

9. Victorian Britain 1837-1901

William IV died in June 1837 and his successor was **Queen Victoria**, a petite and vivacious girl of eighteen. William had no legitimate heirs and Victoria was the daughter of his younger brother the Duke of Kent, who died in 1820, shortly after she was born. She was brought up in England by her German mother but on becoming Queen soon revealed that she had a strong character and a mind of her own. She also had definite likes and dislikes and became so fond of Lord Melbourne that she effectively kept him in office until 1841, having taken a dislike to the Tory Peel. She soon fell in love with her handsome first cousin **Prince Albert** of Saxe-Coburg, an intelligent and accomplished German, and they were married in 1840. Between them the young couple restored respect for the monarchy by avoiding the disreputable lifestyle of George III's sons and becoming the embodiment of 'Victorian' family values, surrounded in due course by their four sons and five daughters. Albert's fascination with the latest technologies led him to construct a state-of-the-art royal home at Osborne House, on the Isle of Wight, while Victoria's romantic love of the Scottish Highlands resulted in their acquiring Balmoral Castle on Deeside.

Hanover's laws did not permit a female sovereign, so William IV was succeeded as King of Hanover by his nearest male relative, his younger brother Ernest, Duke of Cumberland. Although George III never visited Hanover (and never travelled beyond Britain) it had been governed in his name by Hanoverian ministers and played a considerable part in the wars against France, emerging with increased territory in 1815. Its days as an independent kingdom were numbered, however, because it was defeated and annexed by Prussia in 1866.

The 1830s and 1840s were years of massive technological advance in Britain during which **railways** were constructed at a frantic pace, bringing revolutionary economic and social changes with them. The rapid growth of industrial towns which depended upon coal for steam-powered machinery created a demand for a transport system far more efficient than the inadequate existing roads. By the turn of the century a number of pay-as-you-go 'turnpike' roads had been laid out and these were further improved by the new construction techniques of John Macadam and Thomas Telford. Even more impressive was the vast network of **canals** constructed at the same time for the easy and cheap transportation of heavy goods, especially coal.

Wooden rails and simple trucks had been in limited use in Britain since the fifteenth century but the development of iron rails in the 1770s led to the opening of a few railways for commercial use, especially near coal mines. In 1814 **George Stephenson** built a steam locomotive for the Killingworth colliery and in 1825 a railway was opened from Stockton to Darlington. In 1829 Stephenson designed his *Rocket*, a highly serviceable steam locomotive, for use on a line from Liverpool to Manchester which opened in 1830 for passengers as well as goods. The success of this led to the formation of many private railway companies which obtained acts of parliament permitting them to construct lines throughout Britain, and by 1840 some 2,400 miles of track had been laid, with the figure rising to 8,000 over the next ten years. Much of the backbreaking work was done by an army of labourers called 'navvies', many of whom came from Ireland. George Hudson of York, the 'Railway King' amassed and lost a fortune, while the greatest lasting reputation was made by Isambard Kingdom **Brunel**, an engineering genius who designed the Great Western railway in the 1830s as well as the *Great Britain* (1845) the first ocean-going steamship to be driven by a propeller.

The construction of the railway network resulted in momentous social changes. These included the development of seaside resorts which now became accessible to urban workers for their annual week or fortnight's holiday, and the development of boarding schools to which the middle classes could send their sons to be educated as 'gentlemen'. Railway timetabling led to the adoption of Greenwich Mean Time throughout Britain, and railways made possible an efficient and inexpensive postal service, pioneered by Sir Rowland Hill in 1840. Above all the huge demand for railway lines, locomotives and rolling stock, not only in Britain but throughout the world, caused enormous expansion of the iron and coal industries.

The great increase in the number of 'working class' people employed in the industrial towns, and often living in slum conditions and receiving very low wages compared to the fortunes being made by their employers, led to powerful movements which demanded social reform. Chief among these was '**Chartism**' named after the 'People's Charter', a popular petition presented to parliament in 1838 demanding political reforms such as votes for all adult males and secret ballot. Neither this nor subsequent petitions in 1842 and 1848 achieved their aims at the time but they played a significant part in the general move towards eventual political change.

In 1841 Melbourne and the Whigs were defeated in the Commons and made way for a Tory administration headed by **Sir Robert Peel**, the son of a Lancashire cotton-mill owner, whose exceptional intellect had gained him first class degrees in two subjects (Classics and Mathematics) read concurrently at Oxford. He had briefly been Home Secretary under Wellington from 1829-1830, during which time he set up the London police force, subsequently dubbed 'bobbies' in his honour. He should have become Prime Minister in 1838 but chose not to do so when the Queen proved unwilling to replace her Whig ladies of the bedchamber with Tory ones as she was so fond of Lord Melbourne - one of the few occasions in a long reign when Victoria acted unconstitutionally.

Peel's dilemma as Prime Minister was that he was the head of a political party chiefly supported by landowners, yet he was increasingly convinced of the advantages of Free Trade, and also the repeal of the Corn Laws of 1815. These had forbidden the importation of foreign corn until the price of home-grown produce had reached a (rather high) specified figure, thus ensuring that British landowners made a good profit. The trouble was that this system made bread more expensive than it need have been, and an 'Anti-Corn Law League' was formed in Manchester in 1839 and supported by influential social reformers such as Richard Cobden and John Bright.

In 1845 there were bad harvests in Britain and the potato-crop failed in Ireland so that many poor people starved. This led Peel to support a bill for the **repeal of the Corn Laws**, but he failed to gain the support of several cabinet colleagues and resigned in December 1845, only to take up office again within a fortnight when the Whigs proved unable to form a ministry. Under these circumstances Peel steered a repeal bill through parliament in May 1846, though 321 members of his party voted against it in the Commons and Peel himself resigned shortly afterwards. Most historians are agreed that the Corn Law issue was exaggerated by both sides and repeal subsequently made little difference economically. More important was the split in the Tory party between Peelite free traders and protectionists which prevented the traditional Tories from being able to form a majority government for the next twenty years.

Peel was succeeded by a coalition of Whigs, radicals and Peelites under Lord John Russell which held together until February 1852 when the Earl of Derby, a Tory grandee, headed a minority government until its defeat in December. Derby was succeeded by the Peelite Earl of Aberdeen who lasted until his resignation was forced early in 1855 because of poor handling of the Crimean War. Roughly the same administration continued under Viscount **Palmerston** from 1855 to 1858 when internal dissent led to a minority Tory government headed again by Derby until 1859, by which time Palmerston had collected enough political support to return to office until his death late in 1865. During these years domestic issues were not as important as foreign affairs, where the United Kingdom played a dominant role.

In 1853 Russia attacked parts of the weak Turkish empire and sank a Turkish fleet, causing Britain and France to fear Russian domination of the Balkans and eastern Mediterranean. After the failure of diplomatic moves a Franco-British force sailed to the **Crimea** in 1854 to capture the Russian port of Sebastopol. The allies won battles at the Alma, Balaclava and Inkerman but suffered badly during the winter from inadequate clothing and medical attention. The devoted work of **Florence Nightingale**, a British nurse working under difficult conditions at the military hospital at Scutari made her a heroine but led to accusations of incompetence among ministers and military personnel, especially Lords Raglan and Cardigan, who were blamed for the wasteful 'charge of the light brigade' at Balaclava. Sebastopol eventually fell after a lengthy siege in 1855, and the Russians made peace early in 1856. Britain's war aims were achieved but inadequacies in the army, highlighted for the first time by newspaper reporters in the field, led not only to the Prime Minister's resignation but subsequent reforms in officer recruitment.

Hard on the heels of the Crimean War came the **Indian Mutiny** of 1857. Lord Hastings, Governor-General from 1813 to 1821 extended British control of India by his successful wars against the Gurkhas, Pindaris and Mahrattas and his purchase of Singapore, while under his successor Lord Amherst much of Burma was conquered in 1824. The India Act of 1833 further reduced the East India Company's influence, while English gradually became the official language of Indian lands under British control and Hindu practices such as *thuggee* and *suttee* were outlawed. Lord Dalhousie, who became viceroy in 1847, annexed the Punjab, Nagpur, and Oudh as well as other territories, and laid out a vast railway, road and telegraph network before retiring in 1856. The mutiny, which broke out in 1857, was partly a general reaction to Dalhousie's wide-ranging reforms, though it was sparked by the rumour that the cartridges of the newly-issued Enfield rifle were coated in the fat of cows, which are sacred to Hindus, and pigs, which are considered unclean by Moslems.

Indian troops massacred some Europeans at Meerut in May 1857 and marched to Delhi where they recognized the authority of an Indian Emperor from the Mogul dynasty. Delhi was recaptured by the British in September and the beleaguered British residency at Lucknow was relieved in November and a major victory achieved at Cawnpore in December. In the following year the rebellion was suppressed in Oudh and central India, and peace was gradually restored. The mutiny resulted in the India Act of 1858 which finally abolished the influence of the East India Company and transferred power to the British Crown, henceforward represented in India by a viceroy. In 1876 an Act of Parliament conferred on Queen Victoria the title Empress of India, and for the next seventy years the British 'raj' (sovereignty) held sway, during which a British administrative elite, mostly educated for colonial leadership in the English public schools, strove to bring coherence and efficiency to the entire sub-continent.

Britain was also involved in two wars with China. The first (1839-42), known as '**The Opium War**' resulted from the Chinese seizing a quantity of illegal opium which was the property of British merchants, and refusing all requests for compensation. A British fleet bombarded Canton and seized Hong Kong which was ceded to Britain at the Treaty of Nanking in 1842. The second quarrel began in 1856 when the *Arrow*, a ship flying the British flag, was boarded by Chinese authorities in search of pirates and suffered the imprisonment of twelve crew members. British ships retaliated by bombarding Chinese forts but Palmerston, Prime Minister at the time, was accused of high-handed action and defeated in the Commons in March 1857. He called a general election on the issue, was returned with a majority, and dispatched the diplomat Lord Elgin, backed by military force, who negotiated the Treaty of Tientsin in 1858, by which the Chinese agreed to increase the number of ports open to international trade. When in 1859 it became clear that the Chinese were not honouring the terms of the treaty, several forts were attacked by the British and the Emperor's summer palace outside Peking was burned to the ground.

Palmerston was popular because his confidence and determination to wave the British flag matched the mood of Victorian Britain in the middle of the century. Prince Albert's brainchild, the **Great Exhibition** of 1851, housed in Joseph Paxton's remarkable 'Crystal Palace' and sited in Hyde Park, in central London, displayed a vast range of high-quality manufactured goods produced by industrial Britain and exported throughout the world. The exhibition's great financial success provided money to endow a series of major cultural ventures in Kensington, such as the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Science Museum. The census of 1851 revealed that in the last fifty years the population of England and Wales had almost doubled, from 9.1 million to 17.9 million, while Scotland had increased from 1.2 million to 2.9 million. Only in Ireland had there not been a spectacular rise - from 5.2 million in 1801 to only 6.5 million in 1851, the result of famine which prompted millions of Irish people to emigrate to other parts of Britain and to America. The 1851 census also made clear the fact that for the first time a majority of the population of England, Scotland and Wales lived in towns rather than the countryside.

The census of 1851 also attempted to assess religious observance and came up with the statistic that of the 17.9 million people in England and Wales only just over 10 million attended church, and of those, 5.2 million were Anglicans and 383,630 Roman Catholics. The rest were described as Protestant Dissenters, meaning chiefly Presbyterians and Methodists. The latter had been founded by **John Wesley** (1703-1791), an evangelical preacher who travelled over 200,000 miles in his lifetime and preached more than 40,000 sermons. Although Methodism remained technically within the Church of England while Wesley was alive it developed into a separate church after his death. This and other challenges to Anglicanism stimulated the **Oxford Movement** (c 1833-1850) led by the Oxford theologians Keble, Pusey and Newman whose High Anglican doctrines had a wide appeal and led to the building of many new churches, often in the 'Gothic Revival' style. Religions of all denominations were put on the defensive in 1859 when **Charles Darwin** published his book entitled *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* in which he used the evidence of scientific research to challenge the Biblical account of the creation of man, arguing that humans evolved from earlier life forms.

Palmerston died in office in 1865 and the absence of his dominant personality left the political stage clear for a contest between the very different personalities of Gladstone and Disraeli. **William Gladstone**, born in 1809, was the son of a rich Liverpool merchant of

Scottish ancestry. At Eton and Oxford he revealed an outstanding intellect and remarkable talent for debating and first entered parliament in 1832 as a Tory. Peel made him a junior minister at the age of 25, and in 1843 he became President of the Board of Trade, but resigned two years later. After the Corn Law split in the Tory party his views became increasingly radical and he accepted office in Aberdeen's coalition ministry of 1852 as Chancellor of the Exchequer until 1855, and in the same office under the predominantly Whig administration of Palmerston from 1859. On Palmerston's death in 1865 Earl Russell became Prime Minister and he and Gladstone together backed a moderate reform bill to increase the electorate and redistribute seats but this led to disagreements within the Whig party and the government's fall in the summer of 1866.

This brought to power another minority Tory government headed by Lord Derby, of which the most influential member was **Benjamin Disraeli**. Born a Jew in 1804 he was baptized at the age of 13, attended a small private school and went on to study law at Lincoln's Inn. Foppishly dressed and with his hair in ringlets he published the first of many successful novels in 1826, became a Tory MP in 1837 and married a rich and influential widow. Peel never gave him office and after the split in 1846 Disraeli emerged as the leading light among the young traditional Tories. He was Chancellor of the Exchequer in Derby's short-lived Tory government of 1852 which fell after Gladstone's successful attack on his budget plans. He was Chancellor under Derby again in 1858 but the government fell the following year over the defeat of a modest reform bill introduced by Disraeli.

In 1866 Disraeli became Chancellor for the third time in a Derby minority government and he was determined to win popular support for the Tories by introducing a much more radical **Reform Bill** which was passed in August 1867. It effectively doubled the electorate from about one million to two million and redistributed 45 seats. In February 1868 Derby resigned because of ill-health and Disraeli became Prime Minister for the first time. In March Gladstone, by now leader of the opposition party, declared himself in favour of disestablishing the Irish Church and Disraeli called an election on this issue, hoping to gain support from the recently enfranchised voters. Gladstone's oratorical campaigns were highly successful, however, and he returned to power with a majority of 112 seats. During the 1860s the group of Whigs, radicals and reformers that he led had increasingly called themselves the **Liberal** party, a name by which they were henceforth generally known.

In Gladstone's first ministry (1868-74) the most important issue was the future of **Ireland**. The Act of Union with Britain in 1801 had abolished the Irish parliament and declared that the Protestant Church of Ireland was the established church, even though there were only about one million Protestants among Ireland's population of about five million in 1801. The Act was never popular with the vast majority of the Irish people and it was the main aim of Irish leaders throughout the nineteenth century to bring about repeal of the Act by constant persuasion, or failing that, by force. The dominant Irish leader in the early decades of the century was **Daniel O'Connell** (1775-1847), a Catholic lawyer and landowner whose aims were, first, to achieve Catholic emancipation and then the restoration of an Irish parliament. He was never a revolutionary, however, and though he attracted large crowds to his support, he always urged them to obey the law.

In 1828 O'Connell was elected MP for Clare but he could not take his seat at Westminster because he was a Catholic. He then organized an election campaign which might have resulted in many Catholics being returned as MPs but being denied the right to sit.

Wellington, Prime Minister from 1828, realized that this was likely to lead to serious trouble in Ireland and for this reason guided the **Catholic Emancipation** Bill through parliament in April 1829, after which all public offices were open to Catholics except Viceroy and Chancellor. During the 1830s it was O'Connell's policy to co-operate with the Whigs who introduced several useful reforms but would not consider repeal of the Act of Union. When Peel and the Tories came to power in 1841 O'Connell returned to his policy of calling large meetings which threatened disorder. In 1843 the Peel government cancelled one such meeting due to assemble at Clontarf and arrested O'Connell who was tried for sedition and found guilty, though eventually freed on appeal to the Lords.

By this time O'Connell's influence had dwindled and given way to the '**Young Ireland**' movement formed by youthful nationalists in imitation of Mazzini in Italy. They published a journal, the *Nation* and were fervently in favour of all things Irish and strongly opposed to rule from England. Peel introduced well-intentioned measures to improve Irish education but in 1845 and 1846 he was faced with the '**Great Famine**' an unprecedented economic and social disaster caused because the potato plants were attacked by disease (blight) which resulted in the crop turning rotten in the soil. As about 4 million people in Ireland depended entirely on potatoes as their staple diet, thousands starved and about two million emigrated, most of them to the United States. Peel's decision to repeal the Corn Laws, in the hope of preventing further disasters of this kind, had important repercussions for politics in England but did little or nothing to relieve social distress in Ireland.

Emigration partially solved the problem of how to feed too large a population, but the pressing issue after 1847 was the fate of poor tenants in the countryside who, especially after the disasters of 1845 and 1846 were routinely evicted by landlords anxious either to sell their land or to manage it more efficiently. Secret societies flourished and punished tyrannous landlords in their own brutal ways, giving rise to widespread fear and disorder. In 1858 a society calling itself the '**Fenian Brotherhood**' (named after the 'Fianna', Irish warriors of legend) was formed in the United States and spread widely there as well as in Ireland, especially in 1865 when the end of the American Civil War released many Irish Americans who were experienced soldiers. Fearing a general revolt in Ireland the British government arrested Fenian leaders in September 1865, and in the following year there were Fenian disturbances in Britain itself, including bomb outrages causing many fatalities.

It was this state of affairs that persuaded Gladstone of the need to pacify Ireland, first by disestablishing the Protestant Church of Ireland, and then by legislation to end the hostility between landlords and tenants. A disestablishment bill was passed soon after he became Prime Minister and a Land Act followed in 1870, restricting a landlord's right of eviction and requiring compensation to be paid. Unfortunately the act pleased neither landlords nor tenants, especially when **agricultural depression** hit the entire United Kingdom in the 1870s and 1880s, caused by the mass production of cheap corn on the American prairies and its rapid distribution to world markets via steamships and railways. Male labourers deserted the countryside in search of work in towns, coal mines, the army or the colonies, all of which were major growth areas in the last decades of the century.

Aside from the problems of Ireland, Gladstone's first administration passed legislation dealing with a wide range of domestic issues in Britain. The vast size and modern equipment of the Prussian and French armies that went to war briefly in 1870 led to reforms in the British army as well as a significant increase in its manpower. Important acts introduced

reforms in the legal system, established state primary education, reorganized local government and gave trade unions the right to strike, while an Act of 1872 achieved one of the former Chartist movement's main aims - voting by secret ballot. When Gladstone eventually resigned in January 1874 it was because several members of his own Liberal party - still in effect a coalition between Whigs and radicals - voted against the government's bill to set up a university in Dublin for Catholics as well as Protestants. The ensuing election returned a Tory majority of 83.

Disraeli was now able, for the first time in his life, to lead a party in government with a handsome majority even though, as he admitted ruefully, he was over seventy and success had come rather late in life. However, his administration lasted from 1874 to 1880 and during this time Disraeli (who moved to the Lords as the Earl of Beaconsfield in 1876) effectively moulded the Tories into a coherent '**Conservative**' party which could appeal to its traditional landed supporters as well as to the many middle and lower-middle class urban dwellers who had received the vote in 1867. The new Conservatives stood chiefly for the monarchy, the sanctity of property, social reform, and expansion of the Empire. Disraeli himself, by a mixture of flattery and gallantry, coaxed Queen Victoria out of the self-imposed withdrawal from public life which had been her reaction to the premature death of Prince Albert in 1861, and which had led to a sharp decline in her popularity, while the Home Secretary, R.A. Cross, introduced a wide range of successful social reforms.

During the 1860s the 'Khedive' of Egypt, who ruled the country on behalf of the Sultan of Turkey, invested huge sums in the construction of the **Suez Canal**, mostly by French engineers. The canal opened in 1870 but by 1875 the Khedive was seriously in debt and Disraeli offered to buy a 40% share in the canal. This safeguarded the fast route to India for British ships as well as providing an important foothold in the Near East. Britain's commitment to the entire Indian sub-continent was emphasized in 1876 by the Royal Titles Act which created Queen Victoria Empress of India and in 1878 the government sent troops to **Afghanistan** whose rulers showed signs of allying with Russia, thus threatening the north-west frontier of India. The first Afghan War (1838-1842) had been a muddled and ineffective attempt to assert British influence but the campaigns of 1878-1880, led by Lord Roberts, who marched the 320 miles from Kabul to Kandahar in 23 days, made the Afghan rulers wary of co-operating with Russia. Russia's ambitions to expand in the Balkans at the expense of Turkey led Disraeli to support Turkish interests with conspicuous success at the **Congress of Berlin** in 1878 which averted war, though at home Gladstone raged against the atrocities committed by Turkish troops against Christian communities.

The life of parliaments was still limited to seven years by the Septennial Act of 1716 and as a general election loomed in 1879 Disraeli's imperialist policy encountered problems when the British High Commissioner in the Cape, acting on his own authority, ordered a British force under Lord Chelmsford to invade **Zululand** to curb the aggression of the warrior king Cetewayo. Chelmsford's camp at Isandlwana was destroyed in his absence by a Zulu surprise attack, though a small British detachment held out at nearby Rorke's Drift. Reinforcements had to be sent out under Sir Garnet Wolseley, who defeated the Zulus at Ulundi in July. Gladstone, who for a time gave up the leadership of his party, experienced a new lease of life at the age of seventy and undertook an unprecedented series of election speeches, known as his '**Midlothian Campaign**', treating the electors of southern Scotland and northern England to a series of brilliant oratorical attacks on the government and its policies. These undoubtedly influenced the outcome of the election in March 1880, which the

Liberals won with a majority of 137 seats. Beaconsfield turned to writing his twelfth and last novel, 'Lothair', and died in 1881, being succeeded as leader of the Conservatives by the Marquess of Salisbury.

The new Government's most immediate problem was **Ireland**. In 1870 Isaac Butt, an Irish MP, founded the **Home Rule Association** to work towards the restoration of an Irish parliament. The party won over 50 seats in the 1874 election and in 1878 leadership passed to the youthful **Charles Stewart Parnell**, a fine orator whose approach was militant and involved organizing 'boycotts' of hated landlords by their tenants, and also holding up business in the House of Commons by causing procedural delays. Seeking to appease legitimate grievances, Gladstone passed an Irish Land Reform Act in 1881 guaranteeing 'fixity of tenure, fair rents and free sale', but Parnell's aggressive tactics continued as before.

In 1881 the Government lost patience and Parnell was arrested for inciting violence and imprisoned in Kilmainham jail where he made a bargain with Gladstone, offering to stop the violence if the Government would compensate poor tenants. His release from prison prompted the resignation of the viceroy and chief secretary, and the latter's replacement was shockingly murdered with a colleague in Dublin's Phoenix Park in May 1882, being hacked to death with surgical knives by a gang of at least nine extremists. Though Parnell denounced the murders *The Times* printed articles accusing him of complicity, though they were based on forged letters and Parnell successfully sued for libel. For the rest of the decade his authority and influence in Ireland knew few bounds.

Gladstone disappointed his radical followers by initiating very little reforming legislation in this Government with the important exceptions of the **Reform Act of 1884** and the Redistribution Act of 1885. Together these had the effect of increasing the electorate from about three to five million men and redistributing the seats of 79 towns with populations of less than 15,000. The plural member system was abolished and replaced by one-member constituencies throughout the United Kingdom, a change which, as it turned out, benefited the Home Rule movement and the Conservative party.

Gladstone's second administration was beset with difficult problems in the colonies, starting with southern Africa, where the British had founded Cape Colony in 1795 as a staging post on the route to India. Another colony, Natal, had been established in 1823. The main threats to the British were the local African tribes, especially the Zulus, and the 'Boers' who were descended from Dutch settlers, some of whom had arrived as early as the 17th century. In order to escape from British interference 10,000 Boers undertook the 'Great Trek' in 1837, moving from the Cape across the Vaal river and founding the Transvaal province. In 1877 Disraeli annexed the Transvaal on the grounds that it needed protection against the Zulus but this action was bitterly resented by many Boers, who looked to Gladstone to order the withdrawal of British troops. When this did not happen, the '**first Boer War**' broke out and a small British force was defeated at Majuba Hill in 1881, prompting Gladstone to restore independence to the Transvaal.

Gladstone had criticized Disraeli for extending the Empire but events forced him to do the same himself. In Egypt there was a revolt against the Khedive's regime in 1881 which threatened British and French investment in the Suez Canal. The French refused to take military action but Gladstone sent a force under Sir Garnet Wolseley which bombarded Alexandria and defeated the Egyptian rebels at Tel-el Kebir in 1882. After this the Khedive

remained technically the ruler but in fact Egypt became a British protectorate. This meant that Britain also controlled the Sudan which the Egyptians had conquered early in the 1820s, founding Khartoum in 1823.

In 1883 a powerful revolt broke out in the Sudan led by the 'Mahdi', a Moslem leader, and Gladstone decided to withdraw Egyptian and British troops from the Sudan. Unfortunately the man chosen to organize this withdrawal was **General Charles Gordon**, a charismatic British soldier who had served as Governor of the Sudan under the Khedive from 1874 to 1880. Thinking that he could solve the problems single-handedly he disobeyed orders, refused to withdraw and found himself besieged in Khartoum by the Mahdi's forces. The British newspapers portrayed Gordon as a true hero and urged the Government to go to his rescue. When Khartoum fell after a siege of ten months and Gordon was massacred along with the garrison just two days before a relief force was due to arrive, there was a popular outcry. Several MPs normally in the Liberal camp voted against the Government and defeated it on an amendment to the Budget in June 1885 and Gladstone resigned.

Lord Salisbury agreed to form a Conservative administration, even though he did not have a majority in the Commons, and he gave high office to two rising stars of the party, his nephew Arthur Balfour, and Lord Randolph Churchill, who was appointed Secretary for India and sent a force to Burma to unseat its king, who had confiscated British property. The whole of Burma was annexed and it became a province of the Indian Empire.

The general election held in November 1885 failed to provide the Conservatives with a majority and Gladstone returned to power for the third time with a majority of 86. Over the past months he had come to the decision that it was necessary to grant Home Rule to Ireland despite the fact that many in his party were opposed to the idea. In April 1886 he introduced a Bill to restore the Irish parliament and executive (though with limited powers) but it was defeated on its second reading by 30 votes, with 93 Liberals voting against. Gladstone then immediately called another election on this issue and the results showed that he had split the Liberal party. 316 Conservatives were returned, together with 78 anti-Home Rule Liberals, while only 191 Liberals supported Gladstone, plus 85 of Parnell's Irish followers. Faced with this disaster, Gladstone resigned and Salisbury came to power as leader of the largest single party.

A descendant of Elizabeth I's faithful Burghley, Salisbury was an aristocratic grandee of great wealth as well as a man of exceptional intellect and political skills whose career had begun when he was elected Tory MP for Stamford in 1853 at the age of 23. An impressive figure with a flowing beard, he was from 1886 to 1902 a dominant influence in British politics, holding the office of Prime Minister from 1886 to 1892 and again from 1895 to 1902. His main interest was foreign affairs and it was his ambition to promote British influence throughout the world and encourage the further growth of the British Empire. Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee celebrations in 1887 provided a fine opportunity to emphasize the Empire's extent and importance as representatives from all its nations, including many Indian princes in dazzling array, paraded loyally through the streets of London to honour a diminutive and elderly lady dressed in her habitual widow's black. The presence of so many colonial representatives made it easy to hold a formal Colonial Conference which helped to give a sense of unity to Britain's worldwide possessions.

Salisbury's administration was also responsible for an important domestic reform, the **Local Government Act of 1888**, which continued the Disraelian policy of extending the workings of democracy to every level of society. It set up elected County Councils which took over the responsibility for local affairs from justices of the peace, and gave 60 towns the status of 'county boroughs'. In the Conservative party the promising career of Lord Randolph Churchill came to a premature end when he resigned over a minor dispute with a Cabinet colleague and was never reinstated. Another major politician to fall from grace was Parnell who was cited as the co-respondent in a divorce case. Adultery and divorce were considered major disqualifications for men in the public eye and Parnell lost his grip on his Home Rule party, suffered a collapse in health and died in 1891.

This left Gladstone to lead the Irish Home Rule party himself. The Liberal split in 1886 had in many ways followed class divisions, with nearly all the peers and a large majority of the upper and middle class supporters deserting Gladstone over Home Rule, while the Queen, who never liked Gladstone in any case, used her still considerable social influence to cold-shoulder Home Rulers. Gladstone increasingly looked not only to Ireland for support but also to Scotland and Wales, where he promised disestablishment of the Anglican Church. When a general election was held in July 1892 the Conservatives won 269 seats and Liberal Unionist 46, while Gladstone could count on the support of 273 Liberals and 81 Irish Home Rulers. He therefore took office as Prime Minister for the fourth time, aged 82, determined to have another try at passing an **Irish Home Rule Bill**.

The Bill of 1893, like that of 1886, proposed the restoration of an Irish parliament and executive that would control a wide range of domestic Irish affairs but not foreign policy, defence, customs or trade, which would still be controlled by Westminster. Unlike the 1886 Bill, this one permitted Irish MPs to sit at Westminster, though they could only vote on Irish issues. Opinion in Ulster, especially Belfast, was strongly opposed to Home Rule but this did not deter Gladstone who worked non-stop between February and September 1893 to guide the Bill successfully through 85 sittings and three readings in the Commons. When it reached the predominantly Tory House of Lords, however, it was defeated by 419 votes to 41. The Lords had interfered with very little of Salisbury's legislation, but Gladstone's bills were subjected to much demand for amendment, in particular the Local Government Act of 1894 which set up parish councils, and Gladstone went so far in 1894 as to state publicly that in his opinion reform of the powers of the Lords ought to be seriously considered. With this prophetic parting shot he announced his retirement as Prime Minister.

Under these circumstances it was the prerogative of the Queen to choose a suitable successor from the Liberal cabinet, and, passing over Sir William Harcourt and Lord Spencer she asked the **Earl of Rosebery** to take office. It thus proved to be a good year for this rich, charming, popular politician and keen racing man whose horse *Ladas* also won the Derby in 1894. The next year Rosebery won again, with *Sir Visto*. He was not so fortunate with his legislation which continued to be mercilessly censured by the House of Lords. After a defeat on a minor issue in June 1895 the government resigned and in the ensuing general election 340 Conservatives and 71 Liberal Unionists were returned against 177 Liberals and 82 Irish nationalists, and Lord Salisbury returned to head a Conservative and Liberal Unionist coalition with the security of a large majority.

The swing towards the Conservatives was attributed to the popular mood of imperialism which took hold in the 1890s, and it was significant that one of the most influential men in

the Cabinet, the Liberal Unionist **Joseph Chamberlain**, had chosen the office of Colonial secretary. Chamberlain, the son of a shopkeeper, made a fortune out of manufacturing screws in Birmingham, where he became mayor in 1875 and attracted attention with a radical programme of slum clearing and social improvements. Elected MP for Birmingham in 1876 he joined the Liberals and served as President of the Board of Trade under Gladstone from 1880, establishing himself as the leader of the radical element in the party and helping to ensure its re-election in 1885. However, he disagreed strongly with Gladstone over Home Rule and was instrumental in the split which led to the formation of the Liberal Unionists which he formally led from 1891.

The colonial office had not, up to now, been immensely influential, but Chamberlain made it so by the power of his own personality and his determination to weld together the component parts of Britain's ever-growing empire. In 1850 the Australian Colonies Act passed by Russell's Whig government gave self-government to New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania, colonies which had been settled soon after Cook's explorations in the 1770s, initially as penal communities for British convicts, many of whose crimes were comparatively trivial. In New Zealand the British trading Company was dissolved in 1851 and the colony was granted responsible government by Palmerston in 1856. Britain's policy of tightening her hold on India and Burma after the Mutiny of 1857 has already been discussed.

During the 1870s international attention began to focus on Africa, the interior of which had remained a mystery until the journeys of the British explorers Burton, Speke, Grant, Livingstone and H.M. Stanley traced the source of the Nile and mapped the course of the Congo. Once this had been done, there followed a '**scramble for Africa**', with the major European powers competing with each other for vacant territory. In 1884 a Congress in Berlin recognized the Congo as a possession of King Leopold of the Belgians and in 1890 Britain made separate treaties with Germany, France and Portugal by which Nyasaland, Mashonaland and the territories which would become Nigeria, Uganda and Kenya were recognized as British spheres of influence.

In his time at the colonial office Chamberlain successfully presided over the conquest of the Ashanti tribe in West Africa (1896) the extension of British authority in the Niger region under Sir George Goldie (1897), Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee and another Colonial Conference in London (1897), the defeat of the Mahdi's successor, the Khalifa, at Omdurman in the Sudan by Lord Kitchener (1898), and number of agreements with France arising from clashes between the two countries in disputed African territories. In 1900 the Australian Commonwealth Act federated the existing four provinces of Australia, with New Zealand opting to stay on its own.

The one area where Chamberlain experienced serious problems was in dealing with **Cecil Rhodes** in southern Africa. Having made a fortune out of diamonds and gold as a young man Rhodes founded the British South Africa Company in 1887 to develop the territory north of the Transvaal, called after him 'Rhodesia', and in 1890 he became Prime Minister of Cape Colony. His ruthless ambition and desire to extend British control led him early in 1896 to make the serious mistake of authorizing Dr Jameson, a British South Africa Company employee, to ride with 470 men to Johannesburg to assist opponents of the government of President Kruger in overthrowing him. Jameson's men were surrounded and forced to surrender, Rhodes resigned as premier of the Cape and there was a parliamentary enquiry

into Chamberlain's role in the affair. It exonerated him, though not to the complete satisfaction of his critics.

Meanwhile the Emperor of Germany sent a telegram to Kruger congratulating him for repulsing 'disturbers of the peace', and when, in response, Britain put to sea a naval force more powerful by far than anything the Germans could muster, Germany began to build a fleet to rival Britain's long-held superiority and it gradually began to dawn on British opinion that the newly-founded imperial Germany was capable of becoming a serious threat.

By 1899 events led to the second '**Boer War**' between Britain and the republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. When gold was discovered near Johannesburg in 1886 the Transvaal, hitherto a poor and backward state, was besieged by thousands of foreigners digging for gold and establishing thriving businesses. In their view they were badly treated by the government of President Kruger which taxed them heavily and subjected them to arbitrary legal judgements. The quarrel rumbled on for years, escalating steadily, especially after the 'Jameson raid'. In 1898 over 21,000 British subjects in the Transvaal petitioned the Queen for assistance with their grievances and after five months of fruitless negotiations Salisbury and Chamberlain decided on war, with some reluctance it must be said, as there was a strong 'pro-Boer' lobby among politicians of all parties. Public opinion, however, had reached a stage when the general feeling was that the Boers ought to be taught a lesson, a view shared by the British High Commissioner in the Cape, Sir Alfred Milner.

The Orange Free State decided to support her sister republic and this meant that about 50,000 men were available to fight, most of them tough farmers who were crack shots and hard riders who knew their country well. In December 1899 three invading British armies were defeated and reverses continued into the new year. The overall commander, General Buller, was replaced by Lord Roberts and reinforcements arrived, including troops from Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In February 1900 the tide turned, British troops relieved Kimberley and Ladysmith and in May the Orange Free State was annexed. Pretoria, the capital of the Transvaal, fell in June and by August large scale campaigning ceased. Instead the Boers resorted to very effective commando warfare and in November Roberts handed over command to Kitchener who eventually made use of 'concentration camps' to intern Boers and their families. These were inefficiently organized and led to the deaths from disease of more than 20,000 people, mostly women and children. It was not until May 1902 that the Boers made peace at Vereeniging. The Orange Free State and the Transvaal became part of the British empire but were granted self-government in 1907 and three years later joined the Cape and Natal in the **Union of South Africa**, a dominion under the British crown. The war cost Britain £222 million and employed 450,000 troops, of whom 5,774 were killed and 16,000 died of disease, while another 22,829 were wounded. Less than 4,000 Boers were killed in action.