

The Making of Western Indology: Henry Thomas Colebrooke and the East India Company. By Rosane Rocher and Ludo Rocher.

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The Making of Western Indology tells the fascinating story of Henry Thomas Colebrooke (1765–1837) who rose, thanks to his scientific skills, through the ranks of the East India Company (EIC) eventually reaching the Supreme Council of the Company in Calcutta. The book marshals a huge amount of information patiently collected through many repositories and manages to track, almost step by step, the evolution of the man.

By and large, three major epochs of the life of Colebrooke are identified. The first is his childhood and formation, as the son of Sir George Colebrooke, a fallen grandee of the East India Company. Joining as proprietor in the aftermath of the crisis of 1763, Colebrooke senior achieved a meteoric ascent, becoming Chairman of the EIC in 1769, but was bankrupt in 1773 as a result of the crisis of 1772. Sir George sought refuge from creditors in France and would remain in debt to the end of his life, his fortunes never restored. By relying on his remaining contacts at the EIC, Sir George could afford for his son the opportunity of an Indian employment in the lower ranks of the EIC's administrative apparatus; this is how speculation and bankruptcy provided a departure point for Western Indology.

Colebrooke was seventeen when he embarked on the boat in Portsmouth, and his first assignments were in remote Indian outposts, starting with Tirhut, a district in North West Bihar, where the European civil establishment consisted of four men. Other posts followed, giving young Colebrooke plenty of time to absorb aspects of Indian life and customs as well as Sanskrit. A first publication on the immolation of Hindu widows prefigured later works on Hindu law. Too much had been written about India, Colebrooke deplored, in which there was a great want of judgement in the selection of authorities. He by contrast would carefully select his authorities, and the authors give some hints as to how he would surround himself with pandits in an attempt to try and piece together the Sanskrit landscape.

An opening came for Colebrooke on the death of Sir William Jones, who had been involved in a great project of translation of Hindu law. This coincided with efforts by the EIC to separate judicial and revenue functions, and administer justice. This resulting law had to be consented to by populations, even though produced by the British ruler, and this required a complex exercise of adaptation and adjustments, which Jones had left unfinished. The book then goes into fascinating detail, following this most prolific and important part of Colebrooke's career as Administrator-Scholar: now a judge of the superior civil and criminal court, now a professor at Fort William College, now a voice in the Supreme Council of the EIC, the President of the Asiatic Society in Calcutta, and a kind of special adviser to British Governor General Lord Minto.

The last part of the book deals with Colebrooke's life after he returned to Europe in 1815 with a hallowed reputation. As a former member of the EIC's Superior Council in Bengal, he belonged to an elite group that participated in formal events but did not seek any role in EIC administration. He settled into what the authors call "scholarly retirement", raising his young family and managing his estates (available numbers suggest he left upwards of £20,000 at his death, although the authors seem to imply some financial difficulties or tightness). Most of his time he spent "promoting India": researching, developing the Asiatic Society of London, in whose creation he played a key role, and

contributing to the contribution of Indology throughout the West – most notably through the links he developed with German scholars. His final or “sunset” years are a poignant story of inexorable decline in health and blindness.

This is a really interesting book in more than one respect. Primarily intended for students of the development of Western Indology, who will undoubtedly find in it virtues that this reviewer was not knowledgeable enough to enjoy, it should be of interest to a much larger audience providing an important biographical contribution to what Bernard Cohn once called “colonialism and its forms of knowledge”. For instance, the book’s exploration of Colebrooke’s efforts at “transcribing” Hindu law, while subjecting the exercise to Western forms of scholarship (as evident from the attempt at reconstructing “authorities” with the help of somewhat “chaotic” and not disinterested pandits), is a must-read for students of the anthropology of colonial law. Students of the East India Company will also be interested by this insider look at the career of one employee and the light it sheds on EIC’s government. Social historians will relish the information on the family strategies of Colebrooke’s father following his bankruptcy, which is important testimony on debt resolution at a time when prison for debt existed. Likewise, the difficulties encountered by the young Colebrooke give precious information on how previous social networks could or could not be mobilized by the bankrupt. I found the discussion of the creation of the Asiatic Society in London of great interest especially for its surrounding politics: the competition with the Linnean Society, which claimed but failed to enforce a monopoly on some of the subjects that the Asiatic Society wished to explore, the search for tutelage, the problem of funding and the evidence of the substantial interest that greeted the creation of the Asiatic Society are all important elements of the development of British Science in general. There is no doubt that, beyond its narrative of the early development of Indology, the book ought to reach a large audience of historians.

Burma Redux: Global Justice and the Quest for Political Reform in Myanmar. By Ian Holliday.
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The author of this welcome study of contemporary Burma, Ian Holliday, is Professor of Political Science at the University of Hong Kong and his research and teaching focuses on Southeast Asia and on humanitarian intervention and global justice. Holliday’s first two chapters provide a fairly succinct and accurate overview of Burma from the colonial period, through independence, up to the rainy season of 1988. Holliday has done his homework, and those seeking a brief overview of how Burma’s past can explain the political and economic problems of the last half of the twentieth century would do well to read these chapters. Holliday says little here that this reviewer would disagree with. Nevertheless, this reviewer disagrees with his view of the strength of the Burmese economy in 1948. The reason that Burma’s economy was a nightmare from the start of Nu’s rule reflects the poor starting point of the Burmese economy due to wartime destruction not repaired by independence, the postwar weakness of the UK economy to which Burma as a colony had been tied, and related factors. This low base made Burma’s high rate of economic growth over the following fourteen years possible, and in the first two years of Nu’s rule annual GDP did not grow, but shrank by –10.1