

# The last Praetorian

**Bernard Porter**

*Mad Mitch's Tribal Law*  
*Aden and the end of Empire*  
Aaron Edwards.

Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 2014, h/b, £20

**M**ost older people will vaguely recall the nickname, but little more. 'Mad Mitch' comes from a bygone era. Indeed, it was bygone even in his own time. That was around the 1960s, when Britain was relinquishing its hold over most of its empire, to the great chagrin of men like Lieutenant-Colonel Colin Campbell Mitchell of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders: 'a self-confessed imperialist since boyhood', whose final military task, to organise an orderly British withdrawal from Aden – 'we are holding things up whilst we get out from underneath' – rankled terribly. Upper middle-class, minor public school (Whitgift) and Sandhurst educated, a firm believer in 'great causes' and 'an avid reader of adventure books by famous patriotic pinups like T.E. Lawrence and John Buchan', he achieved fame briefly in 1967 by taking back the rebellious Crater district of Aden for the British, in just the way his fictional heroes would have done: that is, pretty gung-ho. The press in Britain loved it. (He made sure they came along to observe it.) For a brief while it gave Britons something to cheer about over their *Daily Expresses* (it was an *Express* reporter who coined the 'Mad Mitch' soubriquet), in the midst of a generally dispiriting period in their international history (for those who bothered about these things); before Crater was finally evacuated, and the Argylls flown back to 'a grey cold, depressing Britain' to the strains of 'Fings ain't wot they used to be', played by the band of the Royal Marines of the ship that saw them off.

He was, of course, controversial. In real life, boys' book heroes must expect to be. He had a reputation in the Army

(though not in his own regiment) for insubordination and attention-seeking: a 'jumped-up little colonel' – he was quite short – prone to 'strutting around like a peacock', 'showboating', and 'undermining his superior officers.' He was accused of shooting from the hip (metaphorically) rather too often, though he claimed it was only to deter: 'they know that if they start trouble we'll blow their bloody heads off'. After the withdrawal there were charges of torture under him, and of shocking behaviour by his 'Jocks' (ordinary troops), some of which were true; but 'the key point' here, as Aaron Edwards claims, 'is that they operated against ruthless assassins who had murdered many of their colleagues'. You couldn't expect to judge these things through 'the distorting lens of British fair play'. 'In any case', as Mitchell wrote in his autobiography, *Having Been a Soldier*, published just two years after his return from Aden and resignation from the Army (because he wasn't promoted high enough), 'what do politicians at home know of the cruel, hard facts of life when civil disorder has broken out?' He deliberately courted controversy thereafter, as Conservative MP for Aberdeenshire West, joining the pretty extremist Monday Club and Anglo-Rhodesian Society. He also became an 'icon' for the Conservative Right, who of course didn't mind any of this. There were 'rumours' – only – that he 'was engaged as a trouble-shooter for the Thatcher government' in the early 1980s.

Most damaging to his reputation, however, may be the fact revealed here that when the Argylls marched into Crater – ostensibly the most dangerous place in southern Arabia – it was only after a covert agreement entered into by the (rebel) NLF that its members wouldn't fire on them, at least at the start. Mitchell probably didn't know this at the time: in his autobiography he put his success down to his brilliant generalship – mainly the element of surprise – but this suggests that it may not have really been such a big deal. And, after all, Crater was Mad Mitch's only battle-honour: the

only one, at any rate, mentioned in this book.<sup>1</sup>

The lack of background material here on Mitchell's earlier career in the Army is frustrating for anyone who wants to piece together some kind of explanation for his actions and attitudes. 'Imperialist from boyhood' is telling, but rather vague. Edwards tells us he 'bypassed adolescence for adulthood', which seems questionable – that he ever bypassed adolescence, that is – and joined the Regular Army at the age of 17 in 1943; but that still leaves 24 years of military duty in Palestine, Korea, Cyprus, Borneo and in the King's East African Rifles – where he is supposed to have fixed Idi Amin up with his commission – before he was sent out to Aden. At least three of those theatres were sites of counter-insurgency superficially similar to the one in Aden, where he is bound to have picked up some tips, especially in the light of his views about 'learning from history': 'almost everything that ever happened had happened before and a solution to the problem could be found in what went before'. But there's no clue here as to what he actually did in or learned from those other – difficult and rather dirty – campaigns.

His autobiography is scarcely more forthcoming on this. Edwards' excuse will be that his is more a book about the Aden *imbroglio* than about Mitchell, despite the emphasis given to him in the title and with his portrait dominating the dust-jacket – 'Mad Mitch', indeed, only makes his full appearance two-thirds of the way through; but it really would be helpful to know how his ideas developed through those experiences. One possibility is that they led him to generalise too much. One counter-insurgency situation was much like another. All insurgents everywhere were 'seedy little terrorists', 'gangsters and cold-blooded murderers', possibly literally diabolical (which no doubt justified padres assuring the troops before battles that they had 'God on their side'); or – the terms preferred by his Jocks – 'wogs and gollies'. For his part, Edwards sees the battle as one against a *method* of warfare:

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<sup>1</sup> Another honour – though not strictly a 'battle' one – was the part he played in the formation of the HALO Trust – 'Hazardous Areas Life-Support Organization' – in 1988, turning him, in Edwards' opinion, into 'a fully fledged humanitarian'. That was quite a jump.

'Britain's forgotten war on terror', which is pushing that now familiar term quite a way back. It also rather obscures the faces and the objectives of people who thought they were fighting for other things.

Here lies one of the crucial differences between Mitchell and T.E. Lawrence, with whom he was often compared. He didn't like the comparison because he had rumbled Lawrence as a 'practising pervert'. And the latter – though Mitchell may not have realised this – wasn't really a kosher 'imperialist'. The main difference, however, was that Lawrence had come to serve in Arabia through his empathy with the Arabs, rather than through soldiering. Mitchell, by contrast, saw Arabs simply as a new bunch of 'subversives'. They were defined, in other words, entirely according to their relationship with Britain. He felt Lawrence's (and other Englishmen's) judgment of them had been 'distorted', probably by the 'rough beauty' of Arabia. If they were loyal, then they might be 'very good chaps'; and if they fought bravely and in the open – like Lawrence's desert tribes – they could be admired for that. Otherwise, however, they were 'disloyal' (to the British, that was), 'slippery', 'batty' (the Arabs called it 'touched by God'), 'irrational', 'cruel', 'superstitious', 'mystical', 'oracular', 'hysterical' (the women), 'maniacal', 'wild', and unaware of their own best interests. Under fire, they 'cowered' – as opposed to sheltering, which was what white men did. They 'lounge' a lot. Instead of shouting, they 'hollered'. While Britain used 'covert intelligence', they 'spied' treacherously. Their attacks were 'heartless' and 'cowardly'. They were addicted to 'fighting, killing and treachery', usually for lucre, or under the influence of 'gat' (*khat*, a chewed stimulant). Under interrogation, they emitted 'bloodcurdling squeals' – not 'cries'. Cairo Radio didn't just broadcast propaganda, but 'spouted' it, 'gutterally'. Their supporters – at the UN, for example – 'ranted'. Not all these expressions come from Mitchell's mouth; many of them are Edwards'. But he is clearly conveying – possibly sharing – the attitudes of the time, as revealed in the words of both of them. A different vocabulary is used for each side. A similar thing happens when men are killed. If it's a

British soldier he's described as a 'married man with (X) children'. Arab victims, presumably, have no families.

Mitchell's world, unlike Lawrence's, was centred around the British Empire; that, and Scotland, the other focus of his patriotism – never Britain *per se*, it seems.<sup>2</sup> Mitchell's attachment to Scotland may have been all the more powerful because he was born and brought up in Surrey, which explained his 'la-di-dah' accent – faintly embarrassing when he passed among his Jocks – but it was in the blood.

His view of most English politicians was highly negative – 'squeamish' and 'old women' are two characteristic descriptions – especially Labour ministers of course, who 'with less of a feeling of the "White Man's Burden" on their shoulders' (that's Edwards) were quite happy to begin the 'scuttle', leaving their Tory successors little alternative but to continue down the same road. His rows with them over Aden exposed the existing 'ruptures in the relationship' between the military and its supporters on the one hand and 'Labour Ministers and senior officers in Whitehall on the other' that were opening up in the 1960s, one other sign of which was the secret and treacherous right-wing plotting that went on against Harold Wilson at this time. (Not that there's any evidence that he was involved in that.)

So far as Aden and the rest of the Empire were concerned, however, theirs was a hopeless cause. Mitchell was under no illusions about this. The best he could do was to contrive a last hurrah before it went under; and – more importantly – help save the British Army from the wreckage, as the only 'healthy and virile member' of the ailing national body. At the very least, for Mitchell personally this would soften the decolonisation blow.

But then it seems that the Army, and in particular his beloved Argylls, were where his prime loyalties had always lain – ahead of either of his 'patriotic' ones. The Argylls had been his dad's regiment before him. In a period of defence cuts in the 1960s they were one of the regiments under

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<sup>2</sup> I wonder how many Scots lost interest in the Union when it no longer brought the Empire with it – the latter being the only common thing in which the more conservative of them could take pride?

threat. Mitchell's main motive for wanting to serve in Aden, Edwards claims, was to get them out there to prove their mettle, so that no-one could think of disbanding them. Once in Aden he was obsessed with the idea of avenging British soldiers whom the insurgents had killed: 'It consumed him. The terrorists had to be taught a lesson.' He revelled in the ceremonial impedimenta of the regiment: bagpipes, naming his Crater HQ 'Stirling Castle', and so on, in order to 'remind all ranks of their fighting tradition'.

Then, as an MP after Aden, he devoted most of his energies to the vigorous Scottish campaign to 'Save the Argylls'. (It worked until 2006, when they amalgamated into the Royal Regiment of Scotland.) This was his particular 'tribe'. Edwards believes he succeeded in keeping the member virile. 'The Army generally emerged unscathed' from the encounter, he writes; 'the only British institution,' as Corelli Barnett later put it, with regard to decolonisation more broadly, 'to leave a permanent mark – the mark of order and organization amid a carnival of collapsing parliamentary government'. (One imagines he is referring here to post-colonial national armies like Idi Amin's. Whether that is something to be pleased about may be doubted.)

So far as the Argylls were concerned, Mitchell seems to have done a good job on them. Their training before they embarked for Aden was imaginative and effective: a mock-up of Crater to practice in, and exercise in a regimental gym heated to tropical levels to get them acclimatised. That was just as well, as conditions out there were terrible: 'not a bit like Peckham', as one police sergeant seconded to Aden from there put it, with many Jocks suffering from severe dehydration, for which their 'staple Army diet' of 'tinned baked beans and mutton stew with dumplings' might not have been the best prophylactic.

Mitchell was a courageous and popular commander. He 'led from the front'. He kept his men entertained by bringing in the likes of Tony Hancock (he turned up drunk), and Harry Secombe, the latter to 'officially open a new D Company toilet'. According to Edwards' account the occupation of Crater

(‘Operation Stirling Castle’) went like clockwork, and its evacuation (‘Operation Highland Clearance’) was likewise ‘incredibly methodical’. That is unusual in warfare, although that NLF ceasefire will have had something to do with it.

And this doesn’t take account of all those ‘atrocious’ charges, levelled at the time. Of these Edwards is generally sceptical, based on the available official reports; but declines to get too involved in them, on the grounds that ‘it is not the business of historians to become champions of the litigious culture that has grown up around Britain’s colonial record, especially since these allegations are so obviously one-sided and favour the terrorists and insurgents without ever asking for them to atone for their own sins.’ This may be a side-swipe at historians like David Anderson and Caroline Elkins who were involved in the case brought by ex-Mau Mau detainees against the British government in the High Court last year.

One of the by-products of that case,<sup>3</sup> was the revelation of hundreds of files on British decolonisation generally, not only Kenyan, hidden away in a highly secret government archive at Hanslope Park in Buckinghamshire. They had been deliberately concealed in order to fool future historians. Some were even forged. Sir Kennedy Trevaskis, British High Commissioner in South Arabia just before Mitchell’s arrival there, was one of the chief offenders here, doctoring documents before they were deposited. Some of those will have been related to the ‘torture’ charges. Did all this come out after Edwards completed his book? If so, he has been desperately unlucky. Even if it’s not the ‘business of historians’ to take sides in these controversies, it is their duty, surely, to help establish the facts. The Hanslope Park evidence, once it has been sifted through, is bound to make a difference. In this respect, Edwards may have been too trusting of the British state as the guardian of its own history.

Aside from all this, however, Edwards clearly admires Mitchell’s ‘leadership’ skills. These he attributes in large part to the fact that he was a ‘man’s man and a soldier’s soldier’, which probably translates as ‘masculinist’ in fashionable

<sup>3</sup> And of Calder Walton’s researches, reported in his *Empire of Secrets. British Intelligence, the Cold War and the Twilight of Empire* (2013).

present-day gender terms. He certainly was that. His 'loyal' wife Sue, who performed her duty to her husband and the British Empire (apart from giving them babies) by 'organising the wives' while the regiment was away, thought it was all to do with 'an attitude of mind', mainly of 'courage and determination'. That, as she told a *Daily Mail* interviewer in 1972, 'is what the dominant male is all about'. And dominant males – and females; I'm sure she would have included Margaret Thatcher if the interview had been ten years later – were also what any country needed if it was to become or remain 'great'; and what Britain singularly lacked in the 'socialist' 1960s, which explained its sad decline. In particular its leaders were unnecessarily squeamish about coming down hard on their adversaries, on the grounds that it might only provoke further resistance; a view that Mitchell rejected comprehensively. You had to 'fly the flag', 'whack or woo' the tribes, let the Gollies know who was boss – and they would respect you for it. It was because they had forgotten this in Palestine and Cyprus, and now in Aden, that the British had failed there. That was 'not the case in Malaya and Kenya, where sterner counsels prevailed.' (One presumes he knew exactly how 'stern' they were in both places.) So macho worked. This of course is a common right-wing way of looking at things, albeit probably less widespread today.

Judgments of Mitchell differed – in fact violently clashed – at the time. On the one hand there were those who saw him as 'the Last of the Praetorians' (the title of Edwards' final chapter) who in days gone by had won its great Empire for Britain, then guarded it; and now in these sad days of national decline could do more than ensure it didn't simply fade into oblivion, with one last burst of old-time heroism to keep the imperialists' spirits up. By this reading, if there had been more Mad Mitches around in the 1950s and '60s, Britain would still be ruling over pine and palm today. Few historians would agree with this – History is more complicated than that – but it is, in truth, a difficult counter-factual to disprove. Aaron Edwards still seems to cling on to it, or aspects of it anyway, with the strong imperial-nostalgic, anti-Labour, anti-UN bias of

this book; and what he himself calls his 'worm's-eye' view of the events portrayed in it, which coincide with Mitchell's stance: that it was always the 'man on the spot' who knew best. Even at the time he was criticised for this, and for showing little understanding of the 'wider problems' – the context – of the events he was involved in; which he denied, but was undoubtedly true. He had after all a very limited and one-sided – if intense – experience of life and the world. The rival judgment was perhaps best expressed by his fellow Scot, Labour MP Tam Dalyell, in the House of Commons in July 1968: who did 'not doubt that Colonel Mitchell is a very brave man', but simply 'wished to remark', that in the broader context of the time 'I do not want to be represented abroad in the Arab world by this kind of man.' Apparently that 'caused outrage' on the Tory side of the Chamber.

Tories like that are rarer today. One hopes that this book – by a Sandhurst Senior Lecturer, not in History but in Defence and International Affairs – won't encourage a resurrection of them at the Royal Military Academy. (I'm sure its History lecturers will provide some balance.) This apart, however, it's useful for historians to try to understand all perspectives, the worm's as well as the bird's, especially from a time, fifty years later, when this particular genus of worm seems almost extinct. *Mad Mitch's Tribal Law*, through its author's obvious empathy with Colin Mitchell, provides a valuable insight into the mind of this sort of military imperialist, now long gone.

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a historian of the British Empire.  
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