Preface

George Eden (1784-1849), second Baron and first Earl of Auckland, Whig politician and much-criticized Governor-General of India, and Emily Eden (1797-1869), novelist and one of the wittiest letter-writers of her century, were a brother and sister who chose to spend their lives together. In nineteenth-century England there was nothing especially odd about that. Family households were the norm, and single women were expected to live with their nearest male (or, failing that, female) relation, unless they were in service or teaching or were packed off to the colonies to find husbands. The Edens' oddness was in their social position, since the upper classes were under strong compulsions to marry for reasons connected with property, status and replenishing the gene pool. Older women, like Mrs Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, were notorious for matchmaking and fretting when their daughters failed to find husbands. In guest-lists for gatherings that consisted almost entirely of married couples, 'Lord Auckland and Miss Eden' stood out, and the oddness was not only in George's bachelorhood but in the fact that he had a ready-made companion, a clever, supportive younger sister with her own reasons for not marrying. Their friends seem to have found their partnership endearing, and it was George's steady, undemonstrative care for Emily and her sister Fanny, rather than Emily's open devotion to him, that won praise. Before the three of them left for India, where George was Governor-General from 1836 to 1842, Emily received a farewell letter from King William IV.

> His Majesty has long been aware of the sincere attachment which exists between Lord Auckland and his amiable Sisters, and of his anxiety for their Welfare and happiness,

> and he gives him credit for this exemplary feature of his character […] His Majesty is not surprised that Miss Eden and her Sister should have determined to accompany so affectionate a Brother even to so remote a destination, and He is sensible how much their Society must contribute to his comfort.[1]

On George's death, the political diarist Charles Greville wrote: 'To his sisters he was as a husband, a brother and a friend combined in one.'[2]

Two contrary impulses were at work at the time: the age-old prompt to marry and reproduce and a newer, Romantic surrender to the strength of nostalgia and family feeling. Two of the Edens' friends, the bachelor historian Macaulay and the diplomat and politician George Villiers, fourth Earl of Clarendon, were both passionately (and in Macaulay's case possessively) devoted to their younger sisters, until at least some time after each of those sisters married. Jane Austen, who was devoted to her brothers, depicted Fanny Price's intense affection for her midshipman brother in *Mansfield Park*. Dorothy Wordsworth was physically and spiritually close to her brother William. The pattern of intense sibling fondness continued well into the nineteenth century, and this book contributes only a tiny detail to the complex story of sibling relationships and attachments in Britain and elsewhere.

George and Emily were Whigs, a party which was in opposition from 1807 to 1830, then achieved the 1832 Parliamentary Reform Act, followed by the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. We meet their most important Whig friends, including the benign and powerful Lord Lansdowne, the fiery and changeable Lord Brougham, and Emily's special friend from the late 1820s to the mid-1830s, Lord Melbourne. George, who had become a member of the House of Commons on his elder brother's death in 1810, moved up to the House of Lords as second Lord Auckland when his father died in 1814. He was a details man: a follower of other people's impulses and a keen and dutiful administrator, not an orator like Lansdowne or Brougham. A faithful attender at Parliament, he modestly kept silent during most debates.

India already interested him before Melbourne appointed him Governor-General in 1835. It was unfortunate that, at that point, British fear of Russian expansion into Central Asia reached a crisis. The Russian empire had gorged itself on territory from the dwindling Persian empire, and Russians were believed to be behind a Persian attempt to seize the Afghan city of Herat. The danger to the British Indian frontier, nearly a thousand miles away, was remote, but to avert a possible alliance between the current Afghan ruler and the Russians George allowed his secretaries to persuade him into sanctioning an invasion to effect regime change. The result was the First Afghan War, which began victoriously, if wastefully, before running into disaster. There are parallels in the handling of the Suez crisis by George's distant relation Sir Anthony Eden – not only with Russia as the distantly threatening power, and with the use of neighbouring countries' forces for invasion (Israelis at Suez and Sikhs, as originally promised, in Afghanistan), but also with the way in which the failure of both enterprises fatally harmed both Edens' reputations for posterity.*

Popular historians' accounts of George's time as Governor-General have not been nuanced. Light-hearted comments in Emily's letter-journals to her sisters have been cited to suggest that he disliked India and was bored there.† In fact he enjoyed his job, requested an extra, sixth year in post, which he was granted, and declined the offer of a seventh year, chiefly because the offer came from a Tory government. The collapse of British authority at Kabul between November 1841 and early January 1842 looked to many of his contemporaries like a blip in his general record of success rather than a reason to damn him for eternity. Yet Ferdinand Mount has asserted that he is 'generally regarded as the worst ever Governor-General (though the competition for that title was strong)',[3] and William Dalrymple has dismissed him as 'a clever and capable but somewhat complacent and detached Whig nobleman' who 'knew or cared about [Afghanistan] even less than he knew or cared about India'.[4] While not justifying all George's actions, I have tried to dispel the Bad Guy image with a broadly considered view of his background, personality and career.

* Sir Anthony was the great-great-grandson of George's uncle Sir Robert Eden, Governor of Maryland 1769-1776.

† See, for example, 'Philip Woodruff' (Philip Mason), a former Indian Civil Servant, in *The Founders* (1953) 276-7. 'In India […] he [Lord Auckland] was bored. Invested in the empire of Tamerlane and Akbar, made sudden heir-at-law to Kubla Khan and Prester John, he was bored. Charged with the destiny of millions, moving in magnificence at which he mildly chafed through a countryside stricken by famine, among children dying of starvation, he was bored.' The truth or otherwise of this florid condemnation will emerge in due course.

At the time George was appointed Governor-General he was not expected to be an expert on India, its languages or its history. A seasoned India hand, familiar with local languages and customs, might serve as acting Governor-General during an interregnum, as Sir Charles Metcalfe did in 1835-36 between Lord William Bentinck's departure and George's arrival. In the longer term a detached, authoritative, preferably titled figure, remote from the politics and prejudices of long-serving officials, was considered best for the top job. It was perhaps a pity that Lord Heytesbury, whom Sir Robert Peel chose to be Governor-General during his brief premiership in 1834-35, did not take up the post instead of George, since Heytesbury, as ambassador to Russia, had not subscribed to the alarmist view that Russia was an all-devouring monster which would stop at nothing to increase its gains. George was not a diplomat, was out of his depth in international affairs, and behaved high-handedly about the treaties his government had made with the kingdom of Oudh and the long-suffering Amirs of Sind, owners of territory traversed by the Army of the Indus on its way to Afghanistan. Against this one can balance such contemporary justifications of his forward policy as the *Morning Chronicle*'s encomium of 9 February 1844, which argued that it was

> founded on the grand and noble idea of establishing the English empire in the East, if not predominant over others, at least secure against their future attacks. Lord Auckland's policy may have been hazardous, but it was great. It looked to the future, and aimed at securing a national and impregnable bulwark, which must have protected our Indian empire.

Emily has also attracted recent criticism for her attitudes, comments and sense of humour, and I have summarized this in Appendix B, 'Emily and the Postcolonials'. Her published and unpublished letters from India have been consulted by historians, especially of the First Afghan War, and cited in many studies of Englishwomen in nineteenth-century India. They provide a keen-sighted, often compassionate, commentary on affairs in Calcutta and up the country, showing a notable scorn for racial prejudice, which she shared with George. Out of sisterly loyalty she became a cheerleader for George during the Afghan campaign and later, leading to utterances that struck even some contemporaries as wrong-headed. Neither she nor

George used the word empire, however. Its application to British India was still in its infancy, and George was a pragmatist, not a theorist, whose involvement in imperialistic advances seems more accidental than planned.

Emily's two novels, *The Semi-Attached Couple* and *The Semi-Detached House*, are still read as amusing and unsentimental social documents, much like Nancy Mitford's *The Pursuit of Love* (1945). Emily admired Jane Austen's novels, shared Austen's love of ironical comment, and made a young female character in *The Semi-Attached Couple* a Jane Austen fan, but she was not a mere imitator of Austen as is sometimes suggested. Her range was wider than Austen's, encapsulating 1850s suburban life and anti-Jewish feeling in *The Semi-Detached House*, and touching on the political world of the Whigs in *The Semi-Attached Couple*, which also sensitively depicts early marital misunderstandings among the pomp, suppressed tensions and occasional cruelties of the pre-Victorian country house.