

## J. G. FARRELL'S INDIAN WORKS : HIS MAJESTY'S SUBJECTS ?

D.C.R.A. GOONETILLEKE

... There had always been some corner of the Empire where His Majesty's subjects were causing trouble ....

J.G. Farrell, **Troubles** (London : Cape, 1990) p.215

J.G. Farrell has in common with Paul Scott -- an admiration for Joseph Conrad (obvious in their use of symbolism, topographical and otherwise), a fascination with the decline of Empire as a subject for fiction; a reputation that rests on a series of historical novels on this subject. Farrell died at the age of 44 whereas Paul Scott did so at 58; therefore, it is not fair to compare their overall achievement. Yet it is necessary to observe that whereas Scott portrayed one country during a single short period in his major work, Farrell's view was global and spanned virtually a century, lighting upon three important crises in three different countries during three different periods: **Troubles** (1970), set in the context of the Irish disturbances of 1919 - 21; **The Siege of Krishnapur** (1973), located during the 1857 "Mutiny" in India; **The Singapore Grip** (1978), focusing on the period leading up to the surrender of Singapore to the Japanese during the Second World War, the first signal defeat of the might of the British Empire by any Asian power.

It is the common view that during the 'Mutiny' in India "a coloured people rose against its British rulers for the first time." <sup>1</sup> Yet in point of fact the first cracks in the British Empire appeared in Sri Lanka (Ceylon as it was then called). Soon after the British gained control of the whole island in 1815, there was a rebellion in 1817-18 which was quelled only after the British received reinforcements from India. A less widespread revolt occurred in 1848. Both these were motivated by 'nationalist' causes and were popular in character, <sup>2</sup> unlike the so-called 'Indian Mutiny', but Sri Lanka (25,232 square miles in extent) was comparatively unimportant and these uprisings did not affect the British psyche and imagination in the way the 'Mutiny' did. The latter has thus gone down in history as the first upheaval. It was "a traumatic event ... destroying the myth of the grateful and obedient natives being led onwards and upwards by the paternal white ruler." <sup>3</sup> It is important to take into account both sides of the equation and the widening of the gulf between them. Henceforth, the British and the Indians tended to see all unrest in India as another 'Mutiny' (in **A Passage to India** (1924), when the British are agitated after Aziz is taken