

**THE ROMANES
LECTURE,
1907: FRONTIERS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649324279

The Romanes Lecture, 1907: Frontiers by Curzon

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Cover @ 2017

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THE ROMANES LECTURE

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Frontiers

BY

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE
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DELIVERED

IN THE SHELDONIAN THEATRE, OXFORD

NOVEMBER 2, 1907



OXFORD

AT THE CLARENDON PRESS

1907

HENRY FROWDE, M.A.
PUBLISHER TO THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD
LONDON, EDINBURGH
NEW YORK AND TORONTO

FRONTIERS

WHEN, at the end of December, 1905, the then Vice-Chancellor asked me to be the Romanes Lecturer in the following year, just after my return from India, I felt that the honour was one which it was impossible for me, as a devoted son of this ancient and illustrious University, to decline. But when he informed me that the entire field of Science, Literature, and Art was at my disposal for the choice of a subject, and that among my predecessors were to be found the great names of Gladstone, Huxley, and John Morley, I was more appalled at my temerity in venturing to tread in their footsteps than I was gratified at the almost illimitable range that was opened to my ambition. In these circumstances, I concluded that my best course would be to select some topic of which I had personal experience, and upon which I could, without presumption, address even this famous and learned University. I chose the subject of Frontiers. It happened that a large part of my younger days had been spent in travel upon the boundaries of the British Empire in Asia, which had always exercised upon me a peculiar fascination. A little later, at the India Office and at the Foreign Office, I had had official cognizance of a period of great anxiety, when the main sources of diplomatic preoccupation, and sometimes of international danger, had been the determination of the Frontiers of the Empire in Central Asia, in every

part of Africa, and in South America. Further, I had just returned from a continent where I had been responsible for the security and defence of a Land Frontier 5,700 miles in length, certainly the most diversified, the most important, and the most delicately poised in the world; and I had there, as Viceroy, been called upon to organize, and to conduct the proceedings of, as many as five Boundary Commissions.

I was the more tempted to undertake this task because I had never been able to discover, much less to study, its literature. It is a remarkable fact that, although Frontiers are the chief anxiety of nearly every Foreign Office in the civilized world, and are the subject of four out of every five political treaties or conventions that are now concluded, though as a branch of the science of government Frontier policy is of the first practical importance, and has a more profound effect upon the peace or warfare of nations than any other factor, political or economic, there is yet no work or treatise in any language which, so far as I know, affects to treat of the subject as a whole. Modern works on geography realize with increasing seriousness the significance of political geography; and here in this University, so responsive to the spirit of the age, where I rejoice to think that a School of Geography has recently been founded, it is not likely to escape attention. A few pages are sometimes devoted to Frontiers in compilations on International Law, and here and there a Frontier officer relates his experience before learned societies or in the pages of a magazine. But with these exceptions there is a practical void. You may ransack the catalogues of libraries, you may search the indexes of celebrated historical works, you may study the writings

of scholars, and you will find the subject almost wholly ignored. Its formulæ are hidden in the arcana of diplomatic chancelleries; its documents are embedded in vast and forbidding collections of treaties; its incidents and what I may describe as its incomparable drama are the possession of a few silent men, who may be found in the clubs of London, or Paris, or Berlin, when they are not engaged in tracing lines upon the unknown areas of the earth.

Frontiers in History.

And yet I would invite you to pause and consider what Frontiers mean, and what part they play in the life of nations. I will not for the moment go further back than a century. It was the adoption of a mistaken Frontier policy that brought the colossal ambitions of the great Napoleon with a crash to the ground. The allied armies might never have entered Paris had the Emperor not held out for an impossible Frontier for France. The majority of the most important wars of the century have been Frontier wars. Wars of religion, of alliances, of rebellion, of aggrandisement, of dynastic intrigue or ambition—wars in which the personal element was often the predominant factor—tend to be replaced by Frontier wars, i. e. wars arising out of the expansion of states and kingdoms, carried to a point, as the habitable globe shrinks, at which the interests or ambitions of one state come into sharp and irreconcilable collision with those of another.

To take the experience of the past half-century alone. The Franco-German War was a war for a Frontier, and it was the inevitable sequel of the Austro-Prussian campaign of 1866, which, by destroying the belt of

independent States between Prussia and her Rhenish provinces, had brought her up to the doors of France. The campaign of 1866 was itself the direct consequence of the war of 1864 for the recovery by Germany of the Frontier Duchies of Schleswig-Holstein. The Russo-Turkish War originated in a revolt of the Frontier States, and every Greek war is waged for the recovery of a national Frontier. We were ourselves at war with Afghanistan in 1839, and again in 1878, we were on the verge of war with Russia in 1878, and again in 1885, over Frontier incidents in Asia. The most arduous struggle in which we have been engaged in India in modern times was waged with Frontier tribes. Had the Tibetans respected our Frontiers, we should never have marched three years ago to Lhasa. Think, indeed, of what the Indian Frontier Problem, as it is commonly called, has meant and means; the controversies it has provoked, the passions it has aroused; the reputations that have flashed or faded within its sinister shadow. Japan came to blows with China over the Frontier-state of Korea; she found herself gripped in a life-and-death struggle with Russia because of the attempt of the latter to include Manchuria within the Frontiers of her political influence. Great Britain was on the brink of a collision with France over the Frontier incident of Fashoda; she advanced to Khartoum not to avenge Gordon, but to defend an imperilled and to recover a lost Frontier. Only the other day the Algeciras Conference was sitting to determine the degree to which the possession of a contiguous Frontier gave France the right to exercise a predominant influence in Morocco. But perhaps a more striking illustration still is that of Great Britain and America. The two occa-

sions on which in recent times (and there are earlier examples ¹) the relations between these two allied and fraternal peoples—conflict between whom would be a hideous crime—have been most perilously affected, have both been concerned with Frontier disputes—the Venezuelan and the Alaskan Boundary.

The most urgent work of Foreign Ministers and Ambassadors, the foundation or the outcome of every *entente cordiale*, is now the conclusion of Frontier Conventions in which sources of discord are removed by the adjustment of rival interests or ambitions at points where the territorial borders adjoin. Frontiers are indeed the razor's edge on which hang suspended the modern issues of war or peace, of life or death to nations. Nor is this surprising. Just as the protection of the home is the most vital care of the private citizen, so the integrity of her borders is the condition of existence of the State. But with the rapid growth of population and the economic need for fresh outlets, expansion has, in the case of the Great Powers, become an even more pressing necessity. As the vacant spaces of the earth are filled up, the competition for the residue is temporarily more keen. Fortunately, the process is drawing towards a natural termination. When all the voids are filled up, and every Frontier is defined, the problem will assume a different form. The older and more powerful nations will still dispute about their Frontiers with each other; they will still encroach upon

¹ For instance the question of the San Juan Islands in the Straits of Georgia between the mainland and Vancouver's Island, which was decided by the German Emperor in 1872 in favour of the United States; and the earlier controversies about the boundaries of Oregon and Maine.