

The Colonies and the War

G. A. CORNISH, B.A.

Faculty of Education, University of Toronto

THE British Empire is of slow growth. Like everything British, it has had a gradual evolution, the stimulating force being practical experience. Every new institution has been tried and tested before it was adopted, and old institutions were only modified after being tried in the searching crucible of experience. Unlike the German Empire it is not the product of the mind of one man, nor based on one man's theory of what a great empire should be. It is built on no theory, for the Englishman detests theory, but honours experience. As a result, to the metaphysical theorist at least, it is an inchoate conglomeration of unscientific blunderings. Such was undoubtedly the view of official Germany. One of the factors which stimulated the Kaiser to plunge into a reckless war was the firm belief that the decrepit old Empire would disintegrate when the first stroke of adversity fell on the Motherland.

To the man whose god is the material things and whose ideal of strength is theoretical symmetry, there was room for such a belief. Ireland appeared to be on the verge of civil war; the whole country was divided into two warlike camps; the British army in Ireland had shown a mutinous spirit, and Sir John French had resigned his office. India had been stirred to its depths by a ghastly series of dacoities, seditions, and bloody assassinations. Egypt was in a none too quiescent mood. The Nationalists, stirred up by paid agents from Turkey, had for years preached open sedition against the British rulers, and more than one political murder had been committed during the last decade. In South Africa, General Herzog, ever since he had broken with General Botha, had fired the back velder with racial animosity and tried to open up the sores that the generous treatment of the mother country and the magnificent statesmanship of that giant among colonials, Botha, had done so much to heal. To the Germans, even Canada seemed none too eager to assume her responsibilities for the defence of the Empire. She presented a series of hesitations to assume adequate naval expenditure, and finally a political squabble followed by a deadlock which ended in doing nothing. Australia and New Zealand alone, isolated from the rest of the Empire, seemed eager to do their parts.

Such, apparently, was the political state of affairs when the war came like a bolt from the blue. All was immediately changed. Never before has the British Empire revealed its essential unity and grandeur more magnificently. The whole became a brotherhood filled with one