrossed by rebellions against the norm: aesthetes and deca-
dents, sexual dissidents of all sorts, the New Woman and, more recently,
her counterpart, the New Man. The powerful insights of this scholarship,
however, have overshadowed another vital part of the story, which is
that masculine norms were themselves in flux. Several independent lines
of evidence point to an erosion of the midcentury ideal. David Newsome,
for instance, notes the decline of the principle of moral maturity in the
late nineteenth century: the sense that boys could hardly be hurried into
adulthood quickly enough gave way to a version of manliness that hardly
cared "to make boys into men at all."[15] J. A. Mangan's work on the games
ethic, meanwhile, shows that while athleticism rose rapidly to cultural
prominence, it also departed from its earlier goals, enshrining a manliness
that had less to do with moral character than aggressive competition.[16]
John Mackenzie charts the rise of new popular exemplars of masculinity
during the same period; where Smiles had celebrated the engineer, entre-
preneur, and missionary, later generations were enthralled by the hunter
and, especially from the 1870s on, by the imperial soldier.[17] Tosh, mean-
while, argues that the 1870s were the beginning of an even more telling
transformation, which he calls "the flight from domesticity": wearied of
domestic pleasures and worried by emerging forms of women's authority,
increasing numbers of men rejected or postponed marriage, finding their
satisfactions instead within groups of male peers in homosocial institutions
such as the club, the athletic organization, or the military.[18] All of these
developments, along with others described later in this book, converge
during the late nineteenth century in the consolidation of what we might
call – with some caution – a new hegemonic masculinity.

The analytic frame of hegemonic masculinity that informs this study
derives from the work of the sociologist Raewyn Connell, who uses the
term to distinguish a society's most authoritative construction of mascu-
linity from other subordinated or marginalized models with which it
coexists: "At any given time," she argues, "one form of masculinity rather
than others is culturally exalted."[19] Connell's approach is not without its
critics, who point out that to select one cluster of masculine values as
hegemonic can oversimplify the diverse range of other contemporary ideals
as well as the even more intricate interactions between possible gender
configurations in the experience of individual lives.[20] Yet Connell's frame-
work remains valuable at the level of cultural analysis because it challenges
us to understand how some masculine models enjoy a privileged

relationship to institutional power, and thus exercise enormous influence over the lives of men and women whether they accept those models or not. At the same time, Connell's concept implies the fragility and contingency of a dominant model – any hegemonic masculinity stands uneasily at a moment between the configuration it has displaced and that which will displace it – and so spurs us toward a more historically nuanced analysis than, say, the uncomplicated alignment of masculine identities with social class. Connell's framework is helpful for the purposes of this book, moreover, because it highlights the power of an idealized masculinity, even when the kinds of activity promoted by the ideal are unavailable to the men who consent to it. Before the First World War, only a fraction of Victorian and Edwardian men had any direct experience of military or colonial life, much less of the rowdy voyages of colonial adventure fiction, but popular audiences found the dream of imperial masculinity no less compelling.

Outside the relatively few studies that have taken it as their particular focus, the conventional scholarly wisdom about imperial manliness has been content to point to a few of its most conspicuous traits – its militarism, its hostility to feminine influence, and its fascination with the powerful male body – and declare the period to be an age of "hypermasculinity." Yet that term misleadingly implies that the effect of the Empire was merely to intensify and exaggerate masculine values that already existed (or, more misleadingly still, that exist always and everywhere). In fact, just as the New Imperialism was not merely an escalation of earlier political commitments but a seismic revision of the Empire's purpose, so too was imperial masculinity marked by its readiness to reject earlier masculine values. The record of popular literature allows us to trace the displacement of these older forms and follow the ideological ramifications of imperialist masculinity to important new insights. It can show us, for instance, that fantasies of all-male communities subordinated not only the mid-Victorians' cherished domesticity, but also their belief that a man's most important struggle was against the standards of his own conscience. Judgments of the male group superseded the self-scrutiny of moral improvement, and shame surpassed guilt as the paramount mode of male anxiety. Discipline turned outward, too, from the internal struggle for self-mastery to a collective mode of discipline epitomized by the military, or to the individual resistance to external hardships prized by the growing emphasis on masculine endurance. At the same time, instinct and spontaneity could be valued over painstaking deliberation, and impulse and irrationality taken for passionate male authenticity. Transcendent principles or universal laws came to be less appealing than

malleable rules that enabled ludic, amoral contests of cleverness and guile.
Above all, popular literature can show us that transvalued stereotypes of
savagery became potent symbols of masculine possibilities, so that atavism
could be imagined as a sign of strength rather than weakness, exoticism as
one of virility rather than effeminacy, and the relapse into barbarism as an
empowering fantasy rather than a paralyzing anxiety. "Hypermasculinity"
scarcely does justice to these richly complicated and often contradictory
aspects of manliness, nor does it help us to see how thoroughly consistent
they were with the new demands of imperial politics.

By the 1870s, England was already the center of a vast Empire, but in the four
decades preceding the First World War it set its bounds wider still and wider.
Among the many new protectorates, colonies, and annexations during this
period we might list the Gold Coast (1874), Cyprus (1878), Egypt (1882),
North Borneo (1882), Upper Burma (1888), British East Africa (1888), South-
ern Rhodesia (1889), Kuwait (1899), Sudan (1899), and the several colonies
and conquered regions that were ultimately federated as South Africa in 1910.
All told, the territory added to the Empire in these decades amounted to
some forty times the area of today's United Kingdom. Even as the Empire
expanded, however, it faced new challenges from other empires that were
consolidating and widening their own spheres of economic, political, and
military influence. The alarmingly swift defeat of the French in the
Franco-Prussian War (1870–71) marked not only the rise of a powerful
German Empire but also the beginning of intense imperial rivalries,
European contests for resources and prestige that were decided in distant
terrains of Africa and the Pacific. The many little wars, diplomatic negoti-
ations, and innovations in legislation and colonial administration that
refashioned the British Empire during this period cannot be adequately
sketched in this book, which provides only enough background to allow
readers to follow specific arguments as they relate to particular instances
of colonial domination and imperial rivalry; readers who wish to learn
more about the events discussed in this book – such as the Sepoy Rebellion,
the Royal Titles Act, the occupation of Egypt and campaigns in the
Sudan, or the Second Boer War – can, I hope, readily find overviews in
widely available sources. In the following few pages, I want to emphasize
a different kind of context, a background essential for the broader argu-
ments of this study, but one that is possibly less familiar and certainly less
accessible than the lists of battles and bills. The context that requires
elaboration is the momentous turn in British attitudes about the import
and mission of the Empire.

The 1870s, pivotal years in the history of masculinity, also saw the birth of what would later be called the New Imperialism. Historians have disagreed about the precise definition of this term, its explanatory value, and even the boundaries of the period to which it should be applied, so it is necessary to clarify how the term will be used here.[21] By the "New Imperialism" I mean the cultural conviction, rooted in political discourse but broadly diffused through the media of popular culture, that the Empire was the source and proof of Britain's glory. In a period of intensifying rivalry with other emerging imperial powers, the Empire would be the bulwark of British prestige and global influence, so that close bonds with the colonies of white settlement required careful fostering, while control over non-white colonial dependencies had to be jealously maintained. It is in relation to these core beliefs – rather than to any coherent set of colonial policies or fits of territorial acquisition – that we can plausibly speak of the New Imperialism as the culturally ascendant ideology of empire from its emergence during the great political debates of the 1870s until its collapse on the battlefields of the First World War. To analyze its impact on Victorian and Edwardian popular culture, however, we must attend not only to the central convictions of the New Imperialism, but also to the nimbus of qualities and attitudes with which it became associated. These included, first of all, a frankly competitive spirit, demonstrated by an aggressive assertion of national prestige against threats from rivals and a militant readiness to defend or expand its influence (from the late 1870s, the more feverish demotic eruptions of this spirit would be called jingoism). Moreover, in its fixation on prestige, the New Imperialist ethos was attentive to appearances, attracted to the performative and even theatrical dimensions of power, enamored by spectacle, ceremonial pomp, and the bold symbolic stroke. Where the gesture failed, it was prepared to turn to naked force, and it intensely appreciated the military virtues. It was deeply concerned with honor, but less patient with the prohibitions of law, religion, and morality; to its proponents, this emphasis could be read as a pragmatic and realistic defense of British interests within the complex game of imperial powers, but to its enemies it seemed opportunistic, unprincipled, and Machiavellian. All these attitudes, as I shall argue over the course of this book, became attached in various degrees and combinations to popular representations of manhood. To clarify these broad strokes, we ought to begin with an individual man with whom all of these qualities were associated, Benjamin Disraeli, whose persona and policies were the chief inspiration for the New Imperialism, and who was enshrined in the years after his death as its symbolic champion. To appreciate the novelty of Disraeli's influence, however, we must take a step further back to his great rival, William

Gladstone, who became just as potent a symbol of liberal imperialism as
Disraeli became of the ideology that eclipsed it.

In the most important midcentury statement of his position on the
Empire, "Our Colonies" (1855), Gladstone argues that the global extension
of European power since the seventeenth century had been undertaken
for all the wrong reasons. The colonization of the Americas, for example,
had been driven by an irrational "love of gold" despite the claims of some
colonists to have been motivated by the impulse to spread the word of God:
"the history of the European civilisation in the West is a history of anything
other than the propagation of the gospel."[22] Other material justifications for
colonization had been similarly misguided. Those who sought to enhance
the revenue of their mother countries, especially by establishing exclusive
trading relationships, were blind to the truth later revealed by liberal political
economists that only free, open, and mutually beneficial trading partnerships
could effectively create wealth. Those who wanted to seize new lands
had yielded to an even more pernicious impulse, since the "lust and love
of territory have been among the greatest curses of mankind." Gladstone
also attacks the motive of prestige: though he allows that the reputation
of an imperial state might usefully augment its "moral influence, power and
grandeur," it ought only to follow incidentally from an otherwise admirable
colonial program rather than from a vain desire to "make a show in the
world."[23] Having repudiated this array of imperial motives as unsound
and unsavory, Gladstone asks, "Why then are colonies desirable?"[24] He
offers two answers. The first is material: colonization can open previously
untapped resources and develop new markets, and so increase global trade.
Yet because he does not believe that a colonial market should be fettered by
any protected relationship with its metropole, it is ultimately valuable only as
another market, not as a colonial market per se. Colonization is economic-
ally beneficial because it produces trade, not because it produces colonies.

More interesting is Gladstone's other reason for expansion: "the moral
and social results which a wise system of colonisation is calculated to
produce."[25] The English state should be moved to establish colonies, he
argues, only by same beneficent urge that prompts English people
to have children. The increase of population augments the power and
stability of a nation, and is a universal moral blessing insofar as it multiplies
the number of people living under conditions of decency and justice:

> We think that our country is a country blessed with laws and a constitution
> that are eminently beneficial to mankind, and if so, what can be more to be
> desired than that we should have the means of reproducing in different
> portions of the globe something as like as may be to that country which we