

French Imperialist Perceptions of Cecil Rhodes*

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The year Cecil Rhodes arrived in South Africa, France lost Alsace-Lorraine after the defeat of Sedan resulting in the advent of the new German State. Until the Entente cordiale was signed, France's foreign policy see-sawed between alliance with Britain, with a view to recovering the "lost provinces", and alliance with Germany so as to stand up to British expansion in Africa and Asia. One of the responses to the Jameson raid and the ensuing *furore* caused by the Kaiser's telegram was the display of French sympathy for the Transvaal, and the mooted idea of a Franco-German-Boer coalition. This possibility was again raised during the 1899-1902 war, but more as a rhetorical question than one seriously envisaged: cooperation with Germany was judged "unnatural" and especially unrealistic as British maritime clout and control of world communications was no match for the French navy. By the time Rhodes had become Cape Premier, in 1890, tensions between Britain and France had heightened in Asia and the Pacific, and, closer at hand, in Niger, Egypt and Madagascar, which explains why French policies had taken a decidedly anti-British stance. When the Jameson raid hit the headlines, France was in the dock of world public opinion because of the Dreyfus case, and shortly to be further humiliated at Fashoda as an indirect consequence of Cecil Rhodes' Cape to Cairo grand design. Not surprisingly the French were only too pleased to join the fray against Britain in 1896 and 1899.

But here perhaps one should distinguish between French recriminations brought about by British policies in Africa, and the actual statements made by individual Frenchmen on the conduct of Cecil Rhodes as concerned French interests in South Africa. They are unanimous in conceding that he always acted fairly, even generously, towards France. None remarked bitterly or sarcastically on the buying-up of French assets when the de Beers was founded, or on the constant participation of the Rothschilds in Rhodes' undertakings. Rather, French investors praised the opportunity given them to make profits by Rhodes' enterprise, whilst French colonialists acknowledged Rhodes' positive attitude towards French claims on Madagascar or towards the action of French missionaries¹.

Whilst Cecil Rhodes was never directly in competition with French imperial interests, French imperialists were nevertheless acutely aware of this influential figure and his grand vision for the British empire in Africa. A young and unknown French Marines' junior officer, Captain Marchand, arguing in September 1895 for his projected Congo-Nile-Obock expedition, was deeply concerned by the British design of the "union of the Cape to Egypt across the African continent [...] by a line of continuous British possessions". He intended to unmask an alleged project for "a junction of Benin to the

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¹ J. Furet, *Cecil Rhodes, Homme d'Etat sud-africain (1853-1902)*(Paris : Les contemporains, 1907), p. 16.

Red Sea through the Wadai” and stressed the need to strike “at the heart of the English cross”²: “To the English theory of the African cross ... to this insane dream, should we not oppose the more moderate French theory of the junction of the Congo to Obock, through the Bahr-el-Ghazal and Ethiopia ...”³ Without sharing such militant anglophobe feelings, future Marshal Hubert Lyautey, then a Major on his way to a posting in Madagascar in 1897 to serve under General Gallieni, was nevertheless acutely aware of the competition between the two imperial powers in Southern Africa⁴. One of the most fascinating treatments of Cecil Rhodes as an icon of imperialism is perhaps that by Eugène Etienne, the main leader of the French *Parti Colonial*⁵. Whilst the deputy for Oran did not specifically publish any article on Rhodes, significant references to him and British imperialism in South Africa, are to be found in his writings and speeches.⁶ They reveal an extremely paradoxical attitude, combining, in a most usual mix, elements of resentment and admiration.

Eugène Etienne never had the pretension to be an anglophile, much to the contrary. It is therefore not a surprise to find the French colonial leader, at the beginning of the Anglo-Boer war, expressing his resentment towards British imperialism and passing a most severe judgement on the “aggression” against the Sister Republics. As a militant Republican, Etienne placed some of the blame for the war on the London’s “grand seigneurs”, but was nevertheless careful to clearly exonerate the British Premier Minister, Lord Salisbury. His comment, unequivocal, was incidentally misinterpreted by Salisbury, who took it up in a speech in Parliament. Etienne promptly reacted and nipped the controversy in the bud by clarifying the misunderstanding⁷.

As one could expect, it was a matter of lamenting Fashoda and the British occupation of Egypt. Etienne also expressed his resentment after the British acquisition of Tonga, following the Samoa agreement of November 1899; a development in which he saw the direct hand of Cecil Rhodes, who had visited Berlin a few months before⁸. Most puzzlingly, Etienne, in an imaginative attempt to creative imperial history, felt strongly about France’s loss of the Cape Colony to Britain. “During the long wars of the revolution and the empire, Holland as well as her colonies, formed an integral part of France. As a result of our disasters, the treaty of 1815 deprived us of the Cape Colony, which fell into English hands.”⁹ Such alleged French historical rights on the Cape Colony appear, extremely far stretched, to say the least. Just as puzzling was the reference to “Uganda, a vast and rich territory taken away from French influence by barbaric means”¹⁰.

² Marc Michel, *La Mission Marchand: 1895-1899* (Paris: Mouton, 1972), p. 32.

³ Marc Michel, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-3.

⁴ Maréchal Hubert Lyautey, *Lettres du Tonkin et de Madagascar* (1894-1899) (Paris : A. Colin, 1921), pp. 488-510.

⁵ Eugène Etienne, “Discours de M. Eugène Etienne au banquet colonial du 4 Novembre 1899”, *La Dépêche Coloniale*, 11 November 1899.

⁶ Imperial daily *La Dépêche Coloniale*, founded and controlled by Etienne, is a prime source of information in this respect. On Etienne and *La Dépêche coloniale*, see Charles-Robert Ageron, *Les Algériens musulmans et la France (1871-1919)* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1968), p. 983.

⁷ Eugène Etienne's letter to *Le Figaro*, published as “Réponse à Lord Salisbury”, *La Dépêche coloniale*, 14 November 1899.

⁸ Eugène Etienne, “L'Angleterre devant l'Europe”, *Le Figaro*, 8 November 1899.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

As to Rhodes himself, Etienne was extremely critical of “the ridiculous and savage aggression of doctor Jameson, supported, bribed and directed by the great man of the Rhodesia, and discreetly but firmly supported by M. Chamberlain”.¹¹ Elsewhere, Rhodes was presented in opposition with the figure of Gladstone.¹² The aggressive imperialism of the latter was contrasted with the peaceful tone of the former, remembered as the Prime Minister who had brought the first Boer War to an end. This is in keeping with the liberal leader’s reputation, but nevertheless is slightly surprising in a French context, for no matter how reluctantly the occupation of Egypt was undertaken during his premiership, it nevertheless remained a very sore point for French colonial expansionists.

Behind this façade of resentment, Eugène Etienne remains, first and foremost, an imperialist at heart. Accordingly, he cannot help but show his respect if not his admiration for this icon of imperialism. One of his main preoccupations is to highlight, as much as possible, the lessons to be learned from the British rival. Cecil Rhodes is presented as the archetype of the “modern” imperialist, combining capitalism and imperialism. Such a model was indeed far remote from the realities of French imperialism and sharply contrasted with the discourse of *mise en valeur*, literally both the enrichment and exploitation of colonies, akin to wishful thinking. Indeed France’s imperialism, remained primarily politically rather than economically motivated, and the lack of capital investment remained chronic. It is noteworthy that Etienne had been advocating the creation of chartered companies on the British model since 1894. A move incidentally opposed at the time by Théophile Delcassé, Minister for the Colonies from May 1894 to January 1895, who feared that such companies, would be tempted “to take political decisions for which the state itself becomes responsible against its wishes”.¹³ The Deputy for Oran nevertheless remained committed to the idea, so much so, that he later published in 1897 a book on the question, *Les Compagnies de Colonisation*, as part of a campaign to bring about the creation of such companies in the French empire.¹⁴ To render such idea more palatable, much effort was made to draw parallels with French *Ancien Régime* precedents, such as for example Joseph Chailley-Bert’s study on *Les compagnies de colonisation sous l’Ancien régime*¹⁵.

Etienne made much of the exaltation of Anglo-Saxon imperial race theme by Cecil Rhodes, which he feels ought to be emulated by the French, in developing their very own French – or Latin – brand of imperial race. The French had become increasingly sensitive to such an issue after the double shock of 1898: the Spanish-American war and the Fashoda crisis. This brutal assertion of Anglo-Saxon force, resolve and determination fed French anxieties of decline. Rising to the challenge became a high priority. It was a matter of proving that France was not a declining power like Spain, but much to the contrary, was a world power to be reckoned with, and that the colonial empire had a bright future in the twentieth century. The idea of British imperialism as a model to follow, was however in no way specific to Etienne. Symptomatically, even Reverend Lecigne, the editor of the very Catholic *Revue du Nord*, in an article published shortly after

¹¹ Eugène Etienne, “L’Angleterre devant l’Europe”, *Le Figaro*, 8 November 1899.

¹² Eugène Etienne, “Discours de M. Eugène Etienne au banquet colonial du 4 novembre 1899”, *La Dépêche Coloniale*, 11 November 1899.

¹³ Christopher M. Andrew, *Théophile Delcassé and the Making of the Entente Cordiale. A Reappraisal of French Foreign Policy, 1898-1905* (London: Macmillan, 1968), p. 31.

¹⁴ See Eugène Etienne, *Les Compagnies de colonisation* (Paris: Challamel, 1897); see also his preface to the work of Belgian writer Edmond Carton de Wiart, *Les grandes compagnies coloniales anglaises du XIXe siècle* (Paris : Perrin, 1899).

¹⁵ Joseph Chailley-Bert, *Les compagnies de colonisation sous l’Ancien régime* (Paris : A. Colin, 1898).

Rhodes' death, professed that "The example of Cecil Rhodes ... the nice parts of his works, the qualities he deployed in search for his ideal, the great national thought which seemed to dominate his effort, all this should be proposed to the meditation and imitation of those who dream of a Greater France, just as he was dreaming of a Greater England."¹⁶

This was of course not neutral as Etienne's expansionist agenda was not very far. For he and other leaders of the Parti Colonial, also had a vision for France: that of a Greater France. This vision, they had sought to consistently fulfil since the 1890s by lobbying successive governments and pressing for further colonial expansion. By the turn of the century, Etienne and his supporters pressed for the completion of a French North Africa grand design by the acquisition of Morocco. His admiration, verging on envy, for Rhodes' vision of a Cape to Cairo railway line, "the backbone" of the British Empire in Africa, was not disguised. This is all too understandable, as at the time, the ultimate French imperial fantasy was the proposed Transaharian railway line. Indeed, the project had no stronger advocate than Etienne himself. Such a railway line, linking Algeria to French West Africa, was primarily perceived by the French as a great equaliser from a strategic perspective. The truly mythical dimension of the *Transaharien* is striking and reminiscent of the British design of a Cape to Cairo line.

Whilst stating unequivocally that France should not intervene in the South African conflict - "It is not the role of our country to be the eternal Don Quixote of Europe", Etienne was pressing, on 8 November 1899, for the prompt opening of diplomatic negotiations with Britain, with a view to assuring the predominance of French influence in North West Africa and to bringing about a settlement of the various questions pending in Asia.¹⁷ The way in which Etienne could not resist concluding his article, by ironically engaging the Foreign Secretary, is very symptomatic of the divergent views held by the two Republican political leaders: "I would indeed refrain from giving any advice or even an opinion to the eminent head of our diplomacy, but I have the right to let my fellow citizens what I think of such vital issues." After the Samoa agreement, it seemed that Germany had capitalised on her neutrality. Taking note of the benefit of the agreement for Britain, namely the acquisition of the Tonga Islands, but more importantly, the vital right of passage from Lake Tanganyika to Lake Albert, across German Territory, in which he sees the result of Rhodes' visit to Berlin a few months before.¹⁸ This line of argumentation was common to the main leaders of the *Parti colonial* and Robert de Caix's positions were along the same line.¹⁹

However, Théophile Delcassé remained firmly opposed to such a line of conduct and was determined not to press any French advantage.²⁰ He felt that France's priority was to work patiently towards an improvement of Franco-British relations as well as to negotiate the diplomatic support of some of the major powers involved in the Moroccan question.²¹ The relations between Delcassé and Etienne came to a head after the speech

¹⁶ A. Lecigne, *op. cit.*, p. 962.

¹⁷ Eugène Etienne, "L'Angleterre devant l'Europe", *La Dépêche Coloniale*, 8 November 1899. The article was initially published in *Le Figaro* on 7 November 1899.

¹⁸ Eugène Etienne's letter to *Le Figaro* published as "Réponse à Lord Salisbury", *La Dépêche coloniale*, 14 November 1899.

¹⁹ C.M. Andrew, *Théophile Delcassé and the Making of the Entente Cordiale ...*, p. 137.

²⁰ Eugène Etienne, "L'Angleterre devant l'Europe", *La Dépêche Coloniale*, 8 November 1899.

²¹ Pascal Venier, "French Foreign Policy and the Boer War" in Keith Wilson (Ed.), *The International Impact of the Boer War* (London: Acumen, 2001), pp. 65-78.

made on 11 December 1899 by Albert Decrais, the Minister for Colonies, who stated the official line of the Waldeck-Rousseau cabinet.²² It was later to be summarized by Joseph Chailley, as follows: “Our colonial Empire is now completely constituted. It is now enough for our needs and fulfils our ambitions. It is now enough France’s needs. Our unique task ought to be to exploit it: the era of conquest is definitively over.” This was indeed not satisfactory for the French expansionists who, whilst satisfied with the existing empire, which they felt “was on a par with our needs and all our ambitions”, felt that it would not be complete without Morocco. Paul Bourde and Joseph Chailley concurred, in 1899, “*Derrière le Maroc entrevue, il y avait la France et sa grandeur.*”²³ Taking the initiative of forming a small group of expansionist enthusiasts who were meeting for lunch, initially and quite ironically at the “Taverne anglaise”. Etienne was soon invited to attend, and it so became the nucleus of what became the *Déjeuner Etienne*, later *Déjeuner du Maroc*, from which the Comité du Maroc, which was to relentlessly press for French expansion in Morocco, originated.

Cecil Rhodes’ image in the French press was unquestionably not a very positive one. Tributes paid to his qualities, and even his genius, no matter how “incomplete” it might be, are however the more noteworthy, as they were unusual traits associated with figures of Englishmen, in the context of the Anglo-Boer War. The sharp contrast between French attitudes towards Britain during the Anglo-Boer war, and after the visit of King Edward VII to Paris and the following presidential visit to London in 1903, is quite striking. However, there seems to be every indication that the treatment of Cecil Rhodes’ death by the French press cannot possibly be interpreted as consistent with an early warming-up of attitudes towards Britain. The treatment of the question by journalist Jean Carrère, who had visited South Africa in 1900 as a war correspondent for *Le Matin*, is quite symptomatic. Carrère played an extremely influential role in the warming up of bilateral relations in the period leading to the *Entente Cordiale*. His articles, published in various periodicals among which *Le Figaro*, *Le Gaulois*, *Le Soleil*, *L’Echo de Paris*, or *La Revue hebdomadaire*, undoubtedly contributed to conditioning French public opinion by promoting the idea of a rapprochement between the two countries.²⁴ Nevertheless as late as the spring of 1902, his tone remained somewhat cold towards England, as is clearly revealed by his two articles on Cecil Rhodes, on 18 and 28 March.²⁵ Likewise, was the tone of a Paris daily generally believed to be close to government circles, *Le Temps*.²⁶

An emerging trend in the French press, in the later stages of the war, was to increasingly distinguish between a liberal and peaceful Britain and another, imperialist and aggressive Britain, that of Rhodes himself, who seemed to be held personally responsible for the war. Such variations on the theme of “les deux Angleterre” became, in 1903, quite central to the argument of the press campaign conducted to condition French public opinion to the idea of a rapprochement with “Perfidious Albion”.²⁷ A fairly similar for of dialectic enabled *L’Economiste français* to reconcile its critical tone during the conflict with its advocacy of a rapprochement in 1903:

²² Joseph Chailley-Bert, “Les Origines du protectorat français au Maroc”, *Revue Parlementaire et Politique*, 10 May 1923, p. 295.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ J. Jacquin’s introduction to Jean Carrère, *L’Impérialisme britannique et le rapprochement franco-anglais 1900-1903, Pages d’avant-guerre* (Paris: Librairie académique Perrin, 1917), pp. V-XIII.

²⁵ Jean Carrère, “Cecil Rhodes. Sa vie. Conséquences de sa fin”, *Le Gaulois*, 27 March 1902.

²⁶ Abel Chevalley, “La mort de Cecil Rhodes”, *Le Temps*, 28 March 1902

²⁷ See Jean Carrère’s article of 1903 on “Les deux Angleterre”. Jean Carrère, *op. cit.*, pp. 320-324.

“When we have so consistently, criticized this Transvaal War, before, during and after; some people, especially in England, have imagined that such criticism was inspired by some kind of jealousy or ill feeling towards Great Britain. Not at all. We have always been partisans, providing it would be honourable for both, of the Entente Cordiale between France and England. It was within our right to nevertheless judge this war, in the same way than in England itself the most eminent men, ministers from yesterday and of tomorrow, Sir Henry Campbell Bannerman, Sir William Harcourt, M. Bryce, M. Morley. We were no more hostile towards Britain being critical in such a way, than were these English statesmen.”

It is also possible to identify a number of other themes, showing the existence of common ground between the two great imperial powers, but also to put across the message that there was a need to be on the same wavelength as the British. The British were frequently presented as pragmatic and “realists” when it came to foreign and imperial policy. The influence of economic motivations in their decision-making was reinforced. Lauzanne, the adoptive son of the *Times*’ correspondent in Paris, Blowitz²⁸, in a fascinating article published in *Le Matin*, in 1900, stressed the importance of the idea of business for the British. In his view, the very expression of business was to be found in the “whole of the English character, the whole English soul and the whole of English policy”. Naturally, as one could expect, Cecil Rhodes figured prominently among examples given of the importance of both business and businessmen in British life. Lauzanne notes, “When it is spoken about a misunderstanding between France and England [...] it might well be because France has never know how to speak to England and that England has never been able to understand France.”²⁹ He stressed how much it had been so, about the question of Egypt as well as in the Fashoda affair, as in both cases, “France has never spoken *business*”, or sought to cut a deal or discussed compensation. He finally suggested that the only way forward to improve relations with Britain was to speak the language of business.

²⁸ Stéphane Lauzanne, “Business”, *Le Matin*, 12 March 1900.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.