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In the early 1890s a thirty-five year old clerk in the British civil service submitted a bulky manuscript to his superior, Alfred Milner, the future Lord Milner and famous pro-consul in South Africa. Milner was impressed and lent his influence towards publication of the work. The clerk was Benjamin Kidd (1858–1916), son of a constable in the Royal Irish Constabulary Force, and educated in a remote part of County Clare. Kidd’s was to be a case of overnight success, a ‘rags to riches’ story worthy of Samuel Smiles or Horatio Alger. The studious clerk and occasional journalist became an instant celebrity. The man who kept colonies of ants and bees in his study, whose dream was to apply the most advanced Darwinian principles to society, to pioneer an holistic science of society based on biology, found his life dramatically transformed. His book, Social Evolution, became an enormous best-seller in Britain and America, and was translated into at least ten languages including Arabic and Chinese. Whatever its intellectual merits – and they were freely disputed – it was demonstrably a book of its time. It was constantly quoted, preached from the pulpit, set as a text by American universities. It became a landmark in the history of Social Darwinism. Opinions were passionately divided about it. One east coast critic in the United States flatly declared that ‘the book supplied a basis on which to begin the science of sociology heretofor non-existent. In the chronology of that science, 1894 will hereafter be known as the year one, and Mr. Kidd’s book as Volume One in its bibliography.’ Harold Laski, the socialist intellectual and rational humanist, later debunked it as ‘an amazing mosaic of ill-considered half-truth’.¹ Henry Demarest Lloyd, egalitarian and anti-monopolist, America’s
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apostle of social justice, liked Kidd’s altruistic ideas, but was alarmed that ‘he promised the business system a new lease of life and authority by his philosophy of struggle, and the ecclesiastical system renewed infallibility’. Others accused Kidd of socialist tendencies and religious heresies. The conservative W.H. Mallock deemed the book ‘a piece of monumental clap-trap’ that ‘provided a scientific basis for democracy – democracy by constant implications being identified with some form of Socialism’.

Kidd’s highly idiosyncratic mix of ideas created immense interest on the part of a fin de siècle generation mesmerised by speculation on the future of man. He reflected the exploratory temper of the age, its apocalyptic sense of change and crisis. He offered a bio-politics that seemed timely, given the turn-of-the-century revolution in genetics. He promised a new synthesis of knowledge, a new gestalt, one that sought to restore emotional and non-rational forces to their rightful place in the hierarchy of human drives. And he seemed to be doing so by using a scientific methodology (a claim that his rationalist critics were, quite properly, suspicious about). His ‘irrationalism’ – his belief that progress depended upon essentially non-rational forces, especially religious – chimed in with the mood of the 1890s. The revolt against reason associated with names like Nietzsche had already well set in. Kidd foreshadowed, in some ways, thinkers such as Bergson, Sorel, Jung and Teilhard de Chardin. His Darwinian defence of religion as a race-preserving force earned contemporary attention at a time of growing détente between the protagonists in the science versus religion debate. Kidd’s up-dated Social Darwinism modified the competitive conflict models of people like Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner. He brought applied Darwinism into line with the more collectivist values associated in America with Progressivism, and in Britain with the ‘Oxford Idealism’ of T.H. Green and Bernard Bosanquet, and after that the ‘new liberalism’ of men like J.A. Hobson and L.T. Hobhouse.

Politically, Kidd offered something for almost everybody: a
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defence of competition for laissez-fairists; a vision splendid of triumphant democracy for apostles of progress; anti-socialism for conservatives, a spicing of socialism for the left; a rationale for Anglo-Saxon imperialists. But his versatility was a twoged weapon. Believers were offended by his functional defence of religion, scientists by his faith in unreason and loose speculation, the scholarly by his pinched concept of rationality and his slanted account of history. Like H.G. Wells he was attuned to the secret harmonies of the age. But also like Wells, he was a spiky individualist who had the knack of treading upon toes, even those of his supporters.

The phenomenal success of Social Evolution enabled its author ultimately to devote himself to a life of writing, travel, naturalist studies and politics. A deadly serious man with a mission, he set out to be a social prophet in the tradition of Comte and Spencer. He wrote more books: The Control of the Tropics (1898), Principles of Western Civilisation (1902), Individualism and After (1908) and The Science of Power (published posthumously in 1918). As well, he contributed influential articles to periodicals and encyclopaedias – he persuaded the Encyclopaedia Britannica to print its first piece on sociology – and churned out numerous columns as a free-lance journalist, writing over ninety articles for J.L. Garvin’s Outlook. He helped form the British Sociological Society, within which he fought a running battle against the eugenists led by Francis Galton and Karl Pearson. Although none of his later works achieved the extraordinary impact of his first book, they were not without their influence and significance. Control of the Tropics adumbrated a bio-political defence of empire that won considerable currency in the Anglo-American world at a time of expansionist fervour. Joseph Chamberlain admitted its influence upon him, and President McKinley was urged by expansionists to consult its argument. Kidd travelled to the United States in 1898, to find himself engulfed in the debate over the Spanish war and acquisition of the Philippines. His contacts with ‘Social Gospel’ reformers and anti-monopolists stimulated a
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radicalisation of his thought. His ‘Social Imperialism’ advocated an amalgam of imperialism with social reform, a doctrine that seemed much less outlandish to that generation than to our own. His Anglo-Saxonism – unlike some other cults of the time – rested not upon racist genetics but upon the more flexible concept of ‘social efficiency’. He called for western development of vital tropical resources needed for the world economy. But it should take place, he insisted, under a paternalistic system respecting indigenous rights. His programme anticipated early twentieth-century policies of trusteeship.

*Principles of Western Civilisation* was an ambitious book, ‘the first volume of a system of evolutionary philosophy’. As such it flopped. It was his worst-received work, at least in the west. Yet even this flawed work excited interest and controversy with its futurist concept of ‘projected efficiency’: the idea that successful social orders worked according to an evolutionary principle that subordinated the interests of presently existing individuals to that of a collective of individuals, ‘the overwhelming proportion of whose members are still in the future’. *Western Civilisation* enjoyed a considerable vogue in early twentieth-century China, Kidd being regarded as one of the more important harbingers of western science and reform. He inspired Mao Tse-tung’s early mentor Liang Ch’i-ch’ao, who described the work as ‘a great light to the future’. There is a lesson here, one suspects, for the practitioners of the ‘great man’ theory of biography. The mental structures of the world have not been exclusively shaped by the classic big books. It is our intellectual snobbery that tempts us to think so. Mass readerships have commonly seized upon the popular sociologies and pulp politics of the day as more relevant aids in cultural navigation.

After a trip to war-torn South Africa in 1902, Kidd became closely involved in Joseph Chamberlain’s tariff-reform campaign, became indeed a significant theoretician of that movement. As a Liberal of the ‘new variety’, he wanted social justice plus national efficiency at home. He became convinced
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that these things could only be achieved by an economic revolution that linked tariff reform and imperial reconstruction. The ‘free scramble’ dogma was indifferent to moral obligation. Domestically it would only lead to an American-style capitalism based on monopoly, ‘vaster, more permanent, more highly organised, and more intelligently systematic, than has been known in the world before’. Globally it led to the rule of international corporations, bodies that transcended the nation and would encroach upon Britain’s independence and economic viability – unless resisted by tariff protection. He painted a dark but believable picture of a free-trade Britain surviving on its capital and entrepreneurial skills, steadily losing its innovative power. Attracted by Chamberlain’s larger-than-life personality and vision, Kidd collaborated in Joe’s attempts to create a tariff-reform ‘Cave of Adullam’ within the Liberal party, a ‘new force’ in politics. His correspondence with Chamberlain, Milner, and their circles, sheds light on the turbulent politics of 1903–6, not least on the behind-the-scenes manoeuvring that took place in the journalistic world, in clubs such as the National Liberal Club, the Eighty Club and the Savile, and in intellectual societies such as the Co-efficients, Compatriots and X Club. When Campbell-Bannerman triumphed over Balfour and Chamberlain at the 1906 election – the triumph of ‘Liberalism of the Anti’, Kidd called it – he withdrew, disillusioned, from politics.

Living reclusively in the countryside, first in Kent, then in Sussex, Kidd pursued his naturalist studies, making occasional interventions in campaigns that concerned him – such as feminism and syndicalism after 1910 – but essentially devoting himself to the life of ideas, always more important to him than the life of action. He was ever the seeker after the ‘secret key’ to knowledge, the man who hoped to give enlightenment to the world. There was always a mystical streak in his makeup, and it intensified with time. His methodology became more intuitive as he progressively lost faith in positivistic science, even at the last in Darwinism. Although not without ambivalence, his thought tended to
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become more collectivist – his books are full of violent attacks upon monopoly and capitalism – while his tone became more visionary and utopian. In his short works, his *Two Principal Laws of Sociology* (1907–8) and *Individualism and After* (the Herbert Spencer lecture for 1908), he denounced Spencerism as an atomistic creed that had outlived its usefulness. He predicted a future of big states and empires, but ultimately one organic commonwealth of mankind, transcending nationalism and governed by a cooperative and futurist ethic. It was a vision that combined oddly disparate elements: religion, Anglo-Saxon imperialism, welfare state with a dash of anarchism. He stigmatised both classic capitalism and Marxism (which he described as an extension of utilitarianism) as materialistic, force-worshipping, and biologically self-defeating. ‘I do not know whether you will call me a reactionary or a revolutionary’, he remarked innocently in his Spencer lecture. Scholars have wavered on the matter ever since.

During this phase of millenarianism he believed that the world was becoming ever more ethical and peace-loving, a view commonly associated with orthogenic Darwinism. ‘A state founded upon coercion must become an impossibility of civilised humanity in the future’, he wrote in 1906. However the European arms race, cut-throat trading rivalries and labour–capital confrontation darkened his vision. He oscillated between his utopian sociology and a doomsday economism that prophesied a global conflict between the great powers for resources. He spent his last years writing a book that might save a world and a civilisation on the precipice of disaster. Finished four days before war broke out in 1914, *Science of Power* had to be re-cast in a desperate race against time and ill health. The final version was completed in the summer of 1916, a few weeks before his death. It offered a powerful indictment of the false doctrines – including Darwinism and imperialism – that had led to militarism, authoritarianism and world catastrophe. Believing that cultural evolution was the key to human progress, he saw only
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one remedy for the crisis of the west: the collective organisation of society for peace and mutuality, achieved by wholesale social conditioning, an ‘environmentalist’ solution consistent with mankind’s higher evolutionary destiny. Woman would play a central role in this change because of her capacity for self-transcendence. She would become the ‘psychic centre’ of human history, custodian of the future against the present.

Science of Power only temporarily rescued Kidd’s reputation. His work lost favour with the disillusioned post-war generation. (The reasons for this are explored in the concluding chapter.) By 1930 he was practically forgotten, although his ideas continued to be displayed, like intellectual fossils, by writers on political science and sociology. Among the more interesting assessments of Kidd’s place in the history of the social sciences were those of Harry Elmer Barnes, sociologist and revisionist historian, in 1922, and Pitirim Sorokin, the Russian-born Harvard sociologist, in 1928. The influential commentaries of Crane Brinton (1933), Richard Hofstadter (1944), and Bernard Semmel (1960) accorded Kidd his due, but were not without bite, sarcasm and degrees of distortion. Semmel, for instance, judged him ‘the first of the English sociologists to alter the direction of Social Darwinism from its Spencerian path, who lived to regret his association with this “science of power”’. Brinton’s reformist dislike of Weismannist genetic ideas led him to portray Kidd as a complacent imperialist who contrived to use biology to save religion from the positivists, and whose political impact was largely ‘Tory’. Brief, but intelligent, appraisals of Kidd have recently appeared in the monographs of Michael Freedon on new liberalism (1978) and Robert C. Bannister on Anglo-American Social Darwinism (1979), raising hopes of a new sophistication towards him in the literature. However in the general textbooks Kidd is still remembered, if at all, as a conservative Social Darwinist, spokesman of white racist imperialism, a man who, like Robert Knox before him or Galton, Pearson and the Fascists later, believed in the genetic inferiority of the dark races. Kidd’s theory of race as socially determined, his
reformist and anti-capitalist ideas, his preference for democracy over elitism, even his impact upon Chinese revolutionary thought (now emphasised by China scholars) have been largely ignored. So too has the flux and development of his thought during his life-time, a subject on which biographical insight has been lamentably lacking.

Labels are dangerous, and in Kidd’s case particularly so. But if we were to pin a label upon him, the more appropriate one would surely be ‘reform Darwinist’ rather than ‘primitivist’ or ‘conservative’ Social Darwinist. (I have used the term ‘Social Darwinism’ broadly to denote the application of Darwinian evolutionary ideas to social and political thought, a usage that includes reform Darwinism, in preference to more limited or technical usages.) Some of his writings, indeed, evoke comparisons with the American ‘muckrakers’ and European socialists. While regarding competition as biologically necessary for social progress – a position that set him against socialism – his preferred model was a socialised liberal capitalism that protected society’s victims, a system very much like that of the English ‘new liberals’ and not all that removed from the interventionist blueprints of the Fabians and Social Democrats. Such similarities should not, however, be allowed to obscure the significant differences that existed between his style of thought and that of many American progressives and English liberals. Their recurring charges that he lacked sympathy with the central categories of liberal thought were sometimes unfair, but were not entirely baseless. There was an authoritarian potential to his ideas that will be explored in this volume. On this matter, as so often, he articulated a common feeling, this time about the inadequacies of liberalism. As I shall argue, Kidd is most profitably interpreted as reflecting the ambiguities of his age, its intellectual evasions as well as its lasting perceptions. By following his career, the biographer is enabled, like an historical geologist, to take a ‘core-sample’ from the rocks and strata of this particular period.

Kidd, the man, is an elusive and enigmatic figure. He left no
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confidential diaries or memoirs, and deliberately avoided personal publicity. Information is desperately scanty on many aspects of his life. Perhaps for these reasons no previous biography exists. His papers, now in Cambridge University Library, and his extensive journalism have been largely neglected. It is not my intention to restore Kidd to the dizzy heights upon which he stood, even if that were possible, or to make exaggerated claims about his intellectual stature. His faults were always painfully obvious to the intellectuals. They were puzzled, sometimes intrigued, by his influence. The story of his success, and failures, is worth scrutiny. He was an egotist — an egotist afflicted by self-doubts and timidity — who wrote on the grand scale, with imagination, and he considered himself better by far than the narrow academics of his day. Perhaps he was not entirely wrong. He was at least willing to invest every ounce of his energy in an unrelenting and highly idealistic search for the truth about humankind, its evolutionary history and ultimate destiny. If he was obsessive, fixated, with delusions of messianic grandeur, perhaps that was integral to the task. Kidd was a complex man, and it may never be possible to paint him in rich colour and telling detail: the documents are too fugitive for that. Nor is his exact impact upon the mental structures of his time easy to ascertain, or his legacy for our century. His preoccupations and areas of interest were in many respects quintessentially ‘modern’. He would not have felt out of place in the age of Desmond Morris, E.O. Wilson, or Theodore Roszak, of socio-biology, doomsday prophecy and counter-culture. If this study contributes to a better understanding of Kidd, the man and the writer, it will have served its purpose.
SOCIAL EVOLUTION

The family name Kidd, also spelt Kyd or Kid, is ancient English. It arose early in Oxfordshire, Yorkshire, Cornwall, Norfolk, London and Scotland, the Kidds being mainly yeomanry and landed gentry in mainland Britain. In Ireland, where Benjamin Kidd came from, they were what a modern descendant called ‘a middle class lot’, professionals, traders and farmers. Many of them were clothiers. By religion the Irish Kidds were predominantly Protestant. The first Kidds to arrive in numbers in the north were Presbyterian Scots immigrants, mainly traders and settlers from ports on the Firth of Clyde. They landed soon after Cromwell’s suppression of Ireland in 1649, the year Monroe sailed from Scotland and ‘settled’ Ulster. The records suggest that the Kidd clan became firmly established in the linen industry. A southern spread of northern Kidds took place from the late seventeenth century, largely down the fertile lands situated on the western side of the River Bann in Derry. The Kidds of southern Ireland can be plausibly derived from a Richard Kidd, who probably came from Yorkshire of Quaker origins and was engaged in the clothing trade. The main family branches to stem from Richard Kidd were the Kidds of Corebally, Cranemore, Ballyrankin, Ballisland (or Ballingale), Askamore, and, further afield, Limerick, Athlone and Dublin. Most of these families were Protestant, a number of them Episcopalian. They tended to marry people with surnames of English rather than Irish extraction, few marrying with the local Catholic Irish. From the later eighteenth century considerable emigration took place amongst them to North America, Australia, South Africa and Britain. The subject of this biography was descended from the Askamore Kidds, or so the evidence suggests.