



Return of the Empire: A New Agency of the Old East India Company?

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This research article on East India Company books has been published before on the online platform H-Soz-und-Kult as two separate review articles.¹ Therefore, the present publication consists of two parts.

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Part I

Huw Bowen, John McAleer, Robert J. Blyth, *Monsoon Traders. The Maritime World of the East India Company*. London: Scala Publishers, 2011, 192 pages ISBN 9781857596755, Price 44,03€.

Margaret Makepeace, *The East India Company's London Workers. Management of the Warehouse Labourers, 1800-1858* (= Worlds of the East India Company). Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 2010, 242 pages, ISBN 9781843835851, Price 73,01€.



Philip J. Stern, *The Company-State. Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 320 pages, ISBN 9780195393736, Price 48,02€.

Jean Sutton, *The East India Company's Maritime Service, 1746-1834. Masters of the Eastern Seas* (= Worlds of the East India Company), Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 2010, 311 pages, ISBN 9781843835837, Price 73,01€.

There seems to be an endless interest in the history of the East India Company (EIC). During the last ten years about twenty books came on the market, all of them by British authors and by British publishing houses. Striking are two new tendencies: Firstly, while research in the 1970s broadened the traditional emphasis on economic aspects including social history, recent studies focus on administrative-cum-commercial subjects. Some of them, despite the vivid criticism, reproduce the narrative of a trading company being transformed into a administrative organisation (between 1770 and 1830) and present it as clear evidence for the empire building in the 'East' and the ascent of the British Empire to global dominance. The process appears as inevitable, once set into motion it could not be stopped. Accordingly, the history of the EIC after 1833 becomes a kind of postscript to a development that had already taken its route. Only few publications reconstruct the EIC in a differentiated manner emphasising its course in its own terms which departs from the established linear success story. Secondly, again in contrast to older research the company's activities in London, Britain and in its settlements abroad are dealt with extensively while the interaction between the EIC's merchants and their Asian partners – be they merchants, producers, politicians of various kinds – are blended out almost completely.²

Both problematic tendencies can also be observed in the books under review here. They deal with the early company state in South Asia, the Company's maritime service, the Company's Asian trading activities and its London employees and Scottish intellectuals. Asian actors do, as already mentioned, hardly appear and if so, they play a marginal or extra role. The EIC seems as if it had been a self-sufficient, self-satisfied enterprise contributing to Britain's imperial superiority in the nineteenth century which fledged out to a unique success-story of the



world's probably first globally acting capitalist undertaking. Despite its heavy struggles with interlopers, free-merchants, pirates and the British state during the first century of its existence and the complete restructuring of the two existing East India Companies at the turn of the seventeenth century, the EIC seems to have barely passed through any troubled waters.

Philip J. Stern's book on the Company-State re-interprets the historical meaning of the first half of the EIC's history up to the middle of the eighteenth century. Stern rethinks "the dynamics of transition between the 'first' and the 'second' British empires, pointing instead to a more continuous, gradual and contingent story that envisions the evolution of empire as part of the transformation from the early modern to modern form of state, sovereignty, and political power" (p. 7). The history of the EIC is thus not merely a story of trading activities but of corporations. Stern convincingly argues throughout his study that the EIC, from its inception in 1600, formed a government, a corporation developing institutional and ideological foundations of a Company-State, a political community that could act in its own right. Moreover, this state formation overseas runs parallel with state formation in England and other parts of Europe – and, one may add, Asia. From the very beginning, Stern argues, the EIC claimed jurisdiction over English trade and traffic in Asia and thus over ships, wares, and subjects. It performed government duties like administering law, collecting taxes, providing protection, inflicting punishment, performing stateliness, regulating economic, religious and civic life, conducting diplomacy and waging war, in short: the EIC was a body politic.

Chapter 1 describes the EIC's network of forts, fortresses, factories and settlements established in the Indic and Southern Atlantic during the seventeenth century. Like other contemporary (English) trading companies (e.g. the Virginia Company) the EIC understood itself as a colonising agency which organised peopling, planting and, essentially, efficient government. Chapter 2 gives ample evidence of how the Company pursued these aims. In chapters 3 to 5 Stern analyses the emergence of the jurisdictional foundations of the colonial network but also the use of diplomacy and war for expanding its role as a local body politic. Chapters 6 to 8 describe the Company's attempt to acquire territorial power at the end of the seventeenth century.

However, at the same time the EIC had to face fierce opposition by interlopers, freebooters, pirates, members of parliament and the king



heavily attacking the EIC's monopoly. The chapters of the book mark the EIC's transformation from a company chartered by the prerogative of the king towards a company privileged and gradually controlled by parliament. This transformation process, as Stern argues, reflects state formation as it was going on in England at the same time. In short, state formation is much more than the emergence of a territorial state in Europe but the organisation of a body politic along the idea of a centralised, efficient and, in the wake of that, powerful government, be that at home or abroad. To widen the scope of the book I would argue that this could also be observed in some countries and states of South Asia. Yet this was not the subject of Stern's study which, in any case, deserves a wide readership comprising more than established EIC-historians.

Jean Sutton has a closer look at the maritime service of the EIC from the middle of the eighteenth century until 1834 when the EIC's trading monopoly ended due to an act of parliament. The Introduction is a rough and ready short history of the 'rise and fall' of the EIC. Rather than taking a critical view of that historical narrative Sutton re-tells the well established yet outdated British narrative of the 'Honourable Company' as it was told until the second half of the twentieth century. The following chapters comprise the history of ship voyages to and from Asia throughout the mentioned period. The huge amount of nautical details (plenty of longitudes, latitudes, minutes and seconds etc. on almost every page) makes the reading somewhat tiresome, at least for a historian whose historical actor is more or less based on firm ground. A maritime historian, however, may be fascinated by the multitude of nautical information as it provides him with orientation in the vastness of oceans.

The book proceeds chronologically, trying to pursue the family history of the Larkins for about one-hundred years. However, a more systematic approach would have been more inspiring. Each chapter is full of interesting details ranging from social life on board a ship including sporting (catching fish), jurisdiction and punishment as well as sanitary conditions which get somewhat lost between the nautical and other maritime details. A more serious shortcoming of the book is the blurring of borders between facts and fiction, especially when it turns into speculations on the general characteristics of historical processes, and when past is in some way romanticised (pp. 93-4). In many instances the reader cannot verify whether a fact actually belongs to a certain voyage described in the book or whether that fact may be considered as



general information about conditions on board a ship.

Another major defect of the book is the rather obsolete narrative of British expansion in the Indian Ocean. In chapter 4 the history of the EIC appears (again and still) as a success-story, Robert Clive being depicted as hero, conqueror and founder of the British Empire in India, and the 'Battle of Plassey' as the most decisive moment in South Asia's modern history. Likewise the narration in chapter 5 is full of anti-French *resentiments* which one would have expected in an EIC-history of the nineteenth century. A look at the footnotes and the literature which has been used thus come as no surprise: Dodwell and the Cambridge History of India of the 1920s is the main 'source' for the narration. Recent research has been rarely referred to.

Finally the reader may feel somewhat disappointed because the promised family history of the Larkins throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is seldom part of the narration. Only the last chapter throws some light on their commercial activities. It is only the Conclusion which highlights the differences between the middle of the eighteenth and the middle of the nineteenth century as well as the development of trading patterns and which also highlights the Larkins' family politics during the said time. Complemented by some details from the preceding chapters the Conclusion would have been sufficient for depicting the family history of the Larkins. All in all, the book does not fulfill scientific standards as; in the first place, it does not reflect the latest academic literature on the subject. Secondly, the predominant descriptive narration does not always suit scientific research. Yet, scientific standard may not have been the aim of the book.

In contrast to the former book, Margaret Makepeace's study on the EIC's London workers is a fine piece of academic labour history. It is fairly innovative though a more systematic approach (again) would have highlighted even better the social background of the labourers. The study abounds in archival sources which give the reader a good impression of the labour conditions of the Company's workers between 1800 and 1858 when, after the 'Great Rebellion of 1857', the EIC was dissolved by an act of parliament. The study is in the tradition of 'history from below' otherwise also known as 'subaltern studies'. As is the case with many subaltern studies contributions it is rather difficult to make the subaltern speak. In fact in Margaret Makepeace's study we get to know many things about the lower classes through the correspondence of the EIC's writers giving information on the labourers.



But her study also provides plenty of petitions of the labourers giving ample evidence of and through their voices.

The author wants to “relocate the East India Company in its rightful place at the centre of the early nineteenth-century London economy by examining how the Company functioned as an employer and how it behaved towards its staff. It explores the Company’s direction of commercial operations in London, the management structure in its warehouses, and the strategies adopted to control and regulate a large and expanding labourer workforce.” Apart from this Margaret Makepeace looks “at the labour processes involved in handling high-value dutiable goods, and focus[es] on recruitment, timekeeping and labour discipline” (p. 9). Taking this point of departure at face value one can hardly imagine a ‘history from below’ since this is still a top-down perspective. However, as already mentioned, there are plenty of sources in which the labourer actually speaks, especially in chapter 7 which I will refer to soon.

Many new aspects of the EIC’s labourers are highlighted for the first time. To start with, the recruitment of labourers as soldiers in the Royal East India Volunteers. Several hundred men were to serve in addition to their daily labour (receiving additional payment as well) as soldiers during the Revolutionary and Continental Wars (1791-1815). Second: The location of the labourers’ residences reflect the then general trend namely that commercial premises took the place of homes in the City itself. Third: EIC labourers are not representative for London’s labour class as they had much better working times and received higher wages. Due to the 6-hours working-day many labourers and employees were able to have a small part-time job outside the EIC which improved their monthly income as well as the social status.

Fourth: The EIC management was known for its social politics. The Company was among the first in London enterprises setting up an invalidity fund and paying occupational pensions. This included early pensions due to infirmities or incapability to perform labour duties. The ‘carrot’ included free medical assistance being one of the first company medical services in Britain. This kind of company politics has been termed “Christian mercantilism”, a combination of paternalism, welfare and patriotism comprising also religious aspects. The ‘stick’ consisted of a system of surveillance and supervision. The administration kept files of each worker on their efficiency, behaviour, sick leave etc. Since pilfering was omnipresent, daily routine body searching took also place.

However, one may doubt the overall efficiency of the EIC with regard



to control and surveillance. The example of pilfering demonstrates that theft was rather endemic than an exception. As an archivist, Margaret Makepeace reads her sources with certain naitivity. Keeping files and records and body checking does not by far create a system of control. Despite the Company's bureaucracy there lots of pilfering occurred indicating that the system was either not efficient or that there was no system at all. The comment of a searcher that thorough searching would be impossible because then 24 hours would not be enough clearly points towards the insufficiency of the system (p. 109). Yet one has to admit that the labourers seem to have been, *cum grano salis*, satisfied with their employer since no strike occurred during the considered period.

Chapter 7 is the most interesting regarding labour history. From numerous petitions we get to know about the every-day living conditions, mostly against the financial background, of wages, pensions, accidents in the warehouses etc. According to her findings Makepeace compares the EIC's laboureres with what Eric Hobsbawm has described as 'labour aristocracy'. It was characterised by regular and a certain level of earnings, social security, good treatment from masters and foremen, relations with the higher and lower social strata, general conditions of living and future advancement of the labourer and his children. To a very large extent this is also true for the Company's labourers. Yet, Makepeace makes one important addition: she rather wants to distinguish between secure and insecure labour conditions for workers than between skilled/unskilled, aristocracy and non-aristocracy labourers since the former became the dominant feature of labour conditions in London during the first half of the nineteenth century.

The most dramatic cut in the Company's London history was the abolition of the trading monopoly. After 1834 the EIC had to dismiss or to pension most of its labourers. The free medical service was also suspended. Often pensions did not suffice for making a living which is why there are again masses of petitions providing information on the living conditions of the Company's labourers. Yet sometimes the quoted material abounds with details. And sometimes details (prices etc.) are given which do not make any sense as comparative numbers are missing (cf. e.g. p.184). Yet these shortcomings do not affect the overall positive impression of the study. It deserve to be read by a wide readership as it provides a new perspective on London's labour class in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Monsoon Traders impresses with its amount and brilliance of pic-



tures. Many of them are not simple illustrations but can be 'read' as sources. The accompanying text divided in five chapters is, however, somewhat disappointing as it re-narrates (for the third time in this row of four books) the established success-story of the EIC. Despite the heavy ups and downs of the Company's history in the first century of its existence the overall picture is that of a successful enterprise steering safely through troubled waters. Apart from this the Company, pars pro toto for England, seems to heroically standing against a multitude of European adversaries. "The failure of these often heroic effects meant England was left with no alternative than to try to assert itself against its rivals [...]" (p. 33). Was England then driven into isolation or did it prefer to be isolated? Why is England's historiographical self-image of self-isolation told again? Does present-day England feel isolated within Europe? Or is that self-depiction simply an old imperial narrative?

Chapter 2 is based on quotes from travelogues and journals representing an exclusively European perspective on Asian (China, India, Southeast-Asia and East Asia) countries, cities and trading partners as well as the merchandise and curiosities brought back home. This kind of historical representation is by far outdated. Only on pp. 86-7 is the reader provided with a non-European, Chinese perspective of Europeans. And also in this book the reader is told the imperial narrative of Robert Clive conquering Bengal in 1757 and founding the British Empire in India, despite plenty of differing historical evidence which has been published during the last couple of decades. Historical actors are the British, whilst Asian countries, cities and people provide the coulisses between which the action takes place.

Fairly interesting are the paragraphs on the social history on board an East Indiaman. Between 1760 and 1820 when more civil and military personnel was shipped to India the social structure and dynamics changed massively (pp. 118-21). Also interesting is the aspect of interlopers, buccaneers, freebooters and pirates in the Indian Ocean affecting heavily the trade of the EIC (Ch. 4). Yet it also shows that this is a field which has hitherto been fairly neglected by the historical sciences. So far, only two studies have substantially dealt with piracy and renegades in the Indian Ocean.³ Strangely enough, this literature is not referred to. Even more, one would have expected some reference to the so called 'Round Voyage' of the pirates at the turn of the seventeenth century connecting the maritime economies of the North Atlantic, the Caribbean and Arabian Sea.



The Great Rebellion in British India 1857-59 is in an outdated fashion and in the tradition of imperial historiography referred to as the "Mutiny" (pp. 176; 178ff). The "military nature" of the revolt is pointed out to highlight the naval, military and maritime resources the EIC was able to procure, transport and apply to subdue the Rebellion. Somewhat whinily reads the abolition of the EIC. Rather than pointing out the defects which led to its dissolution it is stated that "what had once been the most powerful commercial organisation in the world and an Asian power of considerable might slowly passed out of the national consciousness. Its inglorious and ignoble collapse obscured both its astonishing longevity and its undeniable glorious past" (p. 181). As it is the case with many other publications on the EIC this seems to be the true reason for remembering the 'Honourable Company' as she reminds every Briton of his and her glorious past.

Part II

Hugh V. Bowen, *The Business of Empire. The East India Company and Imperial Britain, 1756-1833*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 304 pages, ISBN 9780521844772, 3rd edn, Price 85,07€.

George K. McGilvary, *East India Patronage and the British State. The Scottish Elite and Politics in the Eighteenth Century* (= International Library of Historical Studies), London: I.B. Tauris, 2008, 280 pages, ISBN 9781845116613, Price 67,67€.

Anthony Webster, *The Twilight of the East India Company. The Evolution of Anglo-Asian Commerce and Politics, 1790-1860* (= Worlds of the East India Company), Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 2009, 205 pages, ISBN 9781843834755; Price 63,69€.

Anthony Webster, *The Richest East India Merchant. The Life and Business of John Palmer of Calcutta, 1767-1836* (= Worlds of the East India Company 1), Rochester: Boydell & Brewer 2007, 194 pages, ISBN 9781843833031, Price 56,09€.



George K. McGilvary, *Guardian of the East India Company. The Life of Laurence Sullivan* (= International Library of Historical Studies), London: I.B. Tauris, 2006, 328 pages, ISBN 9781850438564, Price 59,50£.

The history of the East India Company (EIC) has been the object of much consideration and contestation, despite the fact that with subjects addressing cultural issues becoming dominant in historical research from the middle of the 1990s the interest in matters relating to the EIC has gradually been decreasing. Much of the study of the EIC has been focusing on administrative-cum-commercial subjects whereas in the 1970s the take on perspectives from economic history has helped to shift the focus towards accounts integrating economic and social aspects. This development is represented by the seminal studies of C. H. Phillips on the one hand, and of K. N. Chaudhury on the other hand.⁴ During the last three or four decades many articles and monographs on the EIC discovered new themes and contributed to a broader understanding so that a solid basis for general interpretations emerged, one of the recent examples is the latest monograph was by P. H. Lawson.⁵

Now general histories of EIC have mostly reproduced a narrative which concentrates on its transformation from a trading company to an administrative organisation between 1770 and 1830 which is then presented as the (only) important aspect of empire building in the 'East', followed by the decades of reform in British India. The English Parliament's Regulating Act of 1773 and the last Charter for the EIC in 1833 sets the frame for this narrative, which centres on the British Empire's ascent to global dominance. According to it, the empire's train, once set into motion, could no longer be stopped. More importantly for our concern – an differentiated reconstruction of the EIC on its own terms – its development after 1833 has become a kind of postscript to a story which had already happily ended. Against this widespread view some studies discussed here, like Anthony Webster's, *The Twilight of the East India Company*, provide an alternative account highlighting the continuities and changes that took place in the first half of the nineteenth century. They show that the EIC-history was by far not the linear sort of success story that has been told by generations of empire historians.

Added to that, the books under discussion demonstrate a recent trend in researching the EIC, namely a renewed interest in commercial and administrative aspects which seems to respond to the growing importance of the effects of globalisation and the emergence of a new



field of academic research: global studies. Also, this revivalism seems to reflect a new historiographical wave on the glory days of the British Empire, the only world empire of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. The British Empire strikes back with the East India Company riding again. The selection of books mirrors a third tendency of current research: they follow on the one hand structural and institutional concerns and traditional approaches of economic and financial history while they also employ biographical approaches, trace individuals, especially those who can be characterised as actors of globalisation.

Let's come to the first book: Hugh V. Bowen's monograph *The Business of Empire*. Let alone the time-frame it sets itself, the Company's development between 1756 and 1833, indicates that it concentrates on precisely the part of the empire-history which has been most dealt with, i.e. the transformation of the EIC from a trading corporation into an administrative organisation. Thus Bowen rewrites the old-fashioned EIC-success story and presents the well-known empire-narrative even though he adds new aspects and details. One has to mention positively that his history of the EIC is a well written compilation of the EIC's business history. He profiles the Company's London stockholders and directors, emphasising their business procedures, working practices and policies to changing circumstances in what became British India.

Yet the major shortcoming of the book is its selective writing. Sometimes even the latest research findings are missing which is particularly striking in the sub-chapter on the abolition of the EIC's trading monopoly in 1833 (pp. 252-9). Also, the chapter on "an empire in writing" (pp. 151-82) does not include recent research and does not reflect the current state of the art. Latest findings on the EIC's bookkeeping, cartography, data collection, information gathering, its transformation into knowledge and effective presentation are not included in the narration. Additionally, the concentration on the metropolis as the centre of global action mirrors the old-fashioned empire narrative. Despite the fact that commercial relations with South Asian centres of production and trading grew tremendously during the eighteenth century, only the EIC's activities, actions and reactions in London are presented depicting the undertaking as a most agile and modern enterprise. This is also the reason why the narrative of the EIC's success story seems to be a repetitive story.

In contrast, Anthony Webster's book on the *Twilight of the East India Company* presents a more innovative stance. The first three chapters



give a conventional overview of the EIC's history since 1790 when the governor-generalship of Lord Cornwallis set the frame for the colonial state in Bengal and British India, and points out the EIC's struggle for maintaining its monopoly for trade in the 'East'. However, in the following chapters four to seven, Webster actually elaborates the history of crisis, change and continuities between 1833 and 1860. And here the tremendous consequences of this shift in perspective demonstrates itself: the established notion of the Great Indian Rebellion of 1857-9 loses its relevance as a sharp break in empire history as this political event had rather any influence on the economic history of the EIC.

On another note, though the author is fairly acquainted with the company's history of these days and its battle for keeping her monopoly, one misses the fact that private trade to the 'East' was on the agenda of many British entrepreneurs since the foundation of the EIC, in particular from the second half of the seventeenth century onwards. So called interlopers were the reason for much trouble and they were, finally, successful in establishing a second EIC (English, instead of London merchants) at the end of the seventeenth century. Its shareholders received a royal charter as well, yet, due to competition on the financial markets for trading capital and other reasons, both companies were amalgamated into the "United Company" in 1709. However, even after this forced unification, private trade did not come to an end and could, at no time, be controlled effectively. I. B. Watson told the history of those interlopers in 1980 which Webster should have taken into consideration.⁶ Apparently the end of the eighteenth century was not the beginning of the debate on free trade, but rather the demand for the end of state monopolies in favour of overall trading facilities with open access to all markets had been on the table since the beginning of the seventeenth century.

The charter of 1813 ended the trading monopoly of the EIC except to China. Within two decades, repercussions of open access to capital, commodities and commerce caused the crash of the so called agency houses. These were Calcutta based privately operating trading-cum-financing companies with close connections to the Asian and English markets. As industrially manufactured cotton products flooded the Indian markets particularly that of Bengal, and as investment in an expanding Indigo market caused overheating within a short time, the said agency houses were not able to cope with this additional competition. Apart from this, pressure groups from northern British cities like Birmingham,



Liverpool, Manchester and Glasgow strongly favoured the further opening of all Asian markets as well as the abolition of trade restrictions like protective customs. As a result of this public agitation, in a series of bankruptcies, all agency houses collapsed between 1830 and 1834.

The most prominent among them was certainly that of Palmer & Co. Webster shows its rise and fall in his second book, *The Richest East India Merchant*. The story of John Palmer and his agency house, his rise to the "prince of merchants" in British India as well as the agency's bankruptcy is a fine example of the changing economic and commercial environs within the emerging British Empire in Asia. It demonstrates how free trade after 1813 affected the business of private companies in India, how personal entanglement in British Indian politics, machinations with princely states, mismanagement and growing incompetence within a company ultimately caused the breakdown of a firm. In particular, the dubious practices of debt control, a complete absence of effective accounting and cash security arrangements, in short: bad financial management, caused the collapse of Palmer & Co triggering the bankruptcy of more than thirty agency houses. The reinterpretation of the EIC's history before 1833 is a necessary precondition for its setting as a re-orientating company within a world of growing free trade.

The latter aspect is actually the focus of Webster's book on the *Twilight of the East India Company*. Taking P. J. Cain's and A. G. Hopkin's thesis of gentlemanly capitalism as a starting point, Webster argues that in addition to the capital concentrated in the City (of London), which from there directed the British empire's expansion from the late seventeenth to the early twentieth century,⁷ it was a network of northern British commercial and financial interests as well as the chambers of commerce in the British Indian and East Asian metropolises established by the end of the 1830s that brought about the gradual end of the chartered company's state monopoly and the evolution of freely accessible markets within the Indian Ocean area and beyond from the late eighteenth century onwards. According to Webster it was this complex, trans-imperial network of firms and commercial-cum-financial pressure groups which used the organs of the EIC for expansion as well as for undermining its privileged position.

However, despite the interesting subject, the book has some shortcomings. In particular, the parade of numbers and years sometimes disrupt whole paragraphs hampering the general flow of reading and understanding. Likewise, the narration is sometimes too descriptive of-



ten getting lost in details. These might have been of some relevance the dissertation that this book originally was at the end of the 1970s – again indicating the then prevalence of the EIC’s commercial history – but is somewhat misplaced in a present-day publication. Certainly a valuable contribution, the book can hardly be pigeon-holed in any one historiographic genre, as it seems to be something between a rather conventional biography of an empire builder and an entangled history of an actor of globalisation. Overall, what is missing is the “agency” of Indian contemporaries as the narration mainly concentrates on the European development in the colonies on the one side and the centre of power, i.e. Great Britain, on the other.

Another development during the 1830s according to Webster was the emergence of a new generation of exclusively London based agency houses that at the same time tried to establish Indian based banks for raising capital in the colony. Yet, the international economic crisis of 1847-8, particularly affecting the London financial market, again, destroyed these commercial and financial undertakings but paved the way for restricting the EIC’s competences to a mere wing of government in 1853. The abolition of the EIC in 1858 was, in the eyes of many London bankers, brokers and traders, long overdue. Yet it took until 1874 for the EIC to be finally wound up. Seen against this background, the history of the EIC in the 1830s and 40s is not merely the afterthought of its successful transformation from a commercial corporation into an administrative body but the history of gradual changes ultimately facilitating the “modernisation” of British India, in particular the railway and telegraph mania between the 1860s and the 1880s. In this respect the book is a solid contribution to the narrative of empire building.

The same focus can be found in George K. McGilvary’s *East India Patronage and the British State. The Scottish Elite and Politics in the Eighteenth Century*. The author’s thesis maintains firstly, that the Scottish elite was drawn into the orbit of British state building far earlier than hitherto assumed, that is, it was not the politics of Henry Dundas from the 1780s onwards which made Scots participate in the building of the British Raj in India. Rather, they had already been part of the process in the first half of the eighteenth century as part of Prime Minister Walpole’s state building strategies. Secondly, it is argued that patronage by English politicians and the “reliable” part of the Scottish elite after the Union of 1701 as well as the rebellions of 1715 and 1745 helped to establish an increasing network of patronage which promoted careers



of the Scottish mercantile, medical and later also military personnel. And in the third place it is stated that these early patronage politics played an important role in founding the British Empire. Yet, again the East India Company is merely studied as an instrument of the British government, and its dynamism in the Indian Subcontinent beyond the context of empire is not taken into consideration. 'The East', indeed, was a career where Scots made their fortunes, which was to be invested in the local Scottish economy.

In a somewhat rough and ready posoprographic approach, McGilvary tries to give short biographical backgrounds to Scots who became involved in the patronage network. Yet, even if one concedes that there was a growing Scottish influence within the East India Company, at least from the 1720s onwards, in most cases the numbers, though impressive, are cited without any reference statistics, i.e. the proportion to all East India employees are missing. Likewise the 24 per cent Scottish soldiers in the British Indian army, cited by McGilvary to prove his point, refer to 1830 when Dundas' promotion of Scotsmen was already bearing fruit. Though it has been mentioned that due to 1715 and 1745 only after the latter rebellion Scotsmen were recruited for overseas army service, the nexus to the 1830 increase of Scotsmen in the military service has not been pointed out by Webster.

Very striking is the detailed narration of John Drummond's fascinating political and mercantile life. It seems that his political career on the European continent as well as his social-cum-economic position in Scotland made him the predestined actor for establishing the above mentioned network. Indeed, Drummond, in collaboration with Walpole, may be seen as an early and decisive builder of the British Union after 1722. At the same time, the story of the EIC at home and abroad lacks detailed analysis and latest research findings have not been included. Among the many seminal articles missing is Hugh V. Bowens widely appreciated *Revenue and Reform*.⁸ If done so, the reader of McGilvary's book would have able to gain a deeper insight into the financial machinations of the EIC and the British state during those crucial years, thus placing the findings of McGilvary in a much more complex context.

Despite these shortcomings the book certainly deserves attention. Seen from a Scottish, a British and an Empire perspective, it contributes to the mechanisms of modern state formation in the eighteenth century. Above that it becomes clear that networking does not only refer to present-day actors of globalisation but that it has been on the



political-cum-mercantile agenda at least since the early days of modern state building. Patronage systems and networking were part and parcel as well as markers of the “modern state” in Europe, and Britain certainly spearheaded that development. Focussing on Scotland and the early Union seems to be appropriate as this approach has been neglected so far by academic research. At the same time the reader will not miss some sort of Scottish patriotism (or rather chauvinism). Again, without doubt there was an important contribution of Scotsman to the building of the British Union, yet to what extent is still open and needs much more academic research. In any case, the book marks a valuable point of departure.

Of particular interest is McGilvary’s other book on the *Guardian of the East India Company*. It is a biography on Laurence Sullivan who determined the politics of the East India Company for more than three decades in the second half of the eighteenth century. Much has been written on Sullivan by Lucy S. Sutherland highlighting the rivalry between the East India Company’s two factions of commercial entrepreneurs and colonial expansionists in the 1770s and 80s.⁹ As McGilvary points out in his Preface “[t]he book concentrates upon what went on in London and from the perspective of the company’s leaders” (p. ix). Even if one may accept this explicitly Eurocentric perspective one wonders the many mistakes with respect to Britain’s and India’s history. Above all, the history of British expansion in Bengal and other regions of India is being depicted in a rather old-fashioned way simply re-telling the story of “Plassey” and its alleged consequences. Taking recent research into account would have helped to prevent such shortcomings.

McGilvary has to re-tell large parts of the East India Company’s story as his material on Sullivan is rather scattered and incomplete. Often McGilvary speculates about Sullivan’s decisions and deeds as well as his character and manners. Lack of sources for a thorough biography is topped by a lack of scientific historical tools. For example, on p. 77 the author quotes Sullivan writing 1761 in a letter to Chatham (William Pitt the Elder) that after having ousted the French from the Carnatic the commercial gain would be of no great significance yet the fiscal tremendous if the territory would be annexed. On p. 81 Sullivan complains in the very same year upon the burden which territorial administration will put upon the shoulders of the East India Company. This led McGilvary to the conclusion that Sullivan strictly opposed any territorial expansion. And on p. 83 the quote of p. 77 suddenly stems



from Joseph Dupleix, the then governor of Pondichery. McGilvary again quotes Sullivan who rather wanted the trade of the Company at an end than having it to rely on territorial revenues. This is fairly confusing and in any case unprofessional.

As Peter J. Marshall put it in his review "[t]his book seems to exemplify the problems that independent scholars face without an academic support network to advise them how to put their findings into a realistic context".¹⁰ The effort which MacGilvary certainly invested into the finding of sources does not correspond with the scientific outcome. Worse, as with John Drummond, the protagonist of his other book, McGilvary seems to develop sympathy with the Celtic fringe of Great Britain highlighting its servants' national, colonial and imperial service in a somewhat panegyric way. Sadly enough "Sullivan" has much more shortcomings than "Drummond".

All in all the reviewed books add a chapter to an old story which is basically about the commercial history of the EIC and its promoters as well as the empire history. It seems that hitherto 'men on the spot' as part of an old-fashioned European expansion and empire history have been turned into 'actors of globalisation', but without actually debating globalisation. Hence we find plenty of fascinating and illustrative details and additional facts in all the reviewed books, however, at the end of the day, no substantial hypothesis or thesis. An exception to the rule may be Webster's book on the EIC's *Twilight*. Despite the critique all books are a must for readers interested in the history of the EIC. Future research on the EIC should concentrate on the role of the undertaking as an agent of globalisation. To start with, concepts of globalisation have to be taken into consideration to depart from the old-fashioned empire-history and, at the same time, to aim at a deeper understanding of modes of globalisation in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Endnotes

- 1 See <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2011-1-139> and <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/id=16775&type=rezbuecher&sort=datum&order=down&search=Michael+mann>
- 2 Vide, for example, the seminal study of Chaudhuri, K.N. 1978. *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company*,



- 1660-1760. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 3 Rogoziński, J. 2000. *Honour Among Thieves. Captain Kidd, Henry Every, and the Pirate Democracy in the Indian Ocean*. Mechanicsburg: PA; G.V. Scammel 1992. *European Exiles, Renegades and Outlaws and the Maritime Economy of Asia c. 1500-1750. Modern Asian Studies*, 26 (4), pp. 641-61.
- 4 Philips, C.H. 1940, *The East India Company, 1784-1834*. Manchester: Manchester University Press; Chaudhury, K.N. 1978, *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company, 1669-1760*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 5 Lawson, P. 1993. *The East India Company. A History*. London: Longman.
- 6 Watson, I.B. 1980. *Foundation for Empire. English Private Trade in India, 1659-1760*. New Delhi: Vikas.
- 7 Cain, P.J. and Hopkins A.G. 1993. *British Imperialism. Innovation and Expansion, 1688-1914*. London: Longman.
- 8 Bowen, H.V. 1991. *Revenue and Reform. The Indian Problem in English Politics, 1756-1773*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 9 Sutherland, L.S. 1952. *The East India Company in Eighteenth-Century Politics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- 10 Marshall, P.J. 2008. *English Historical Review*, 501, pp. 475f.