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Carroll Quigley's Conspiracy Theory: The Milner Group

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Academic historians dislike the concept that history is often made by groups of individuals plotting together in confidence, even though one obvious way to get big things done is to make plans with your friends and allies while keeping your rivals in the dark as long as possible.

One exception is the late Georgetown history professor Carroll Quigley, who in 1949 completed a book rather grandly entitled [*The Anglo-American Establishment*](#).

Decades later Bill Clinton was an undergrad student of Quigley (he got a B from him). In [Clinton's 1992 acceptance speech](#) at the Democratic convention, he cited Quigley as an inspiration.

In reality, Quigley's book, which wasn't published until much later, was only very tangentially related to American institutions such as the Council of Foreign Relations. It actually focused on one group of British establishmentarians, the progressive imperialists who set up the British equivalent of the CFR, the [Royal Institute of International Affairs](#) (a.k.a., Chatham House), edited *The Times* of London for most of the first four decades of the 20th Century, and largely controlled the peculiarly influential [All Souls College](#) at Oxford.



Quigley calls them the [Milner Group](#) after Alfred Milner (1854-1925), an *eminence grise* who more or less started the Boer War of 1899-1902, then mentored “Milner’s Kindergarten” of bright young men in running South Africa, and finally popped up again in Lloyd George’s five-man war cabinet in 1917. But Milner mostly served behind the scenes.

Quigley traces the Milner Group back to the far more colorful [Cecil Rhodes](#)' desire to start a [“Secret Society”](#) to promote Anglo-American unity and global domination. In the first five wills written by the mining tycoon of southern Africa, Rhodes (1853-1902) called for his estate to fund a secret society to reunify America with Britain and promote Anglo settlement of the world. For example, Rhodes wrote in his first will that he was leaving his fortune:

To and for the establishment, promotion and development of a Secret Society, the true aim and object whereof shall be for the extension of British rule throughout the world, the perfecting of a system of emigration from the United Kingdom, and of colonisation by British subjects of all lands where the means of livelihood are attainable by

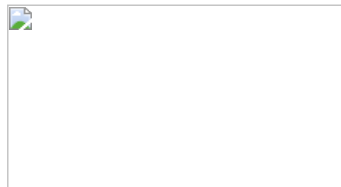
energy, labour and enterprise, and especially the occupation by British settlers of the entire Continent of Africa, the Holy Land, the Valley of the Euphrates, the Islands of Cyprus and Candia, the whole of South America, the Islands of the Pacific not heretofore possessed by Great Britain, the whole of the Malay Archipelago, the seaboard of China and Japan, the ultimate recovery of the United States of America as an integral part of the British Empire, the inauguration of a system of Colonial representation in the Imperial Parliament which may tend to weld together the disjointed members of the Empire and, finally, the foundation of so great a Power as to render wars impossible and promote the best interests of humanity.

Rhodes hoped his Secret Society would act as the Jesuits of the British Empire:

I look into history and I read the story of the Jesuits I see what they were able to do in a bad cause and I might say under bad leaders.

At the present day I become a member of the Masonic order I see the wealth and power they possess the influence they hold and I think over their ceremonies and I wonder that a large body of men can devote themselves to what at times appear the most ridiculous and absurd rites without an object and without an end.

The idea gleaming and dancing before ones eyes like a will-of-the-wisp at last frames itself into a plan. Why should we not form a secret society with but one object the furtherance of the British Empire and the bringing of the whole uncivilised world under British rule for the recovery of the United States for the making the Anglo-Saxon race but one Empire. ...



To forward such a scheme what a splendid help a secret society would be a society not openly acknowledged but who would work in secret for such an object.

I contend that there are at the present moment numbers of the ablest men in the world who would devote their whole lives to it. ... There are men now living with I know no other term the [Greek term] of Aristotle but there are not ways for enabling them to serve their Country. They live and die unused unemployed. What has the main cause of the success of the Romish Church? The fact that every enthusiast, call it if you like every madman finds employment in it. Let us form the same kind of society a Church for the extension of the British Empire. A society which should have members in every part of

the British Empire working with one object and one idea we should have its members placed at our universities and our schools and should watch the English youth passing through their hands just one perhaps in every thousand would have the mind and feelings for such an object, he should be tried in every way, he should be tested whether he is endurant, possessed of eloquence, disregardful of the petty details of life, and if found to be such, then elected and bound by oath to serve for the rest of his life in his County. He should then be supported if without means by the Society and sent to that part of the Empire where it was felt he was needed. ...

Take one more case of the younger son with high thoughts, high aspirations, endowed by nature with all the faculties to make a great man, and with the sole wish in life to serve his Country but he lacks two things the means and the opportunity, ever troubled by a sort of inward deity urging him on to high and noble deeds, he is compelled to pass his time in some occupation which furnishes him with mere existence, he lives unhappily and dies miserably. Such men as these the Society should search out and use for the furtherance of their object.

(In every Colonial legislature the Society should attempt to have its members prepared at all times to vote or speak and advocate the closer union of England and the colonies, to crush all disloyalty and every movement for the severance of our Empire. The Society should inspire and even own portions of the press for the press rules the mind of the people. The Society should always be searching for members who might by their position in the world by their energies or character forward the object but the ballot and test for admittance should be severe)

Once make it common and it fails. Take a man of great wealth who is bereft of his children perhaps having his mind soured by some bitter disappointment who shuts himself up separate from his neighbours and makes up his mind to a miserable existence. To such men as these the society should go gradually disclose the greatness of their scheme and entreat him to throw in his life and property with them for this object. I think that there are thousands now existing who would eagerly grasp at the opportunity. Such are the heads of my scheme.

For fear that death might cut me off before the time for attempting its development I leave all my worldly goods in trust to S. G. Shippard and the Secretary for the Colonies at the time of my death to try to form such a Society with such an object.

In his sixth and seventh wills, Rhodes switched from calling for a Secret Society

to the [Rhodes Scholarships](#) to promote Anglosphere unity. (Probably the most famous living Rhodes Scholar is Quigley's old student Bill Clinton.) Wills are legal documents, so it's hard to keep your Secret Society secret if you put it in your will.

In the early versions of Rhodes' Secret Society in the 1890s, the finances were to be controlled by Lord Rothschild while the propaganda was to be handled by the titanic newspaper editor [William T. Stead](#) (1849-1912, last seen bobbing alongside John Jacob Astor IV amidst the wreckage of the *Titanic*). But Stead opposed the Boer War of 1899 and was replaced in Rhodes affections by Milner.



A stumbling block to Rhodes' plan for an English Cape-to-Cairo railroad through East Africa were the Boer Republics of Afrikaners who had fled the English takeover of Cape Town and established their own countries, where gold had now been discovered. In late 1895, Rhodes and his business partner in [De Beers](#), Alfred Beit, financed (with the foreknowledge of British colonial secretary Joseph Chamberlain) the [Jameson Raid](#) out of Rhodesia into the independent Transvaal. The English immigrant miners working there were supposed to violently rise up against the Dutch-speaking government, but largely failed to do so. Rhodes was embarrassed, but attention was distracted from his defeat when Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany sent a [telegram](#) to the Boer leader:

I express to you my sincere congratulations that you and your people, without appealing to the help of friendly powers, have succeeded, by your own energetic action against the armed bands which invaded your country as disturbers of the peace, in restoring peace and in maintaining the independence of the country against attack from without.

The Kaiser's opinion caused enormous indignation in Britain, where Southern Africa was considered to be part of Britain's sphere of influence. The Jameson Raid / Kruger Telegram are often seen as key early steps in the deterioration of the generally chummy British-German relationships of the 19th Century toward the series of unfortunate events in 1914-1918 and 1939-1945.

Milner, a career government official, was sent out from London in 1897 to run South Africa. He soon engineered the Boer War of 1899, which Britain eventually, after a much harder fight than expected, won in 1902, taking control of the vast mineral deposits that Rhodes and Chamberlain had tried to seize in Jameson's Raid.

The South African careers of Rhodes and Milner are reminiscent of the Marcher

Lord theory propounded recently by Peter Turchin, in which the metropolitan center declines into soft decadence while power shifts to the hard men of the frontiers.

The South African connection is also reminiscent of the large but now largely ignored Jewish role in British Empire politics. Neither Rhodes nor Milner were Jewish, but their allies such as [Beit](#) often were. (Current Fed Vice Chairman [Stanley Fischer](#), who was born in the British colony of Northern Rhodesia in 1943, is a late example of the Jewish role in southern Africa.)

Milner recruited a variety of competent and idealistic young Brits, such as John Buchan (future author of the famous suspense novel *The 39 Steps* and Governor-General of Canada) and Geoffrey Dawson (editor of *The Times* during most of 1912-1941) to serve in [Milner's Kindergarten](#) in South Africa.

British culture of a century ago looked to Periclean Athens for role models (see, for example, Plato's *Symposium*), so it was extremely good at inducing warm relations between older men and the most brilliant younger men.

As far as I can tell, Milner was straight, but that wasn't the kind of thing that was worried about all that much in youth-worshipping Edwardian England.

As the banker father sings in *Mary Poppins*:

It's grand to be an Englishman in 1910
King Edward's on the throne, it's the age of men

A culture of male self-admiration tended to elicit high male achievement. (In contrast, in today's culture of male denigration, males tend to live down to society's expectations.)

Around 1910, most of Milner's Kindergarten returned to Britain where they played important roles in foreign policy up through the unfortunate events of 1940, and even beyond.

Quigley claims, for example, that Milner actually drafted the famous Balfour Declaration of 1917, a letter from the British government to Lord Rothschild approving Palestine as a national home for the Jewish people. (A more recent author claims it was actually written by Milner's dynamic protege [Leo Amery](#).)

According to Quigley, Milner's young men were the low-key, centrist embodiment of the Secret Society dreamed up by Rhodes. They largely took over the Cecil Bloc of Tories assembled in the 19th Century by the masterful Prime Minister Salisbury and then dissipated in the 20th Century by his nephew Prime Minister Balfour, who was too oriented toward philosophy and golf to run a faction.

Quigley wasn't too perturbed by the Milner Group, although he was annoyed by its influence on historiography via its control of many of the best jobs in the history professor business:

I know of the operations of this network because I have studied it for twenty years and was permitted for two years, in the early 1960s, to examine its papers and secret records. I have no aversion to it or to most of its aims and have, for much of my life, been close to it and to many of its instruments. I have objected, both in the past and recently, to a few of its policies, but in general my chief difference of opinion is that it wishes to remain unknown, and I believe its role in history is significant enough to be known.

Did the Milner Group really exist?

Quigley claims that although its existence went unsaid among the upper classes, the reality of the Milner Group as a coherent body can be documented from the sentimental obituaries younger members wrote for deceased members in media institutions they controlled such as the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

Reading them, I'd say he has a point.

Still, we know a huge amount about the private lives of the British toffs of a century ago, and the lack of follow-up to Quigley's hypothesis suggests that not much more evidence has surfaced.

But whether you'd call it the Milner Group with a capital G or just a clique or *coterie* seems to be one of those glass part full or part empty questions. It's likely that no-drama Milner dispensed with the romantic Mason-inspired silliness that the young Rhodes had come up with in favor of a simple strategy of like-minded friends quietly coordinating for maximum public effectiveness.

As for secrecy, consider the famous **Chatham House Rule**: if you are invited to a meeting at Chatham House where, say, John Kerry explains the Iran deal, you are allowed to discuss what you learned but not mention the name of whoever you heard it from. That's a clever way to cut the Gordian Knot of wanting to propagandize without being seen to propagandize.

British institutions such as *The Economist* continue to utilize anonymity, pseudonyms, and initials to inflate credibility. If, for example, Will Wilkinson signed his names to his columns in *The Economist*, you'd say, "Oh, that's just *Will Wilkinson's* opinion." But if he's identified in *The Economist* only as W.W. it's easy to imagine he is some authority.

On the other hand, practically everybody in the British ruling class had social connections to everybody else. The Chamberlain family alone (Joseph, Austen,

and Neville) is difficult to disentangle.

In Quigley's 1949 book, it's amusing to see 21st Century journalists such as Matt Ridley and [Polly Toynbee](#) prefigured by their 19th century kinsman, such as Salisbury's protege M.W. Ridley, first Viscount Ridley. For example, Milner's best friend at Oxford and intellectual



inspiration was progressive economist [Arnold Toynbee](#) (uncle of the once famous historian Arnold J. Toynbee). Margot Asquith, Balfour's friend in the high brow high society clique of the 1880s, The Souls, was the step-great-grandmother of actress Helena Bonham Carter, whose grandmother Viola, the daughter of PM Asquith, was much disappointed when Winston Churchill didn't marry her.

(And British all-male institutions tended to create cliques. I'm reading another British history book, [Children of the Sun: A Narrative of Decadence in England after 1918](#). It focuses upon two British literary cliques of young men that emerged after the Great War, the first led by Brian Howard and Harold Acton, whose most famous member proved to be Evelyn Waugh (his memorable gay characters [Anthony Blanche](#) in *Brideshead Revisited* and Ambrose Silk in *Put Out More Flags* are a combination of Acton's good characteristics and Howard's abundant bad ones); the second clique was a few years younger and led by W.H. Auden and included Christopher Isherwood and Stephen Spender.

George Orwell, who was at Eton with Cyril Connolly, but couldn't afford Oxford, often felt oppressed by these backscratching coteries. Orwell particularly despised the pervasive influence of the rich, American, gay, Jewish, and pro-Stalin [Brian Howard](#). The only way Orwell could have hated Howard more were if Howard had also somehow been Irish Catholic.

Were these Oxford literary cliques conspiracies? Well, if you were off in Burma shooting elephants while your peers were bonding over luncheons and teas at Oxford, they could seem like them.)

And it's not hugely clear that the Milner Group had tremendous ideological influence, since, via their mouthpiece at *The Times*, their voice was that of the British Establishment and it's not that obvious what the British Establishment would have done all that differently if other personnel had been at key chokepoints.

The Establishment's undeniable massive screw-up was appeasement of Hitler in the 1930s. Lord Astor became the main financier of Milner Group interests, buying *The Times* in 1922, and he went along with Milner's view that the time had come to be nice to Germany. Waugh's Communist cousin Claude Cockburn (father of numerous journalist Cockburns and grandfather of actress Olivia Wilde) deemed Lady Astor's friends the purportedly treasonous [Cliveden Set](#).

But Quigley emphasizes that the center of gravity of the Milner Group was

somewhat less pro-appeasement than Neville Chamberlain's inner circle. And Quigley underplays how strongly Milner's most impressive protege Amery (who was half-Jewish) sided with Churchill for rearmament in the 1930s, being the second most important anti-Appeasement voice in the Tories after the death of Austen Chamberlain in 1937. If Churchill hadn't lived, I can imagine Amery becoming the fierce wartime Prime Minister.

As the Rhodes-Milner faction became less closely associated with South Africa in the 20th Century, it became less Jewish, although Quigley asserts that [Isaiah Berlin](#) was a late addition to the outer circle of the Milner Group.

In any case, Quigley's explanation of the how the Milner Group coordinated Establishment opinion is relevant in the U.S. today:

The Times was to be a paper for the people who are influential, and not for the masses. ... By the interaction of these various branches on one another, under the pretense that each branch was an autonomous power, the influence of each branch was increased through a process of mutual reinforcement. The unanimity among the various branches was believed by the outside world to be the result of the influence of a single Truth, while really it was result of a single group. Thus, a statesman (a member of the Group) announces a policy. About the same time, the Royal Institute of International Affairs publishes a study on the subject, and an Oxford don, a Fellow of All Souls (and a member of the Group) also publishes a volume on the subject (probably through a publishing house, like G. Bell and Sons or Faber and Faber, allied to the Group). The statesman's policy is subjected to critical analysis and final approval in a "leader" in *The Times*, while the two books are reviewed (in a single review) in *The Times Literary Supplement*. Both the "leader" and the review are anonymous but are written by members of the Group. And finally, at about the same time, an anonymous article in *The Round Table* strongly advocates the same policy. The cumulative effect of such tactics as this, even if each tactical move influences only a small number of important people, is bound to be great. If necessary, the strategy can be carried further, by arranging for the secretary to the Rhodes Trustees to go to America for a series of "informal discussions" with former Rhodes Scholars, while a prominent retired statesman (possibly a former Viceroy of India) is persuaded to say a few words at the unveiling of a plaque in All Souls or New College in honor of some deceased Warden. By a curious coincidence, both the "informal discussions" in America and the unveiling speech at Oxford touch on the same topical subject. ...

There is no effort here to contend that the Milner Group ever falsified or even concealed evidence (although this charge could be made

against *The Times*). Rather it propagated its point point of view by interpretation and selection of evidence. In this fashion it directed policy ways that were sometimes disastrous. The Group as a whole was made up of intelligent men who believed sincerely, and usually intensely, in what they advocated, and who knew that their writings were intended for a small minority as intelligent as themselves. In such conditions there could be no value in distorting or concealing evidence. To do so would discredit the instruments they controlled. By giving the facts as they stood, and as completely as could be done in consistency with the interpretation desired, a picture could be construed that would remain convincing for a long time.