
Review of Books

THE ANARCHY: THE RELENTLESS RISE OF THE EAST INDIA COMPANY. By WILLIAM DALRYMPLE. pp. 557. London, Bloomsbury, 2019.
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Delicate line drawings of the *Mohur*—a coin minted under the auspices of the British East India Company—sit between sections of William Dalrymple’s new book, *The Anarchy*. The illustration is enormously apt, for Dalrymple’s central aim in this work is to explore the relationship between money and power, and to emphasise British India’s murky origins in the machinations of a for-profit corporation. The ‘Honourable Company’, he claims, is “history’s most ominous warning about the potential for the abuse of corporate power”.¹ The book’s narrative charts the Company’s transformation from a disorderly commercial venture, originally established to enrich a motley collection of Elizabethan nobles and privateers, into the principal player in South Asian politics. As the tale progresses, the *Mohurs* punctuating the text increasingly signify the relationship between profit and political sovereignty: in 1757, following the Battle of Plassey, the Company won the right to mint coinage; seven years later, as a result of their narrow victory over the Mughal Emperor at Buxar, the corporation acquired the right to collect revenue in the fabulously wealthy regions of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. Embellishing the book’s final chapter is an illustration of a coin proudly bearing the Company’s heraldic achievements, minted at Madras in 1803—the year the Company symbolically assumed the Mughal’s Imperial mantle by capturing Delhi, and the date Dalrymple draws to a close this cautionary tale of the “intimate dance between the power of the state and that of the corporation”.²

The book’s narrative rests lightly on a wide-ranging and rigorous engagement with recent scholarship on the East India Company. Dalrymple’s overarching argument about the corporate nature of eighteenth-century colonialism relies on the pioneering research of scholars such as C. A. Bayly, K. N. Chaudhuri, and P. J. Marshall, alongside a collection of younger scholars including Philip Stern and Maya Jasanoff—themselves the products of a flourishing interest in Company India that Stern has ascribed to the contemporary relevance of a history featuring “globalisation, multinational corporations, private mercenaries and outsourced warfare, colonialism and neo-colonialism, and... pirates”.³ Of course, Dalrymple has repackaged this literature as a truly gripping narrative. Chapter One captures the contrast between the Company’s unassuming first decades and the luxuriant court of the Great Mughals, before following the dramatic erosion of Mughal sovereignty over the course of the eighteenth century. Chapters Two to Five chart the Company’s near expulsion from India

¹Dalrymple, William, *The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company*, (London, 2019), p. 397.

²*Ibid.*, p. 394.

³Stern, Philip J., *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India*, (Oxford, 2011), p. vii.

following Siraj ud-Daula's infamous sacking of Calcutta in 1756, right through to its remarkable turn of fate at the Battle of Buxar in 1764. Over the same pages, the plight of the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam unfolds with epic pathos. The inevitable crises engendered by the Company's attempts to balance governance with the relentless pursuit of profit are tackled in Chapters Six and Eight: the first provides a harrowing account of the Great Bengal Famine of 1770; the latter explores the metropolitan anxieties manifest in the spectacular impeachment trial of former Governor-General Warren Hastings. Chapter Seven takes leave of the Company's misadventures to follow the heart-breaking tale of Shah Alam's disastrous return to Delhi, while Chapter Nine sweeps to a dramatic conclusion with the Company's close-won victory over the Subcontinent's remaining major powers—the French-backed Maratha Confederacy and Tipu Sultan of Mysore—thereby cementing British hegemony in South Asia. At one point the author admires the skill with which a French Jesuit, Père Louis Bazin, jots a pen portrait of the rugged Persian warlord Nader Shah—the scourge of Delhi.⁴ The passage reads as one master admiring the skill of another, for Dalrymple sketches the inner motivations and outward appearances of his protagonists with immense economy, all the while avoiding caricature. As with the best popular histories, this attention to human detail makes a densely tangled past accessible beyond the academy. But Dalrymple also makes two interventions that will significantly impact future scholarship.

The first of these informs the book's title. "Brilliant work on regional resurgence does not", the author contends, "alter the reality of the Anarchy, which undoubtedly did disrupt the Mughal heartlands".⁵ Going against the grain of recent scholarship, which has sought to temper the traditional view of India's eighteenth century as a period of social and political turmoil, the book instead returns to earlier accounts of chaos and bloodshed, claiming that "the process of revisionism may have gone... too far".⁶ Dalrymple makes the argument compelling. His gory accounts of the desolation left in the wake of Maratha raids, or his melancholic account of the crumbling ruins of Delhi—with light flickering from only "one house in a hundred"—render visceral a now protracted academic debate.⁷ Equally, the author's eye for a pithy quote allows voices from the past to interject with searing acuity. The Emperor Aurangzeb's death is positioned as the tipping point at which the reign of the Great Mughals descends into Dalrymple's 'Anarchy'; the transition is elegantly evoked using a contrite letter, sent from the Emperor's deathbed to his son and heir-apparent Azam Shah: "I have not been the guardian and protector of the empire...life is transient...the past is gone and there is no hope for the future".⁸ Aurangzeb's lament is all the more poignant given that his son was slain just months later, the victim of a swift succession struggle with a half-brother. Similarly, Dalrymple's description of Nader Shah's neutering of Mughal power concludes with poetic simplicity: a brief letter from the Maratha ambassador at the Imperial Court, only just escaping the carnage, reporting that "the Mughal empire is at an end...the Persian has begun".⁹ Such passages exemplify the importance of popular history. By conjuring the past so vividly, Dalrymple has produced a narrative that will undoubtedly shape the 'mood' and 'tone' of future research. If the process of revisionism has gone "too far", this account may herald the pendulum's return swing.

Dalrymple's second major contribution follows from his first. The book's account of the 'Anarchy' engulfing post-Mughal India masterfully embeds the Company's own history within a broader South Asian context, told with a sensitivity that relies on the author's deep intimacy with India's diverse cultures. This intervention draws on a tranche of primary sources, several newly translated, which

⁴Dalrymple, (2019), p. 40.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. xxxi.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. xxxii.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 291.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 42.

animate the fortunes of lesser-known figures such as Mirza Najaf Khan, the “last great Mughal general”.¹⁰ Particular attention is paid to the travails of Shah Alam, the Emperor whose life “forms a spine of the narrative”.¹¹ This conceit is well-judged, for Shah Alam’s captivating struggle to reclaim his inheritance perfectly encapsulates the remarkable aura that Mughal sovereignty retained even as the Dynasty’s real power atrophied, whilst the Emperor’s blinding and his family’s rape at the vicious hands of a Rohilla usurper, Ghulam Qadir, functions as a horrifying epitome of Dalrymple’s overall argument. The attention paid to these regional South Asian actors does not result in a structural account of the Mughal State’s fragmentation—as with earlier historiography—nor is imperial decline cast as a power vacuum that inexorably draws the Company into further expansion.¹² Instead, the narrative rests on biography, with history’s motor driven by individuals and their contingent abilities as rulers, statesmen, and generals. Although this approach will undoubtedly prove contentious, Dalrymple’s attention to South Asian actors provides a welcome alternative to Anglo-centric narratives of the East India Company’s expansion, while wonderfully exploding patriotic myths along the way: Robert Clive’s ‘triumph’ at Plassey, for instance, is convincingly recast as a ‘palace coup’, primarily engineered by Marwari financiers and notables at the Murshidabadi court.¹³

Where Dalrymple’s account seems less incisive is during passages bearing his overarching argument: that the East India Company’s history can be read as an “intimate dance between the power of the state and that of the corporation”.¹⁴ The electric epilogue—which refers to, and in some ways assumes the character of a Persian genre of moralising history known as *‘Ibrat-Nāma*, or ‘Book of Admonition’—makes a passionate case for the importance of state intervention in limiting “corporate influence, with its fatal blend of power, money and unaccountability”.¹⁵ After reading the horrific abuses of power that litter the preceding pages, few would disagree. Yet Dalrymple’s claim that, in 1858, the “Victorian state, alerted to the dangers posed by corporate greed and incompetence, successfully tamed history’s most voracious corporation” appears a far more problematic assertion—this was, after all, the golden age of *laissez faire*.¹⁶ Indeed, Dalrymple’s distinction between the state and corporation runs counter to much of the most exciting new research on British imperialism, which has emphasised the absence of a recognisably modern form of British statehood prior to the significant political and cultural upheavals that characterised the nineteenth century.¹⁷ Scholars have stressed instead the multiple ‘corporate bodies’ structuring early modern political life, exploring how monarchical dynasties, ‘composite empires’, pluralistic legal cultures, and hybrid or competing forms of jurisdiction existed and often overlapped across the globe.¹⁸ Importantly, Jon Wilson has shown how the separation of state from society, alongside the emergence of ‘nationalised’ forms of social, religious, and racial identities at

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. xvii.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. xxxi.

¹²The ‘Aligarh School’ famously saw a brittle Mughal superstructure fragmenting as a result of pressure from below. See: Habib, Irfan, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556-1707*, (1963, 3rd edition, New Delhi, 2014).

¹³Dalrymple, (2019), p. 135.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 394.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 395.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 391.

¹⁷Jon Wilson, *The Domination of Strangers: Modern Governance in Eastern India, 1780-1835*, (London, 2008); Stern, (2011). See also: Stern, Philip J., “‘A Politie of Civill & Military Power’: Political Thought and the Late Seventeenth-Century Foundations of the East India Company-State”, in *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 47, (April, 2008), pp. 253–283; and *Ibid.*, ‘Corporate Virtue: the Languages of Empire in Early Modern British Asia’, in *Renaissance Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 4, (2012).

¹⁸Braddick, Michael J., *State Formation in Early Modern England, c.1550–1700*, (Cambridge, 2000); Braddick, Michael J., and John Walter (eds.), *Negotiating Power in Early Modern Society*, (Cambridge, 2001); Brewer, John, and Eckhart Hellmuth (eds.), *Rethinking Leviathan: the Eighteenth-Century State in Britain and Germany*, (Oxford, 1999); Scales, Len, and Oliver Zimmer (eds.), *Power and the Nation in European History*, (Cambridge, 2005); Shepard, Alexandra, and Phil Withington (eds.), *Communities in Early Modern England*, (Manchester, 2000); Spruyt, Hendrik, *The Sovereign State and its Competitors: An Analysis of Systems Change*, (Princeton, 1994).

the turn of the nineteenth century, were processes coterminous in metropole and colony—occurring as both emerged from the disparate web of sovereignties that characterised the early modern period.¹⁹ To view the history of colonialism in India as primarily a lesson about the contemporary relevance of state regulation is thus to miss this nuance, and to overlook how aspects of the modern state regularly developed first in India, then were exported back to Britain.

Equally, a convincing argument could be made that the nationalisation of the East India Company was driven less by metropolitan actors, and more by a crisis of legitimacy precipitated by the growth of public cultures and civil society *within* South Asia.²⁰ Company officials developed a wide array of idiosyncratic ideologies and collective identities during the first half of the nineteenth century, frequently contradicting the official policy of both Parliament and the Court of Directors, and eventually undermining the rationale behind the Company's continued existence.²¹ The passages of Dalrymple's book that weave Anglo-French rivalry into the narrative use a remarkable collection of French-language sources that highlight this complexity: in one, the Frenchman Michel Raymond—a mercenary general employed by the Nizam of Hyderabad—is seen coordinating the politics of Mughal successor-states according to French national interests, passionately declaring how he was "ready to sacrifice all" and thereby "prove the zeal for my country which animates me".²² Although Dalrymple does recognise how, in the British case, the relationship between Company and Parliament "grew steadily more symbiotic...until eventually it turned into something we might today call a public-private partnership", statements like Raymond's point to a more complicated situation.²³ Early-modern identities, rooted in loyalties to a number of overlapping 'corporate bodies', make it extremely difficult to align eighteenth-century history with contemporary understandings of the relationship between state and corporation.

All the same, there is no doubt that this book is a masterpiece of popular history. Long passages of primary material are expertly marshalled into compelling order, then allowed to speak for themselves. Other passages are deeply emotive. Perhaps most importantly, though, by telling the East India Company's 'relentless rise' as a gripping page-turner, Dalrymple has provided a balanced account of imperial British history at a time when jingoistic misconceptions of the Nation's former empire are widespread and instrumentalised.

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THE ENGLISH EAST INDIA COMPANY'S SILK ENTERPRISE IN BENGAL, 1750–1850: ECONOMY, EMPIRE AND BUSINESS. By KAROLINA HUTKOVÁ. pp. 275. Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 2019
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The English East India Company's Silk Enterprise in Bengal evolved from the author's PhD dissertation submitted to the University of Warwick in 2015. In this monograph, Karolina Hutková makes an

¹⁹Wilson, (2008).

²⁰Bayly, C. A., *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire*, (Cambridge, 2011).

²¹Young, Tom, *Art in India's 'Age of Reform'*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 2019.

²²Dalrymple, (2019), p.341.

²³*Ibid.*, p.xxvii.