

**'All man's pollution does the sea cleanse':
Revisiting the Nabobs in Britain, 1785-1837.**

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Abstract

This essay details a historical moment when the future of the British Empire in the East stood at a watershed and when the implications of the colonial expansion were hotly debated at home. In particular, it investigates the precarious social position of East India Company employees in a British society that was only beginning to define itself as a global colonial power. Labelled 'nabobs', East India merchants were socially defined and criticised through their relation to this unknown but highly imaginative India. By focusing on the figure of the nabob, this work seeks to explore the complex relationship between individual and collective identities in domestic Britain around the turn of the nineteenth century. Britishness – as a forged national identity – forms the nexus for analysing the personal conflicts and social location of 'imperial Britons'.

Corruption in its multiple meanings will be treated as a key concept to understand the various charges against nabobs, which defined them as a marginal and dangerous group in the perception of eighteenth-century commentators. This work argues that stereotypes and negative representations of Company servants in contemporary newspapers, pamphlets, novels and caricatures deeply shaped the self-understanding, habitus and chances of those men who had often spent decades of their life in British India. To give a detailed picture of this heterogeneous group of imperial Britons, this study is divided into two parts. First, it discusses in detail the social discourses surrounding the figure of the nabob. Second, it uses a comparative framework to write an analytical biography of three EIC merchants, focussing on the categories of influence, wealth and patriotism – and how these profoundly shaped their personal trajectories. In tracing the careers of three nabobs, this paper will also shed light on the shifting relationship and self-understanding of Britain vis-à-vis her emerging empire in the East.

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Introduction

Much has been written about the greatness of the British Empire by historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Such self-satisfied and glorifying stories of the success of British rule came, however, under increasing criticism from the 1970s onwards, when proponents of the postcolonial theory turned scholarly attention to the ideological forces, the exploitation and the various forms of oppression that went along European colonial rule. Academics across the globe began to address and analyse the violence, wrongfulness and guilt that this era of global expansion meant for the colonized peoples; but they also started to think about the ramifications of colonial expansion on the history of European societies. Postcolonialism remains an ongoing project that has produced scholarship that is self-reflective and highly critical about the production of knowledge about 'the other' as well as about the self-understanding of colonial actors over time.¹ Questions of identity and difference are at the heart of the work of postcolonial scholars. Race, class, gender, empire and nation – and their complex interplay – are all taken as categories of analysis, and they are, at the same time, all concepts which are linked to notions of identity.²

In this paper, I want to detail a historical moment when the future of the British Empire in the East stood at a watershed and when the implications of the colonial expansion were hotly debated at home. In particular, I want to

¹ See especially the groundbreaking work of Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1978). More recently, see the work of Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, 2005); and Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton and Chichester, 1996).

² See, inter alia, Kathleen Wilson, 'Introduction', in Kathleen Wilson (ed.), *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity, and Modernity in Britain and the Empire 1660-1840* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 1-26.

investigate the precarious social position of East India Company employees in a British society that was only beginning to define itself as a global colonial power. Labelled ‘nabobs’ – a transliteration of the term *nawab* for Muslim regional leaders of the Mughal empire –, East India Company merchants were socially defined and criticised through their relation to this unknown but highly imaginative India. This work engages with a paradox that existed with regard to their social status in domestic Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. On the one hand, Britons in the Company’s service were publicly perceived as common criminals, vulgar *nouveaux riches* and corrupt agents of the imperial adventures on the Indian subcontinent. On the other hand, those men effectively ruled vast territories in the name of Britain, while increasing the property, trade and power of the island they originated from.³

By focusing on the figure of the nabob, this work seeks to explore the complex relationship between individual and collective identities in domestic Britain at the turn of the nineteenth century. Britishness – as a forged national identity – forms the nexus for analysing the personal conflicts and social location of ‘imperial Britons’. Scholars such as Linda Colley, H.V. Bowen and David Hancock have conclusively shown the extent to which the British nation and the British Empire emerged side-by-side. In fact, they evolved mutually dependent upon each other.⁴ As Colley has written, the British ‘came to define themselves as a single people not because of any political or cultural consensus

³ For a comprehensive account of the volume and impact of trade between Britain, India and South-East Asia and an answer of how fortunes were actually made by the East India Company and its employees see P. J. Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes: The British in Bengal in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1976).

⁴ See, inter alia, David Hancock, *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735-85* (Cambridge, 1997); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1737* (New Haven and London, 2005); Huw V. Bowen, *The Business of Empire: The East India Company and Imperial Britain, 1756-1833* (Cambridge, 2006); Tillman W. Nechtman, *Nabobs: Defining the Indian empire and the British nation in the late eighteenth century* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Southern California, 2005), pp. 10-11.

at home, but rather in reaction to the Other beyond the shores'.⁵ In her seminal work, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837*, she enumerates the many influences that coalesced into the idea of a British nation. As she has so adeptly shown, concepts of national belonging expressed through nationalist sentiments or symbols of patriotism were a crucial but distinctively new rationale in the eighteenth century.⁶ In this work, I argue that despite their patriotic behaviour, nabobs were, for much of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, seen and criticised by their fellow countrymen for being un-British. Unlike the group of powerful gentlemanly capitalists and London shopkeepers that were considered as respectable Englishmen, East India merchants were, by contrast, associated with 'Asiatic corruption' – an idea that was related to decadence, despotism, cruelty and other tropes of the Orientalist discourse of the eighteenth century. This was not only because they lived out of reach of the metropolitan polite society. Rather, they were thought of being especially receptive to the various temptations that this unknown India offered.

This paper takes its starting point in the year 1785, when the controversies surrounding the nabobs approached its climax. Moreover, this was the very year in which two of our protagonists, Warren Hastings and William Paxton, returned to Britain after decades in Bengal. This paper thus spans the decades around the turn of the nineteenth century, and it ends in 1837 with the death of Charles Cockerell, the third nabob under consideration. This year equally marked the beginning of the Victorian Age, hence the era of high imperialism, when the British Empire was at its heyday, and largely embraced by the public. Domestic attitudes towards the emerging British

⁵ Linda Colley, *Britons*, p. 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Empire in the East thus changed significantly over the period 1785 to 1837. And so did the attitudes and the self-understanding of imperial Britons who lived and worked on the edges of this nascent empire. What we can do is to trace both the palpable changes in discourse and representation as well as the personal trajectories of this small group of imperial vanguards. For this purpose, I have chosen three EIC employees who shared the experience of amassing a fortune in South Asia through office holding and private trading activities. After a life in the colonial setting as ‘merchant princes’, all of them returned to settle down in Britain. Here, they sought to maintain or even expand their wealth and power as well as to improve their social status. All of them, upon return, were confronted with hostile public reactions. These were spurred by negative stereotypes and representations of Company servants, which were at that time ubiquitous in popular culture – for instance, in contemporary newspapers, pamphlets, novels and caricatures. These pejorative images of nabobs were not confined to the realm of culture, but they had equally an impact on the political and judicial sphere. As I will seek to show, such denigrating views on nabobs deeply shaped their self-understanding, habitus and real chances of success in the British society.

To better understand the personal struggles and trajectories of these repatriates, I wish to argue again that identity matters as a historical category. The problematic nature of identity, as ‘a category of practice and a category of analysis’, which is used to describe everyday experiences as well as the mechanisms of identity politics, is, however, rarely part of the discussion.⁷ As Frederick Cooper has rightly noted, ‘identity’ is an important concept for

⁷ Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, p. 62.

historical research, but it needs clarification, since it 'tends to mean too much (when understood in a strong sense), too little (when understood in a weak sense), or nothing at all (because of its sheer ambiguity)'.⁸ The majority of authors writing about aspects of identity circumvent the pressing necessity of defining the term. The constructivist stance to dismiss identity as an analytical category for being too fluid, multiple, fragmented, and hopelessly subjective, can not be considered a helpful contribution to the discussion, since it offers no real alternative that captures the complexity of a person's interaction with the social world. In other historical works, we see a problematic tendency to detect identity almost in 'everything and everywhere', rendering it useless for scholarly investigation.⁹ I want to argue, instead, that there are more accurate and fruitful ways to use identity as an analytical category.

It is, however, mandatory to specify how this concept will be understood and used in this work. To begin with, I do not share the assumption made by scholars such as Jean L. Cohen that identity is somehow opposed to interests.¹⁰ Rather, I wish to stress that the strategies that Anglo-Indians adopted in order to overcome prejudices against them; strategies to circumvent mechanisms of exclusion from the British ruling élite; as well as strategies to react to social pressure in domestic Britain, were all inseparably connected to their personal identities. Another point that I want to make is that I assume that the constant negotiations of identities through self-representation were socially framed. Identity can, then, be regarded and analysed as a 'historical process, rather than

⁸ Ibid., p. 59.

⁹ Scholarship carried out on social or intellectual movements has often stressed the strong bounds and similarities between individuals, without paying much attention to the great heterogeneity that is inherent in every social figuration. In the tradition of national history writing, there is the tendency to naturalise collective identities. See Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing history from the nation: questioning narratives of modern China* (Chicago, 1995).

¹⁰ See, for example, Jean L. Cohen, 'Strategy of Identity: New Theoretical Paradigms and Contemporary Social Movements', *Social Research* 52:4 (1985), pp. 663-716.

an outcome'.¹¹ In this process, individual interests and identification with groups and ideas were just as important as social constraints existing in a society at a particular point in time.

The case for reintegrating subjective experience into a social and cultural history of empire is indeed a pressing one. Taking up the insights of scholars of the so-called 'new imperial history', who rightly called for a stronger focus on the repercussions of empire on domestic Britain, I believe that nabobs are an illuminating group to study. There exists, of course, already a rich scholarship on nabobs on which I build my own arguments. Generally speaking, we can distinguish two dominant approaches that have been adopted by academics in the field. First, some works have focused on the experience and role of EIC servants in the colonial setting. In these studies, questions about the integration of Europeans into local societies, which were marked by sharp internal divisions, take centre stage. Scholars such as William Dalrymple, Percival Spear and Maya Jasanoff have taken issue with the idea that Britons felt always superior to the native population.¹² They have rightly pointed to the weakness and instability of the British presence in India in the eighteenth century.

The other great strand of postcolonial scholarship that writes about imperial Britons focuses on the changing perceptions or representations of the East India Company and its servants. For these scholars, the images of nabobs – rather than the real people – provide a window into issues of gender and race

¹¹ Kathleen Wilson, 'Introduction', p. 6.

¹² See William Dalrymple, *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India* (London, 2004); Maya Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire: Conquest and Collecting in the East, 1750-1850* (London, 2006); Percival Spear, *The Nabobs: A Study of the Social Life of the English in Eighteenth-Century India* (New York, 1998).

that evolve within the larger framework of empire and nation building.¹³ Historians such as James M. Holzman, Sudipta Sen, Phillip Lawson and Jim Phillips have laid the foundations of a still flourishing historiography on representations of nabobs.¹⁴ More recently Tillman W. Nechtman has provided a sweeping study of the changing images of nabobs from the mid-eighteenth to the late eighteenth century.¹⁵ He takes a fresh look at the significance of objects that Company servants brought back to Britain, and he further investigates issues of gender that were linked to female residents in British India, who were also called *nabobinas*.¹⁶

Although there is, thus, a substantial historiography that details the shifting attitudes towards EIC employees through visual and textual representations, there are two shortcomings in the existing literature that I wish to address. First, there is a tendency to overlook the multi-layered nature of the concept of corruption as understood in the eighteenth century. Depending on the overall topic, scholars focus only on one dimension, such as the occurrence of political corruption in EIC circles. Such a perspective, however, runs the risk of reducing the historical complexity of a very ambiguous concept that needs careful explanation. It is, therefore, the aim of my first chapter to explore the manifold meanings of corruption, and I will ask how they were related to the figure of the nabob.

¹³ See, for instance, Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire* (Cambridge, 2006).

¹⁴ James M. Holzman, *The Nabobs in England: A Study of the Returned Anglo-Indian, 1760-1785* (published Ph.D., New York, 1926); Sudipta Sen, *Distant Sovereignty: National Imperialism and the Origins of British India* (New York and London, 2002); Philip Lawson and Jim Phillips, "Our Execrable Banditti": Perceptions of Nabobs in Mid-Eighteenth Century Britain', *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 16:3 (1984), pp. 225-241.

¹⁵ Tillman W. Nechtman, *Nabobs: Empire and Identity in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (forthcoming: Cambridge, 2010).

¹⁶ Idem., 'Nabobinas: Luxury, Gender, and the Sexual Politics of British Imperialism in India in the Late Eighteenth Century', *Journal of Women's History*, 18:4 (2006), pp. 8-30.

The second shortcoming in the existing literature is that the large majority of studies on nabobs focus *only* on representations. As a result, these works fail to acknowledge the actual human agency of those men of trade. In order to fully comprehend the *de facto* chances, limitations and conflicts of returning nabobs, I will argue that it is mandatory to approach them as creative actors of their own fate. The second chapter will, therefore, present a comparative analysis of the personal trajectories of three East India merchants, namely Warren Hastings, William Paxton and Charles Cockerell. It will mostly concentrate on three categories that were crucial for both the charges of corruption, as well as for the social strategies of these individuals. These will be wealth, influence and patriotism. Such a collective biography can provide a fuller understanding of how returning Anglo-Indians sought to secure their place in the social hierarchy of Britain, and how they actively shaped their identities in a changing social environment. Finally, such an analysis can shed new light on the changing relationship between empire and nation between 1785 and 1837.

Chapter One

Defining Corruption: the Figure of the Nabob

This chapter aims to explain how corruption was understood and used in its great ambivalence at the turn of the nineteenth century in Britain by focusing on the figure of the 'nabob'. I will argue that EIC employees and their relatives embodied for British contemporaries a 'new' or 'Asiatic' corruption. Given the fact that nabobs were primarily identified through their relationship to India, it is worth exploring the negative representations of both this particular group of Britons as well as of India itself that then prevailed in Britain – representations which were, as I will seek to demonstrate, both historically intertwined. As a highly visible and contested group of social upstarts, the publicly well-known nabobs personified many contemporary anxieties – and were thus the object of a range of overlapping discourses – which arose in regard to the future of Britain and her position in global power games. As James M. Holzman has early pointed out, nabobs were the favoured target of anti-imperial agitation and social criticism from the early eighteenth century onwards.¹⁷ The final loss of the American colonies in 1783 led to a public awareness of the economic and political importance of the territories under control of the East India Company, which in turn gave the figure of the nabob increasing public attention.¹⁸

The gradual transformation of the EIC, after the Battle of Plassey in 1757, from a private trading enterprise into a state-like bureaucracy in South Asia had

¹⁷ See James M. Holzman, *The Nabobs in England*, p. 18.

¹⁸ Although it has recently become much contested, some historians accept the idea of seeing this historical development as the watershed between a so-called First and Second British Empire. The Second was then concentrated in Africa, Asia and the Pacific. See Anthony Pagden, *Peoples and Empires: Europeans and the Rest of the World, from Antiquity to the Present* (London, 2002), p. 98.

then already started to cause profound unease amongst the landed elite in Britain.¹⁹ It was suggested that middle-class Britons and all sorts of ne'er-do-wells were in charge of ruling what Robert Clive once depicted as a 'rich, populous, fruitful country in extent beyond France and Spain united'.²⁰ The East India Company was according to Clive effectively 'in possession of the labour, industry, and manufactures of twenty million of subjects'.²¹ There was great concern in Britain that the treasures of India would be rapidly ransacked as – so it was thought – Company servants avariciously enriched themselves. This situation was perceived as unacceptable since the interests of the nabobs were seen as clearly 'separate from those of the nation at large'.²²

For our purpose, it is central to elucidate the complexity and ambiguity that were inherent in the concept of 'corruption' at that time. Generally speaking, corruption as it was then understood could be defined as a 'deviant use' of 'public office' for 'private gain'.²³ However, the applicability of the concept was far greater than this narrow definition seems to suggest. The question of what constituted a 'public office' and what was regarded as a corrupt act depended on factors that were anything but rigid. For instance, social status, changing values, and common practices all affected the understanding of corruption. Contemporaries were faced with a lack of an objective baseline from which to measure what kind of behaviour was to be included under this rubric. Eighteenth-century Britons – who take centre stage in this work – rarely reflected upon the constantly shifting and sometimes even

¹⁹ See Philip Lawson and Jim Phillips, "Our Execrable Banditti", p. 232.

²⁰ Cited in Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (Cambridge: MA and London, 2006), p.178.

²¹ Huw V. Bowen, *The Business of Empire*, p.5.

²² Chris Jones, 'Jane Austen and Old Corruption', *Literature & History* 9:2 (2000), p. 2.

²³ See Nancy E. Park, 'Corruption in Eighteenth-Century China', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 56:4 (1997), pp. 967-1005, p. 968.

contradictive standards that were used to judge whether an act of a person, or group of people, fell under this category. The historian, by contrast, needs to make sense of the unstable nature of corruption in particular situations, societies and periods in order to understand the mechanisms of the underlying social order.

Nancy E. Park, studying corruption in eighteenth-century imperial China, noted the existence of an astonishing ‘multiplicity of attitudes concerning corruption’ amongst Chinese commentators.²⁴ This, as I shall argue, is equally the case for eighteenth-century British India, where a growing number of temporary residents of British origin were engaged in the making of an Eastern empire on the Indian subcontinent. The EIC servants in India were, of course, not isolated from contemporary discourses and moral standards that were then dominant in Britain. On the contrary, nabobs became the focus of concern in a society that was only beginning to define its relations to its Eastern territories. Simultaneously, they were – at least to a certain extent – subject to Indian standards of corruption, which were equally fluid in meaning. As a result, the adaptation and vague understanding of cultural differences regarding corruption was essential for merchants to conduct business and to maintain stable relations with local rulers.²⁵

In order to analyse the complex relationship between empire and nation, and the decisive role that was played by nabobs as the ‘human frontier that moved fluidly between those two spaces’, we ought to concentrate on some of

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Huw V. Bowen has persuasively argued that Europeans were not able to establish their own rules and principles of business in India until the nineteenth-century, see H.V. Bowen, ‘No longer mere Traders’: Continuities and Change in the Metropolitan Development of the East India Company, 1600-1834’, in H. V. Bowen et al. (eds), *The Worlds of the East India Company* (Woodbridge, 2004), pp. 19-32.

the central issues and debates about corruption, which attracted a considerable degree of public attention and discussion in Britain.²⁶ These were constitutive of the social criticism and deep suspicion that returning Anglo-Indian merchants had to confront. This chapter will therefore provide the analytical framework that will enable us to organise the individual biographies, intellectual responses and strategies of re-integration of the three nabobs that are under consideration in this work. It will also provide concrete examples of the accusations that returning EIC employees often had to face. It is central for this study to gain an overview of the various dimensions of corruption, the motives of the profound controversy surrounding the figure of the nabob as well the contemporary discursive context in order to explore effectively the differences and similarities that we encounter in the lives of our chosen individuals. While each nabob was an independent individual, the nabobs were closely associated as a collective on many levels. They had made similar experiences of living and making a fortune in India, and they shared the experience of the same social debates and concerns, which profoundly shaped their lives after their return.

²⁶ Tillman W. Nechtman, *Defining the Indian empire* p. i.

East Indian Fortunes

In India, all the vices operate by which sudden fortune is acquired; in England are often displayed, by the same people, the virtues which dispense hereditary wealth. Arrived in England, the destroyers of the nobility and gentry of a whole kingdom will find the best company in this nation, at a board of elegance and hospitality. Here the manufacturer and the husbandman will bless the just and punctual hand, that in India has torn the cloth from the loom, or wrested the scanty portion of rice and salt from the peasants of Bengal, or wrung from him the very opium in which he forgot his oppressions and his oppressor. They marry into your families; they enter into your estates by loans; they raise their value by demand; they cherish and protect your relations which lie heavy in your patronage.²⁷

In 1783, Edmund Burke summed up with these words his concerns about widespread abuses of power in India by EIC employees. Burke argued that these crimes did not originate from the moral enervation that Britons faced as they spent a considerable time of their lives on the subcontinent. Rather, he maintained that this dramatic situation was the natural consequence of the practice of sending common criminals to India as *de facto* representatives of the British state. His above-quoted speech on Fox's India Bill was intended to support efforts to reform the role of the East India Company on the subcontinent, and to control its management more efficiently. In this passage,

²⁷ Cited in Peter J. Marshall (ed.), *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Vol. V, India: Madras and Bengal, 1774-1785* (Oxford, 1981), p. 403.

he outlines the nabob's intention as to plunder, to oppress and to destroy India – an India that is presented to the reader as the poor of the poor, from whom the ruthless nabob would furthermore take all hopes and possessions. In his evocative language, Burke described how the nabob would not hesitate to steal even a 'scanty portion of rice and salt' from the peasant; take away the needful material of the weaver. Even the opium that acted as a medicine for the suppressed would be violently ransacked by Britons, who voraciously squeezed dry their subjected territories. In Burke's account, India appears to be in great jeopardy, and she is further described as a weak, poor and enervated country, whose population is defenceless against the aggressions committed by the British conquerors. Furthermore, Burke vividly described in the same speech the strategies of the returning nabobs who mingled with, and married into respectable English families, thus imperilling the social order of Britain by means of their Eastern fortunes. The underlying assumption that the career of an East India merchant is almost necessarily based on duplicity reflects the overlap between discourses of corruption and a social snobbery with regard to social climbers in general, who could in the eyes of many contemporaries only become 'ungenteely rich'²⁸. This harsh criticism was more than an expression of envy, but – as Renu Juneja has so aptly described – it was rather a 'complex feeling spurred by violations of class hierarchies', which questioned the social constitution of Britain.²⁹

In the final quarter of the eighteenth century, it was, however, not unusual to depict nabobs as mere criminals. In satirical poems, such as the anonymous

²⁸ James M. Holzman, *The Nabobs in England*, p. 15.

²⁹ Renu Juneja, 'The Native and the Nabob: Representations of the Indian Experience in Eighteenth-Century English Literature', in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 27:1 (1992), pp. 183-98, p. 184.

The Nabob or the Asiatic Plunderer (1776), Anglo-Indians were characterised as being indifferent to the suffering of the indigenous people, because 'Their breasts are stone, their minds are hard as steel'.³⁰ By looking at speeches of Edmund Burke, one can trace a wide range of denunciations that he used in his passionate attempts to defend Britain from the vices of empire, brought back to Britain by Company servants who fell victim to moral decay in the unique circumstances of the East:

English youth in India drink the intoxicating draught of authority and dominion before their heads are able to bear it, and as they are full grown in fortune long before they are ripe in principle, neither nature nor reason have any opportunity to exert themselves for remedy of the excesses of their premature power.³¹

Burke's depiction of EIC employees as immature, selfish and, in consequence, irresponsible rulers can only be understood if we remember that the recruitment of servants to the East Indies took regularly place at the tender age of sixteen or seventeen. The young applicants had to demonstrate a successfully completed commercial training, and they were asked to hand in a birth certificate as well as a letter of recommendation from one of the Directors of the EIC in order to start their career as a Writer, the lowest rank in the company hierarchy.³² Subsequently, these young aspirants could rise to the grades of a Factor, Junior and Senior Merchant, but, since the salaries were relatively low,

³⁰ Cited in James M. Holzman, *The Nabobs in England*, p. 19.

³¹ Cited in Peter J. Marshall, *Speeches of Edmund Burke*, pp. 402-3.

³² The tasks of a writer are best described in Peter J. Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes*, pp. 10-16.

they were encouraged to undertake private trade from the very beginning of their career.³³

What appears to be a genuine system of recruitment in the East India Company – one that should be based on merit, or at least on the basis of objective standards of personal qualification – was in fact an elaborate system of patronage. Judging by contemporary pamphlets and newspaper articles, an open secret that bribery and family influence stood right at the beginning of a young career in India.³⁴ According to Philip Lawson and Jim Phillips, a Company director could charge up to £4,000 for his patronage of a candidate on the lowest level of the Company hierarchy. Given this common practice, it seems surprising that another popular prejudice had it that nabobs were usually of low origin. This claim can therefore hardly be substantiated for the great majority of Company servants when we consider the fact that the recruitment process was based on the exchange of such large sums, which had to be raised by the family of a candidate.³⁵ This widespread notion thus reflects the overall negative attitude that the British public had adopted towards the mass of EIC servants.

In this context, the similarities between the ‘old corruption’ in English politics on the one hand, and the practices within the East India Company, on the other hand, are striking. Nonetheless, for contemporaries such as Edmund Burke, only the latter system seemed to pose a threat to the social order of the state. Historians, on the contrary, have argued that acts of corruption and bribery were in fact constitutive for Britain at that stage. According to W. D. Rubinstein, instruments of corruption such as signs of gratitude, bribes, unmerited pensions and family influence were ‘all-pervasive features’ of the

³³ See James M. Holzman, *The Nabobs in England*, p. 9.

³⁴ See *Public Advertiser*, 29 Aug. and 16 Sept. 1776.

³⁵ See Philip Lawson and Jim Phillips, “Our Execrable Banditti”, p. 227.

political culture in Britain in the eighteenth century.³⁶ This well-established system of patronage amongst the landed gentry was not – as we shall see – entirely separated from the personal networks of the East India Company. On the contrary, both were apparently interrelated.³⁷ Despite this fact, the idea of the East India Company as a club of criminals and social climbers who gained – alarmingly fast – increasing influence in British society, was the dominant vision in popular depictions of the time.

Contemporary articles, pamphlets and other means of representation need to be taken seriously when we look in detail at the biographies and conflicts of our three protagonists in the upcoming chapters. Linda Colley has stressed the point that middle-class Britons – a category which includes a great proportion of the empire elite – were often in dispute about central political questions with the British aristocracy; nonetheless, both groups maintained a constant and fruitful contact with one another. More importantly, as Colley has convincingly shown, both groups were mutually depended.³⁸ Both sides were fully aware of this. The co-operation between the gentry and the middling ranks can be considered the rule, rather than the exception.³⁹ For instance, in terms of the contemporary credit culture in Britain, Margot Finn has sharpened our understanding of this collaboration across social strata as she detected the many ways of financial support that were carried out among the middling ranks

³⁶ William D. Rubinstein, 'The End of "Old Corruption" in Britain. 1780- 1860', *Past & Present*, 101 (1983). See also Philip Harling, 'Introduction', in *The Waning of 'Old Corruption': the Politics of Economical Reform in Britain, 1779-1846* (Oxford, 1996), p. 1.

³⁷ A study of the social networks of three EIC employees, who take center stage in this dissertation, will clarify this observation in more detail. See chapter two, p. 33.

³⁸ Linda Colley, *Britons, passim*.

³⁹ The middling ranks included not only nabobs, transatlantic merchants, shopkeepers and many other professionals, but also the much-contested group of West-Indian Planters. The latter were the subjects of yet another severe controversy that unfolded around the abolition of slavery. This fierce debate culminated in the law of 1807. The image of a decadent or despotic ruler, however, was not attached to West-Indian planters, who can be seen – similar to nabobs – as another group of 'imperial vanguards.'

and the gentry. These practices were stimulated by a constant lack of fluid capital which then existed in Britain.⁴⁰

The remarkable fact that it was also wealthy nabobs who granted substantial loans to the nobility is only rarely mentioned in recent works of imperial history.⁴¹ This occurrence, which is a striking example of the large fortunes that returning nabobs possessed, fits neatly into a range of arguments that postcolonial scholars have made in the last decade in order to draw attention to the repercussions that the empire had on domestic Britain.⁴² There is consensus amongst historians that credit was the lifeblood of Britain's economy at that time and that it helped to maintain political and social stability. On the personal level, this widespread practise meant that 'The men and women who benefited from [easy credit] found themselves caught fast in a complex web of dependency and obligation.'⁴³ The image of the nabob as a criminal, who had made his fortune in the East by despotic means, and his apparently growing influence in metropolitan politics and elite families, reached a sudden climax with the impeachment trial of Warren Hastings, the former governor-general of Bengal, who returned home in 1785 only to face a fatiguing public legal process that unfolded over several years, from 1787 until he was acquitted in 1795.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Margot C. Finn, *The Character of Credit: Personal Debt in English Culture, 1740-1914* (Cambridge, 2003).

⁴¹ A famous example is that of Paul Benfield. In 1793, the firm Boyd, Benfield & Co. was established in London, made great profits with loans to noblemen and the state government. Benfield was at some point the most important Nabob banker in London, but a series of misfortune led to his bankruptcy in 1799. See James M. Holzman, *The Nabobs in England*, p. 75-76.

⁴² Famously argued in Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, 'Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda', in idem (eds), *Tensions of Empire. Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, 1997), pp. 1-56.

⁴³ Linda Colley, *Britons*, p. 66.

⁴⁴ Peter J. Marshall, *The Impeachment of Warren Hastings* (Oxford, 1965); Nicholas B. Dirks, *Scandal of Empire*.

As we have seen, it is worth looking behind the facade of so-called ‘public opinion’. The latter is generally expressed in, and becomes accessible through, the study of contemporary newspapers and literature. Such a study, however, can only reveal one dimension of the ‘nabob-controversy’.⁴⁵ Popular concerns about a ‘new’ or ‘Asiatic’ corruption, which was thought to flood the British Isles, did not reflect on the strong interrelation between the old and new system of corruption. This ought not come as a surprise because, as Nicholas Dirks has shown, ‘the more that both political and economic corruption’ could be palmed off ‘on the activities and servants of the East India Company, the better “old corruption” – with its own circuits of patronage, power, and wealth – could protect itself.’⁴⁶ Thus, by depicting nabobs as a homogenous and deeply suspicious group, it was possible to deflect the attention from the state’s and many politicians’ involvement in the business, or – in Dirks’ own words – the ‘scandal of empire’. According to him, these scandals that surrounded the figure of the nabob helped to conceptualise and to legitimise the growing commitment of the state in Indian affairs and, ultimately, the governing of Eastern territories. Dirks, however, failed to mention the efforts of a political reform that started in the 1780s and that sought to tackle the prevalent peculation of public means by MPs – which was then a widespread phenomenon among Britain’s political élite.

One could argue that there might have been a relationship between the public denunciation of the nabob’s corruption and his role in India, and the denunciation of domestic political corruption, a debate that was carried on well into the nineteenth century. This period of the transformation of the system of ‘old corruption’, that Philip Harling has so vividly described, can then be

⁴⁵ A term coined by Tillman W. Nechtman, *Defining the Indian empire*.

⁴⁶ Nicholas B. Dirks, *Scandal of Empire*, p. 13.

understood as a self-corrective action of the state, which was spurred in response to Britain's changing position on the global map of rivalling empires. The reform of the Company administration that was realised in India by the governor Lord Cornwallis (1786-93) and by his successors went along the same lines; the aim was to overcome nepotism and bribery.⁴⁷ Among other things, one outcome of this reform was a changing atmosphere or estrangement between the British and the native society in India.⁴⁸ This estrangement was increased by shifting debates in Britain, which helped to depict South Asia as being 'timeless and immune to advancement'⁴⁹, and which led to an image of the Indian culture as decadent, despotic, pagan and cruel – and, ultimately, as inferior to Britain.⁵⁰ We therefore ought to ask how these changes relate to our discussion of the nabob and the ubiquitous phenomenon of corruption, as the central issue in representations of this precarious social group.

As we have seen in the first part of this chapter, especially in Edmund Burke's speech, there was much furore in Britain about the nabob who was generally considered a criminal; that is, a criminal whose interest was mainly to enrich himself by exploiting the people and treasures of India. This negative idea of the EIC merchant, who was apparently – as the English radical Richard Price put it in 1776 – only 'actuated by the love of plunder and the spirit of conquest',⁵¹ seem to have slowly diminished when hopes were raised that the

⁴⁷ William Pitt's East India Act (1784) was intended to give the British crown more influence in guiding the political affairs of the Company in India and to better control corruption and mismanagement. See Christopher A. Bayly and Katherine Prior, 'Cornwallis, Charles, first Marquess Cornwallis (1738–1805)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition, 2008. Available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6338> (accessed 24 July 2010).

⁴⁸ See William Dalrymple, *White Mughals*; Michael Edwardes, *British India 1772-1947: A Survey of the Nature and Effects of Alien Rule* (London, 1967), pp. 32-34.

⁴⁹ Sudipta Sen, *Distant Sovereignty*, p. 38.

⁵⁰ See Jyotsna G. Singh, *Colonial Narratives/Cultural Dialogues: "Discoveries" of India in the Language of Colonialism* (London, 1996), p. 59.

⁵¹ Cited in Anthony Pagden, *Peoples and Empire*, pp. 101-103.

treasures of India could pay off British debts, which saw a significant increase during the times of extensive warfare against Revolutionary France.⁵²

The vision of India as a defenceless and innocent victim of European aggression – one that we have already encountered – was towards the end of the century overshadowed by sophisticated theories that conceptualised India, its nature and peoples, as the actual seducer of British subjects, rather than as its victim.⁵³ Nicholas Dirks has paraphrased this changing understanding of the Eastern territories in a drastic analogy, claiming that ‘the charge of a rape will never stick when the victim is judged a whore.’⁵⁴ From the British perspective, South Asian customs and religions were increasingly seen as corrupted and scandalous.⁵⁵ The discussions about corruption that used to be so closely attached to the nabob now partly shifted towards India itself, thus stressing its role as the source of temptations and decay that imperilled the virtues of Britons abroad. The perception of India as a ‘narcotic place’⁵⁶, that was addicting and intoxicating at the same time, did not, however, help to improve the negative valuation of nabobs. Rather, the common evaluation of ‘India as a lush garden ... that had made its population lazy and indolent’ led to a renewed scepticism in domestic Britain towards nabobs and their moral and physical constitution. These concerns did matter, since nabobs effectively governed on the behalf of the British state on the Indian subcontinent. The anxiety that

⁵² The significance of the tax revenues that were collected by the East India Company in Bengal, which provided a continuous source of income cannot be overestimated in the context of the transformation of the EIC from a trader to a sovereign and broader mechanisms of global trade in regard to China. Sudipta Sen, *Distant Sovereignty*, pp. xv-xvi.

⁵³ Sarah Jordan has written extensively on the ‘the effeminizing indolence of that country’, in *The Anxieties of Idleness: Idleness in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Culture* (London, 2003), pp. 123-152.

⁵⁴ Nicholas B. Dirks, *Scandal of Empire*, p. 79.

⁵⁵ On the perception of cultural practices such as sati (widow burning) and hookswinging, ‘a form of devotion involving hooks embedded in the back’, see *ibid.*, p. 23.

⁵⁶ Tillman W. Nechtman, *Defining the Indian Empire*, p. 108.

corrupted nabobs would bring back to Britain a range of despotic practices and dangerous ambitions of wealth, status and power which would then disrupt the social order in metropolitan Britain was still prevailing around the turn of the century.

It would be wrong to assume that all those images of India as described above changed suddenly in the eyes of contemporaries. A range of important historical transitions, however, led to what David Arnold has called the 'colonizing ethos of the era'⁵⁷, a time that was marked by cultural demarcation and territorial expansion. According to Arnold, it was 'in the early nineteenth century, [that] the British began to exhibit a new sense of ownership towards India.'⁵⁸ As a result, we can detect – during the last years of the eighteenth century – the formation of a common understanding of India that paved the way to the powerful notion of European superiority, which in turn led to the conviction that India was in need of a British 'civilising mission'. In short, the assumption that EIC servants and other 'imperial vanguards' (Nechtman) were not at all immune against the chimerical wealth and immorality of this imagined India profoundly shaped their reception in domestic Britain. Although they were not solely regarded as common criminals, nabobs were, however, seen as the 'corrupted agents' of empire, and so they continued to be the target of a wide range of negative responses well into the nineteenth century.

As Tillman W. Nechtman has rightly noted, Company merchants 'walked a fine line, trying always to mask their Indian connections without fully renouncing that part of their lives.'⁵⁹ These repatriates were expected to live

⁵⁷ David Arnold, *The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze: India, Landscape, and Science, 1800-1856* (Seattle: WA, 2006), p. 4.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 12.

⁵⁹ See Tillman W. Nechtman, *Defining the Indian Empire*, pp. 242-45.

without great comfort or elegance, since the ostentatious display of an Eastern fortune was commonly seen as evidence for those men's and women's subverted virtues. The question of the concrete materiality of empire was, as I will seek to show in the next part, central to the concept of corruption as well as to the definition and personal dilemma of the nabob.

Visualising Corruption: Diamonds and Decorum

Eighteenth-century commentators were eloquent on the subject of luxury, often characterizing it as one of the greatest threats to a person's virtue, but at the same time as a stimulus to commerce and national wealth. Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger, who have both written on luxury debates in the eighteenth century, stressed the ambiguity of the concept and its contested nature in the eyes of contemporaries. They noted that:

On the one hand, Enlightenment culture adapted itself to luxury as a positive social force, viewing it with confidence as an instrument (and indication) of the progress of civilisation. On the other hand, it feared luxury as a debilitating and corrosive social evil, clinging to classical critique of excessive indulgence and wanton profligacy, urban chaos and plebeian idleness.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger, 'Introduction', in Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (eds), *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods* (Basingstoke, 2003), p. 2.

This conflict was famously treated in the widespread political satire *The Fable of the Bees*, written by Bernard Mandeville in 1714. Here, Mandeville put forward his sophisticated analysis of the relationship between private luxury consumption and public benefit, which came to be known as the Mandeville paradox. The paradox consists of the fact that private vice – in the form of envy, greed and pride – ultimately serves the common good which is, in a commercial society, greater economic prosperity.⁶¹ The trade-off between economic growth and individual virtue that Mandeville had so aptly described was, however, still hotly debated until the nineteenth century.

The definition and attributions of luxury as a contested phenomenon changed over the course of the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, the display of luxury could often be used in order to attack the moral virtue of someone – or to admire his or her taste, fortune and reputation. This ambiguity is only comprehensible if we note that limits between what was held to be appropriate, and what sort of luxuries and display were regarded as extravagant, generally depended on the social status of a person rather than on accepted rules of beauty. Aesthetic principles such as ‘decorum’ and ‘taste’ were of great importance in the eighteenth century, as they effectively framed discussions about luxury by linking them to someone’s public standing and aspirations.⁶² The right to possess and surround oneself with genteel objects was not only determined by the personal fortune that a person had acquired in the course of his life. Rather, the family background, education, title and landownership were all factors that counted for an aesthetic judgement on whether someone was

⁶¹ Kyle Scott, ‘Mandeville’s Paradox as Satire: The Moral Consequences of Being a Good Citizen in a Commercial Society’, *Politics & Policy*, 37: 2 (2009), p. 370.

⁶² See John Styles and Amanda Vickery, ‘Introduction’, in John Styles and Amanda Vickery (eds), *Gender, Taste and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700-1830* (New Haven and London, 2006), p. 16.

dressed above his status, or as appropriate to the person's social standing. As we shall see in the following, the material culture and conspicuous consumption of EIC merchants and their family members shaped – and were at the same time shaped – by existing social hierarchies in Britain.

Although there was a rapidly developing market in Britain for colonial goods and exotic novelties from the early eighteenth century onwards⁶³, nabobs – being the agents of this trade in luxuries – were attacked because of their personal taste for things 'Oriental'.⁶⁴ It is crucial to recognise the entangled nature of two strings of debates that came together in the figure of the nabob, in particular through his relations to the East. One strand of the debate unfolded in the eighteenth century around the consumption of 'Oriental luxuries' in general and their apparently corrupting impact on British citizens. The other debate surrounded the nature and the shady origin of nabob fortunes, and was also linked to broader discussions about corrupt luxury. Although both discourses were, of course, historically intertwined, they will in the following be described separately in order to achieve a greater clarity.

Throughout the eighteenth century, diamonds, precious stones and gold as well as certain textiles were associated with 'Oriental' decadence, femininity and wickedness.⁶⁵ The historian William Robertson (1721-1793) and other

⁶³ On the development of the import trade in Asian luxury goods, from small scale trade for courtly consumption to the creation of a global market for new consumer goods, see Maxine Berg, 'In Pursuit of Luxury: Global History and British Consumer Goods in the Eighteenth Century', *Past & Present*, 182 (2004), pp. 85-142.

⁶⁴ Eighteenth-century consumers associated a range of qualities with the so-called 'Oriental luxuries', often without linking them to a concrete location in Asia. Things 'Oriental' were regarded as sensual, feminine, colourful, decadent, exotic, soft, precious or simply strange, but always as foreign. See Madeleine Dobie, 'Orientalism, Colonialism, and Furniture in Eighteenth-Century France' in Dena Goodman and Kathryn Norberg (eds), *Furnishing the Eighteenth-Century: What Furniture Can Tell us about the European and American Past* (New York and Oxford, 2007), pp. 13-36.

⁶⁵ Maxine Berg, 'Asian Luxuries and the Making of the European Consumer Revolution', in Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (eds), *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods* (Basingstoke, 2003), pp. 228-29.

prominent representatives of the Scottish Enlightenment have argued that Rome had been run down by jealousy and despotism caused by Eastern luxuries.⁶⁶ Especially in the first half of the century, there was much furore and anxiety that Britain, Rome's self-proclaimed heir, would meet the same fate. There was, at the same time, also a strong religiously based criticism of luxury in Britain. Apart from the violation of Christian modesty, luxury was seen in Protestant Britain as a distinctive feature of Catholicism: In her seminal work *Britons*, Linda Colley has argued that a British identity was forged to a great extent in opposition to the supposed decadence of Catholic societies, and in particular against the opulence in French culture for which the baroque and later the rococo style were both emblematic. Nabobs were more than likely to become the target of public criticism, as they introduced a wide range of new commodities into Britain, which were regarded as highly suspicious. The excessive luxury expenses by nabobs were interpreted as 'Oriental' or foreign, rather than as a British characteristic.⁶⁷

The possession of diamonds was certainly the most obvious threat to the principle of decorum that is the idea that a person's material culture and behaviour must reflect his or her social rank. In short, as Samuel Johnson described the term in his *Dictionary*, decorum was closely linked to 'decency, order, seemliness'.⁶⁸ In the eighteenth century, diamonds were associated with the courtly and royal sphere. More than anything else, they epitomised the luxuries of the East, as they were generally imagined from tales such as the

⁶⁶Sudipta Sen, *Distant Sovereignty*, pp. 38-39.

⁶⁷ On contemporary British concerns about the Indian-ness of nabobs see, Tillman W. Nechtman, 'A Jewel in the Crown? Indian Wealth in Domestic Britain in the Late Eighteenth Century', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 41:1 (2007), p. 82.

⁶⁸ Samuel Johnson, 'Decorum', in *Johnson's dictionary of the English language in miniature. To which are added, an alphabetical account of the heathen deities; and a list of the cities, Boroughs, and market towns in England and Wales. Embellished with a portrait of Dr. Johnson*, 2nd edn (London, 1795), p. 58.

highly popular collection *The Arabian Nights*.⁶⁹ Apart from the factual value of those precious gems, they had a strong cultural association of boundless oriental wealth and as a glittering symbol of sin and decadence. Despite these associations, they had also a purely decorative function, which made them conspicuous and meaningful tools of self-fashioning.

Nabobinas, the wives and mistresses, sisters and daughters of Company merchants, were publicly condemned for their appetite for diamonds and other riches. In 1795, *The Rolliad* reported after a visit of Marian Hastings that her impressive appearance at the royal court best represented the showy opulence of all rapacious nabobs, and announced:

‘Gods! How her diamonds flock
On each unpowdered lock!
On every membrane see a topaz clings!
Behold! —Her joints are fewer than her rings!’⁷⁰

Similar to this satirical poem there are many other references in contemporary journals and literary pieces that associate precious jewels in particular with women and their easy corruptibility through Eastern luxuries.⁷¹ Many scholars have pointed to the fact that items of ‘exotic’ beauty such as diamonds, pearls and rubies were seen as feminine and highly sexualised objects that would spur

⁶⁹ Between 1704 to 1717 the Orientalist Antoine Galland translated a collection of tales from Arabic into French and invented a couple of new stories in a similar style and setting. The collection was published in several volumes under the title *Mille et Une Nuit*, and were quickly translated into English. In Britain, it became almost immediately an instant classic.

⁷⁰ *The Rolliad* (London, 1795), pp. 325–26.

⁷¹ Tillman W. Nechtman, ‘Nabobinas’, pp. 8–30.

passions, envy and vanity in Britain. Corruption, then, found its visual expression in diamonds and rubies more than in any other commodity.

The discovery of rich sources of diamonds in Brazil and the subsequent opening of mines in the 1720s did not change India's dominant position as the world supplier of this most precious good.⁷² The East India Company had since long established connections to the Indian gem market.⁷³ On their private accounts, Company employees increasingly purchased diamonds, which they could then ship to England as a convenient form to remit capital. The probably best-known scandal about an EIC servant who 'translated' his Indian fortune into the concise form of a huge diamond, appeared to be the case of Thomas Pitt, at the time governor general of Madras.⁷⁴ In 1702, he purchased a diamond worth £24,000 and thereafter was nicknamed 'Diamond Pitt'. Interestingly, it was his grandson, William Pitt the Elder, who noted in a speech in parliament in 1770 that 'the riches of Asia have been poured in upon us, and brought with them not only Asiatic luxury, but, I fear Asiatic principles of government.'⁷⁵

The diamond trade was seen as highly speculative. It was controlled by Sephardic Jewish merchants who operated in networks that were based in Goa, Lisbon, Amsterdam and London.⁷⁶ Towards the late seventeenth century, Madras became the new centre of the Indian gem market. The East India Company was – through private trading of its members – deeply involved in this

⁷² See Bruce P. Lenman, 'The East India Company and the Trade in Non-Metallic Precious Materials from Sir Thomas Roe to Diamond Pitt', in H.V. Bowen et al. (eds), *The Worlds of the East India Company* (Woodbridge, 2002), p. 98.

⁷³ The diamond trade was not part of the official East India Company monopoly trade. Clive, Hastings and Co. held connection with foreign agents. See, Peter J. Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes*, pp. 219-23.

⁷⁴ See Tillman W. Nechtman, 'A Jewel in the Crown', p. 77.

⁷⁵ Cited in William Cobbett et al. (eds.), *Parliamentary History of England, From the Earliest Period to the Year 1803*, vol. xvi, 1765-1771 (London, 1813), p. 752.

⁷⁶ Bruce P. Lenman, 'The East India Company', pp. 105-07.

global trade.⁷⁷ In the eighteenth century, it was a widespread phenomenon within nabob circles to trade, invest and make remittances by means of diamonds and other Indian luxuries. These mechanisms were not a secret in domestic Britain. We thus need to see especially jewels as part of a material culture, which provoked social debates not only on personal corruption, but also on the fatal influence of foreign luxuries on the future of Britain.

The material culture of returned Anglo-Indians was more than anything else a provocation to the existing social hierarchy and to established power relations in British society. The consumption and display of 'exotic' animals such as tigers, large portraits in Indian settings, strange foodstuff and sparkling jewellery were all symbols of difference and arrogance.⁷⁸ As Nechtman has put it, such 'material collections narrated imperial Britons' experiences - all of the movement, all of the connectivity, and all of the diversity of having been a resident not merely of Britain the small island nation but rather of a Britain that was global and imperial.⁷⁹ The fact that nabobs were more acquainted than other consumers with Indian customs, and knew how to use certain spices and clothes in the right manner, not only turned them into arbiters of taste for many London shopkeepers, but made them also to targets of snobbery from those who claimed to have the right taste – by birth. This view is clearly articulated by Eliza Parsons, in *Woman as She Should Be; or, memoirs of Mrs. Menville. A novel*,

⁷⁷ The intense co-operation between nabobs and Jewish diamond merchants is best described in Gedelia Yogev, *Diamonds and Coral: Anglo-Dutch Jews and Eighteenth-Century Trade* (New York, 1978); Søren Mentz, *The English Gentlemen Merchant at Work: Madras and the City of London, 1660-1740* (Copenhagen, 2005), pp. 110-26.

⁷⁸ Mildred Archer has catalogued all portraits of EIC servants and their families, which are held by the British Library in the Oriental and India Office Collection (OIOC). She rightly noticed the significance of such paintings for the self-understanding and nostalgic feeling of returned India residents and visitors. See Mildred Archer, *India and British Portraiture, 1770-1825* (New York, 1979), p. 57.

⁷⁹ Tillman W. Nechtman, *Nabobs: Empire and Identity*, pp. 10-11.

published in 1793, where the author describes the nabob's unmerited pride and his general tawdriness:

They return with callous hearts to their native country, to dazzle the multitude with their magnificence, and triumph over those who have ten thousand times more merit, but are less beholden to chance or good fortune than themselves.⁸⁰

Exotic items formed part of a visual language that linked magnificence to moral corruption. In contrast to political forms of corruption such as insider trading and patronage, 'Oriental' luxuries were highly *visible* for contemporaries and therefore a striking evidence for the personal corruption of a Company employee as well as for his supposed un-Britishness.

The other discourse surrounding luxury and corruption refers to the fortunes made by Anglo-Indians during their stay in India. According to Tillman W. Nechtman, Indian wealth was generally regarded as insubstantial.⁸¹ Fortunes that were made through dubious methods, speculation, and trade with diamonds and other exotic luxuries, were seen as volatile and strongly opposed to the trustworthy wealth that was acquired by the landed gentry in Britain. Whereas the latter seemed to embody a sense of continuity and modesty, nabob fortunes, by contrast, were based on high risks, corrupt practices and greed. They were, therefore, more likely to vanish as quickly as they were seized. A common theme in the public image of the nabob was that many were thought to lose their rapaciously accumulated fortunes because of mismanagement,

⁸⁰Cited in Christina Smylitopoulos, 'Rewritten and Reused: Imagining the nabob through 'Upstart Iconography', in *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 32:2, (2008) p. 41.

⁸¹ See Tillman W. Nechtman, 'A Jewel in the Crown', p. 72.

excessive spending or simply in a bet – which seemed to confirm their supposed recklessness.

James M. Holzman has provided us with a detailed study about how eighteenth-century nabobs spent their money back in Britain. The case of General Richard Smith, which he details, created much attention in metropolitan newspapers and certainly at many gossip tables around Greater Britain.⁸² After six years in Bengal, Smith returned home with a fortune worth up to £300,000 and great political ambitions. The press commented on both – on his rapid career in domestic politics as well as on his fall into ‘original insignificance’.⁸³ He was said to have lost £180,000 to Charles Fox in just a single gambling session. In September 1784, The *Public Advertiser* announced the public sale of his material possessions, and little later his escape to France – which he undertook in the hope of avoiding his creditors. Life stories like this forged the image of EIC servants who apparently owed vast, but at the same time, very insubstantial fortunes.

Property was in the eighteenth century by far the most respectable form of wealth and was linked to the recognition of responsibility, political power and social status. Nabobs, who sought to live the life of a country gentleman after their return, were nonetheless seen as presumptuous and were shunned by their aristocratic neighbours. Nabobs as well as their Atlantic counterparts, the West Indian planters, were certainly not the only socially ambitious group of the newly rich. This heterogeneous group also included the entrepreneurs of a flourishing industry in manufactured goods that unfolded in eighteenth-century Britain. The fortunes of nabobs, however, were seen as corrupt because they did

⁸² See James M. Holzman, *The Nabobs in England*, pp. 74-75.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

not generate employment or other social benefits for the nation – at least in the eyes of contemporary critics. How EIC employees struggled to invalidate such prejudices and ready-made insults needs to be carefully analysed.

As we have seen, public debates about luxury, empire and corruption were multi-layered as well as target-orientated. In the course of the second half of the eighteenth century, East India Company merchants became publicly ‘orientalised’ through satirical prints, novels and other means of popular culture. Although the public pressure grew massively in the 1780s, when Warren Hastings was put in trial, returning nabobs reacted very differently to social expectations and the outspoken hostility that was expressed against them in their home country. It is the purpose of the next chapter to better comprehend the manifold strategies of re-integration and self-invention that nabobs relied upon after their decades of absence. Here, we will compare the life histories and experiences of Warren Hastings and his less known contemporaries Charles Cockerell and William Paxton. We will do so by using a comparative framework that allows the study of a range of overarching themes that were all linked to our discussion of corruption in the eighteenth century, namely marriage strategies, social networking, political ambitions as well as the different ways of living of the three chosen individuals. The complexity of the nabob-controversy, as presented in the first chapter through popular representations, provides us with a set of tools that will help us to understand and to measure the similarities and differences between individuals, their identification with the East India Company, and their precarious position in British society around the turn of the nineteenth century.

Chapter Two

Diversity, Unity and Entanglements: A collective biography

East India Company servants have been the object of studies by a great number of scholars who approached this group with a wide range of intellectual interests. The historian can draw on a number of detailed biographies of distinguished individuals such as Warren Hastings or Robert Clive, some statistical analyses of private and Company trading activities, as well as on an ever-growing literature on the nabobs' public representation in fictional texts and caricatures.⁸⁴ Studies, which focus entirely on such popular perceptions of nabobs in the eighteenth century, are sometimes unsatisfying as they bear little connection to real people. The important question of how Britons who came to be labelled as 'nabobs' reacted to this kind of public criticism and hostility still is a glaring gap in our knowledge of their history.⁸⁵

Recent scholarship has done little to explain how stereotypes shaped the life of EIC employees. Nobody, to my knowledge, has ever focused on finding common patterns and important differences in the strategies that nabobs adopted to escape public criticism and social constraints. It is my assumption that the continuous self-inventions of nabobs might tell us something about their experience and awareness of the boundaries inherent in notions of belonging to Britain at the turn of the nineteenth century. However, in order to study the making of a British identity, recent scholarship has tended to use

⁸⁴ This focus on representations and imperial discourse is one of the traits that are commonly identified with scholars of the 'new imperial history'.

⁸⁵ James M. Holzman as a notable exception has peppered his study *The Nabobs in England*, with interesting but very fragmentary insights into the great variety of possible responses by referring to the biographical background of well-known figures in the Company's service. See James M. Holzman, *The Nabobs in England*.

nabobs merely as an object of projection for all kinds of discourses, for instance as a window into issues of gender and race. This was to the effect that scholars in fact reiterated contemporary stereotypes.⁸⁶ The problem with this focus is that it does not analyse nabobs as creative *agents* – who were not only the ‘passive object’ of external criticism, but who were at the same time responding in quite differing ways to the obstacles and concerns they had to confront. We will therefore look at the biographies of three individuals in order to find the key factors for a successful integration into the British high society, as well as for reasons that led to possible failure. The actor-centred approach that I propose here should lead to a better understanding of the interplay between aspects of personal and collective identities. Ultimately, it will provide crucial insights into the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in the British society at the turn of the century, thus clarifying what it meant to be ‘British’ in specific case studies.

William Dalrymple, Maya Jasanoff and David Hancock have something in common that both stimulated and informed this essay. They have all employed a narrative technique for their histories of the British Empire that linked together individual biographies under a specific theme and a range of important historical questions. By focusing on a heterogeneous group of European border-crossers, *White Mughals* (Dalrymple) and *The Edge of Empire* (Jasanoff) explored the shift in attitudes towards India from the early encounters to the heydays of British colonial rule in South Asia, without glossing over the ambivalences vis-à-vis India that each individual expressed, for instance, in private letters. Personal experiences, gained on spot in the East, were thus

⁸⁶ Recent work on nabobs has focused on gender and race as markers of identity within the relationship between South Asia and Britain. See Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the Family*; Anna Clark, *Scandal: The Sexual Politics of the British Constitution* (Princeton, 2004), pp. 84-112.

never as black-or-white as some historians tend to assume. In his study of transatlantic merchants, David Hancock employed a similar approach in analysing their networks, material culture and commercial identities. His well-researched *Citizens of the World* is intended to recreate the world of a group of London-based businessmen. His study centres around four individuals and their partners and associates, and he recognises both the similarities as well as the many existing differences between them. These men's personal ambitions are not analysed in a sort of social vacuum, as it is often the case in business histories. In contrast, Hancock shows that any biographical enquiry should reflect both 'impersonal forces and human reactions' as equally influential for personal trajectories.⁸⁷

Taking up some of the insights of these three authors mentioned above, I believe that a collective biography is the right approach to reconsider the figure of the eighteenth-century nabob. Historians can nowadays draw on biographical information on many of the EIC officials who were then based in British India. This essay cannot, of course, provide us with an all-embracing study, as space is very much limited. What it can do, however, is to present a nuanced view on the lives and strategies of three nabobs who shared the experience of having made a considerable fortune in Calcutta. Moreover, all of them returned to Britain towards the end of the eighteenth century, and then reinvented themselves in manifold ways. For the sake of structure, I will look subsequently at Warren Hastings, William Paxton and Charles Cockerell. In this chapter, the use of cross-references and comparisons between these individuals are intended to clarify the complex personal entanglements and striking differences that existed

⁸⁷ David Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, p. 8.

among them. This will help us to challenge popular wisdom about *the nabob* as a static figure. By means of a range of overarching themes – that can be subsumed under the rubrics of wealth, influence and patriotism – we can effectively compare and frame their personal trajectories.

As we have seen in the first part, the imperial wealth and political influence of nabobs were key issues for contemporaries, and they caused much anxiety and criticism in regard to returning Anglo-Indians. Eastern fortunes and the system of patronage among EIC servants were in fact regarded as striking evidence for their ‘Asiatic corruption’. These corruptive practices were, however, not thought to be isolated from the British state. Rather, it was feared that they would eventually pollute domestic Britain, too. Lastly, we will look at the issue of nabobs and patriotism, a topic that caused profound unease among island Britons. In general, progressive-patriotic behaviour was for many Georgian Britons an indicator for someone’s true Britishness.⁸⁸ It is therefore striking that the majority of nabobs did not seem to be regarded as patriotic – even though many of them engaged in activities that were intended to give proof of their close attachment to their home country. As I shall argue, it was precisely the perception of nabobs as morally corrupted Britons, as men who were, furthermore, influenced by foreign ideas and customs, that disqualified them in the eyes of contemporaries to be regarded as true patriots.

As my first object of study, I have selected one well-researched individual, Warren Hastings, who was seen by many contemporaries as *the* archetypical nabob. The other two are relatively unknown figures who were both supporters and former protégées of Hastings, but who nonetheless

⁸⁸ See John W. Burrow, *Whigs and Liberals: Continuity and Change in English Political Thought* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 85-100.

possessed a very different profile. In the case of Warren Hastings, a wealth of scholarship has explored manifold aspects of his life.⁸⁹ The impeachment process of Hastings (1787-1795) had far-reaching consequences for his reputation and private fortune, but it also affected other repatriates, as the public opinion proved to be hostile in regard to nabobs in general.

Reading Anthony Webster's fascinating work on John Palmer of Calcutta in *The Richest East India Merchant*, I began to look for material about Palmer's partners in London, who were involved in the tragic bankruptcy of his agency house in 1830 – a dramatic incident that caused a major economic crisis for thousands of people in Calcutta and Britain.⁹⁰ As I studied the life of Charles Cockerell, one of Palmer's main creditors and former business associates, I learned about Cockerell's extraordinary taste for Indian architecture. After his return to Britain in 1801, his brother, the architect Samuel Pepys Cockerell, built him a splendid estate in the Cotswolds – in Mughal style. The process of 'Indianising' the Sezincote mansion and its gardens and cottages took almost two decades; starting in 1806, the transformation of the estate was only completed in the 1820s. Thomas Daniell, a renowned artist who had personally spent years in India, and the eccentric landscape consultant Humphry Repton, were involved in this – at that time unique – project. Samuel Pepys Cockerell was equally in charge of building the houses and garden follies of Warren Hastings in Daylesford (1789-93). But even more than that: the same architect

⁸⁹ Georg R. Gleig, *Memoirs of the life of the Right Hon. Warren Hastings, first governor-general of Bengal*, 3 vols. (London, 1841); Keith Feiling, *Warren Hastings* (London and New York, 1954); Peter J. Marshall, 'The personal fortune of Warren Hastings: Hastings in retirement', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London, 28:3 (1965); Paul F. Norton, 'Daylesford: S. P. Cockerell's Residence for Warren Hastings', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 22:3 (1963); Sydney C. Grier, *The Letters of Warren Hastings to his Wife* (Edinburgh, 1905).

⁹⁰ See Anthony Webster, *The Richest East India Merchant: the Life and Business of John Palmer of Calcutta, 1767-1836* (Woodbridge, 2007).

was also responsible for designing the estate of William Paxton, the longstanding business partner of Charles Cockerell and John Palmer. Paxton had settled after his return from India in Carmarthenshire, South Wales. Originally from Scotland, he became the Company's Master of the Mint in Calcutta when Hastings was governor-general of Bengal, and he worked until his death in 1824 as a successful London merchant banker. Having made a considerable fortune in the intra-Asian trade, Paxton acquired Middleton Hall in 1787. Samuel Pepys Cockerell was now commissioned to erect him a new mansion right after he had finished his work for Warren Hastings (1793-95). The dissimilarities of Sezincote, Daylesford and Middleton Hall are striking, and they reflect more the taste and polite strategies of their owners, rather than the personal handwriting of the architect.

The fact that these three Anglo-Indians were connected with each other proved to be a great advantage for the layout of this research. Charles Cockerell and William Paxton are both fascinating figures, but they are scarcely mentioned in scholarly literature on the East India Company. Therefore, an overlap in terms of correspondence partners, activities and experiences greatly helped to fill some gaps in their histories. It is not surprising that Charles Cockerell is mentioned mainly by historians interested in the influence of Indian architectural styles and material culture in Britain.⁹¹ Peter J. Marshall and Anthony Webster are notable exceptions in this regard, and their work served as valuable sources for Cockerell's biographical background.⁹² It is unfortunate

⁹¹ Raymond Head, *The Indian Style* (Chicago, 1986); Christopher Hussey, *English Country Houses: Late Georgian, 1800-1840* (London, 1958).

⁹² One of Marshall's pupils, Willem G. J. Kuiters provided the first, and to this date only detailed study on William Paxton's private life and business activities. I am very grateful for his generous support in providing me with his published and unpublished papers as well as for his many useful suggestions for further primary material on William Paxton and his 'Middleton Hall'. See

that the record on Paxton is comparatively thin. In order to get a vague idea of his character and opinions, we have to rely on comments made by his clients.⁹³ For my own studies, I had the good fortune to find an extensive collection of letters, diaries and personal papers in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, which was catalogued under the name of Charles Cockerell's son, who had adopted the family name of his mother, namely Rushout. Cockerell's many letters to William Paxton, to John Belli – the former private secretary of Warren Hastings – and to Thomas Daniell help to refine our image of this rather unknown, but intriguing figure.

Some of the overarching themes that David Hancock tackles in his work on transatlantic merchants are also of crucial importance for this study. Personal improvement was an important goal of every tradesman's agenda, EIC servants included. Acquiring and maintaining influence and engaging in social networking were important tools for nabobs to become respectable. In addition, the acquisition of cultural capital was one of the most important means for nabobs and, in the long run, it was the precondition for the establishment of a successful lineage. A major feature amongst imperial merchants was – according to Hancock – their opportunistic behaviour in politics and commercial affairs.⁹⁴ His argument shall be addressed and verified in the case of our chosen nabobs. Let us now turn to the intriguing life of one individual whose personal fate was profoundly shaped by the social debates surrounding the figure of the East India Company merchant, British imperial expansion in

Willem G. J. Kuiters, 'William Paxton, 1744–1824, merchant and banker in Bengal and London' (unpublished MA diss., Rijksuniversiteit Leiden 1992); Willem G. J. Kuiters, 'William Paxton, 1744–1824: the history of an East India fortune', *Bengal Past and Present*, 111 (1992).

⁹³ Regarding Charles Cockerell, some official papers and the business correspondence with Francis Fowke, are held in the Oriental and India Office Collections of the British Library, London.

⁹⁴ See David Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, p. 40; 172.

India, and the apparent threat to the social and political order of Britain that returning nabobs then seemed to embody.

Warren Hastings

After sixteen years of absence Warren Hastings disembarked on 13 June 1785 at Plymouth, South England. His parting from Calcutta was definite, and he was looking forward to a life as a country gentleman, as a patron of art and agricultural improver. Long before, he had made plans to repurchase the estate of Daylesford on the margin of Gloucestershire, which his family had lost in the early eighteenth century.⁹⁵ Hastings belonged to a once powerful gentry family whose position had been undermined by financial ruin.

At the age of eighteen, Hastings turned to India. His temporary guardian, Joseph Cheswicke, had connections to the EIC and possessed enough influence to secure him an appointment as a writer in the Bengal service in 1750. Stationed in Cossimbazar, he survived the difficult first years in India – thus a period in which many newly arrived Britons died from diseases, warfare and other excesses. The political circumstances changed rapidly during the following years. Hastings served as a volunteer in a military expedition from Madras that was headed by Robert Clive. This campaign recovered Calcutta for the British and led to the famous battle of Plassey in 1757 and the overthrow of Siraj ud-Daula. In what followed, Hastings' career was shaped by valuable contacts with high officials in the EIC élite, which included a post in the

⁹⁵ See P. J. Marshall, 'The personal fortune of Warren Hastings'; Paul F. Norton, 'Daylesford: S. P. Cockerell's Residence for Warren Hastings', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 22:3 (1963), pp. 127-133.

government of Henry Vansittart. When the latter resigned from his post and returned to Britain, and Warren Hastings followed suit in January 1765.⁹⁶

In contrast to many British authorities, Hastings seem to have resisted taking valuable gifts from local rulers, such as Mir Jafar, the puppet nawab of Bengal, or from Mir Kasim, when the latter held the same office. Yet, despite his achievements, Hastings was not willing to retire after all these years in the Company's service. He had only acquired a modest fortune through private trade, which he spent lavishly. Pleased with his work for the Company's service, Hastings finally had the chance to return to the East when he received an offer in 1769 to take up a prestigious post in the council of Madras, at Fort St. George. On 26 March 1769, he set sail towards India. This voyage was to change the course of his life.

Among his co-passengers on the *Duke of Grafton* was a young German baroness, Anna Maria Apollonia von Imhoff (née Chapuset). The baroness was travelling with her husband, who had accepted a cadetship in the Madras army. Warren Hastings and *Marian* – how Hastings would always call her – seem to have become mutually attached to each other before they went ashore. The romance between them involved the subsequent divorce of the Imhoff's and the payment of a rather large sum of money that should recoup the abandoned Baron.⁹⁷ Later in his life, this liaison was to become an evidence for his moral corruption for some critics. For him, however, this – his second – marriage was a source of great happiness. It was not before July 1777 that their wedding took

⁹⁶ P. J. Marshall, 'Hastings, Warren (1732–1818)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition, 2008. Available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/12587> (accessed 22 July 2010).

⁹⁷ It seems to be the case that Marian has never been officially married to Baron von Imhoff. James Augustus Hicky, then the editor of the *Bengal Gazette*, called their arrangement a '*sham-divorce*'. See Gerhard Koch, 'Einführung', in Gerhard Koch (ed.), *Imhoff Indienfahrer: Ein Reisebericht aus dem 18. Jahrhundert in Briefen und Bildern* (Göttingen, 2001), p. 22.

place, although both had lived together for years. In plate 2.1, we see the couple as depicted by the painter Johan Zoffany.



Plate 2.1. *Mr and Mrs Warren Hastings* by Johan Zoffany, Calcutta, 1783-7.⁹⁸

It is an intimate portrait in the tradition of the mid-eighteenth-century garden conversation piece, showing Warren and Marian Hastings near their house in Alipore, Bengal. Mrs Hastings is shown in a gleaming golden dress, wearing a handsome necklace. A female servant accompanying the couple is also very nicely dressed, and her conspicuous pearl earrings reveal the wealth of the couple she serves. As Mildred Archer has noted, Marian's stature seems to be 'slimly elongated', with the intended effect to let her appear especially graceful.⁹⁹ She thus complements her powerful husband, who is shown here as a romantic figure. He seems to point her attention to the picturesque view that this spot offers. The stately jackfruit tree in the middle ground is not only a

⁹⁸ Mildred Archer, *India and British Portraiture*, pl. IV.

⁹⁹ *Idem.*, *India and British Portraiture*, p. 140.

plant typical to South Asia, but it also seems to be a symbol of the fertile soil in their estate.

Marian brought two sons into her marriage with Warren Hastings, namely Charles and Julius Imhoff. Charles would later become the husband of Charlotte Blunt – a relative of Charles Cockerell, thus weaving together two families who were both shaped by the Indian experience. Warren Hastings' successful management of the commercial activities of the EIC in Madras recommended him for higher responsibilities. On 17 February 1772, he returned to Calcutta as he was appointed by the EIC as the new governor of Fort William. In 1773, he got promoted and became the first governor-general of Bengal. Much has been written about the extraordinary role that Hastings played in his twelve years of governorship for the cultural flourishing of British India in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. He acted as a generous patron for many artists, including William Hodges, William and Thomas Daniell and the German painter Johan Zoffany, placing with them many lucrative orders.¹⁰⁰

He encouraged publications and translations by a range of scholars and travel writers. In his private life, Hastings collected Indian paintings and manuscripts, and he was passionate about Indian music and literature, a character trait that is well reflected in his role as the first president of the learned Asiatic Society of Bengal.¹⁰¹ The way Hastings always sought to expand the trade of the East India Company seems to have been greatly appreciated amongst the directors of the Company in London, and so were his acts to improve the food supply after the devastating famine that hit Bengal in 1772.

¹⁰⁰ Peter J. Marshall, 'Hastings, Warren (1732–1818)' *Oxford DNB*.

¹⁰¹ See Mildred Archer and Ronald Lightbown, *India Observed: India as viewed by British Artists, 1760-1860* (London, 1982).

Doubtlessly, Warren Hastings was an ambitious man, who understood the importance and power of his new position. His strategy in governing this vast territory was based on the assumption that British sovereignty had to involve Indian administrators, and that methods of government should reflect the ideas, practices and prejudices of the native people. As Marshall has rightly pointed out, his judicial reforms and his administration of revenue collection were both achievements that were set against corruption, and which can be taken as examples of Anglo-Indian cooperation.¹⁰² The success of his reform was modest, however. Starting with his inauguration, Warren Hastings faced a virulent opposition from several members of his council. One of them in particular, Philip Francis, quickly became Hastings' outspoken enemy. He opposed every proposal that Hastings made, accused the governor of personal corruption and mismanagement, and even conspired against him in Calcutta and London circles. 'Within a few years the main aim of his life came to be to force Hastings out and to succeed him.'¹⁰³ In London, Francis sought the contact to Whig politicians such as Edmund Burke and Henry Dundas, who welcomed his denunciations of Hastings since it strengthened their arguments that the government of India was in a deep crisis, and thus in need of restriction and reform.¹⁰⁴ The nabob controversy – that is the multi-layered discourse of criminality, corruption and cruelty of Company servants – was already emerging at that time. Burke declared his position in dramatic parliamentary speeches in the early 1780s, interpreting Hastings as the embodiment of all rapacious nabobs and the source for excessive warfare and mischief in South Asia.

¹⁰² See Peter J. Marshall, 'Hastings, Warren (1732–1818)' *Oxford DNB*.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*.

¹⁰⁴ See *ibid*.

Warren Hastings resigned in February 1785 and followed his wife who had to leave India because of a lasting illness. Instead of honour and fame, Hastings would face harsh critique on his return to England that subsequently culminated with his being put on trial. His impeachment was a political spectacle that reached an enormous public attention in Britain. According to Nicholas Dirks, Hastings 'had become a symbol ... of all that was rotten in the East, both of the capricious abuse of British power and position and of the alarming possibility that the corruption of India would enter Britain through the sanctioned success and fame of Hastings.'¹⁰⁵

Upon return, the former governor-general had to defend himself, his virtue, decisions and intensions as well as the future of British India. The excessive warfare during his governorship led – in his perception – to the salvation of the British Empire in India. His opponents, by contrast, blamed him for the severe financial crisis of the East India Company that was caused by the succession of wars on the Indian subcontinent. In 1791, Hastings declared in his official speech of defence in the overcrowded Westminster Hall:

To the Commons of England, in whose name I am arraigned for desolating the provinces of their dominion in India, I dare to reply, that they are ... the most flourishing of all the states in India. It was I who made them so. The valor of others acquired – I enlarged and gave shape and consistency to – the dominion which you hold there. I preserved it ... I gave you all; and you have rewarded me with confiscation, disgrace, and a life of impeachment.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Nicholas Dirks, *Scandal of Empire*, pp. 89-90.

¹⁰⁶ Cited in *ibid.*, p. 87.

Hastings's trial started on 13 February 1788 and it 'ended in his acquittal on 23 April 1795, after the court had sat for 149 days spread over eight years.'¹⁰⁷ Contemporary commentators immediately understood the significance of this judicial spectacle that was among the most striking trials of the century. The deep embarrassment that many citizens felt about the role of Britons played abroad needed a face, an icon. The public vilification of Hastings was thus directed not only at this single individual but, moreover, at any nabob living and making his fortune in the East. The trial had in the long run an almost cathartic effect on imperial Britain, and it gave way to the 'civilising mission' that dominated the colonialism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁰⁸ In declaring his personal distance to the former governor-general, a politician or Company servant could clear himself of the charge of corruption. Those who supported Hastings often did so in secret.¹⁰⁹

To sum up, in his lifetime, Warren Hastings was the personification of imperial guilt and corruptedness. However, this perception changed radically from the mid nineteenth century onwards. As Marshall writes: 'To the high Victorians, the exercise of British imperial power in Asia was almost part of the natural order of things.'¹¹⁰ In consequence, Warren Hastings became rehabilitated as the embodiment of British superiority and legitimate rule.

¹⁰⁷ Peter J. Marshall, *The Impeachment of Warren Hastings* (Oxford, 1965), p. 76.

¹⁰⁸ Nicholas Dirks, *Scandal of Empire*, pp. 30-31.

¹⁰⁹ See Peter J. Marshall, 'The personal fortune of Warren Hastings: Hastings in retirement', in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London, 28:3 (1965).

¹¹⁰ Idem., 'The Making of an Imperial Icon: The Case of Warren Hastings', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 27: 3 (1999), pp. 1-16, p. 2.

William Paxton

In late eighteenth-century Britain, it was anything but a promising combination for a person who sought for a higher social status to be both a Scotsman *and* a nabob. Consequently, the Edinburgh-born merchant and banker William Paxton – who typified both – was most of his life a ‘marginal figure’.¹¹¹ Nonetheless, Paxton worked hard throughout his career to improve his social position. He did so by means of a wide range of activities amongst which we can subsume his business activities, the creation of a vast network of befriended partners, the display of genteel taste as well as his political opportunism. Moreover, Paxton was looking for social recognition through his remarkable public donations. In February 1824, shortly after his decease, *The Cambrian* commented on his commitment to the local development of South Wales: ‘Wherever the genius of public improvement showed herself, Sir William Paxton was one of the readiest and most efficient supporters’.¹¹² One could argue that he seemed to have succeeded in gaining this recognition only after his lifetime, because subsequent generations would in particular remember his commercial talent, his interest in new technologies, his patriotism and charitable streak – rather than his nabob background.¹¹³ However, in the eyes of his gentry neighbours in Carmarthenshire, Paxton – as so many of his fellow EIC merchants – was regarded as corrupt, and was treated as a parvenu.

¹¹¹ David Hancock introduced the term to describe the position of outsiders in the world of London business (i.e. Scots, Irishmen, Huguenots, and others). Marginal groups could, however, be heavily involved in global business, but they lacked the comfort of social recognition, see David Hancock, ‘Introduction’, in *Citizens of the World*, p. 14.

¹¹² *The Cambrian*, 21 February 1824.

¹¹³ John E. Lloyd (ed.), *A History of Carmarthenshire*, vol. 2 (Cardiff, 1939).

As could already be seen in the life of Warren Hastings, the struggle for political power was an important tool for nabobs on their way to social status. At the same time, it was also the cause for angry attacks that were publicly launched against them. Returning Anglo-Indians faced not only outspoken critique by members of the political élite. Rather, they had to navigate through a web of prejudices and potential embarrassments, doing their utmost to win friends and respect wherever they settled. Paxton, to whom we shall turn next, is in this regard no exception. The study of his life provides us with crucial information about the heterogeneous personal trajectories of East India merchants. These insights will allow us to question some oversimplifying assumptions about this group of imperial vanguards which one still encounters in the literature.



Plate 2.2. *Sir William Paxton* (artist and date unknown).¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ This portrait is held in a private collection and depicted in the homepage of the National Garden of Wales, which are designed on the grounds of Paxton's estate in Carmarthenshire. See

Born in 1744, William was sent to the navy where he started his career at the tender age of twelve. After eight years in the naval service, mostly in the position of a Midshipman, he had experienced the hardships of the Seven Years War (1756-63).¹¹⁵ Pointing to the strong bonds that existed between the navy and overseas trading, Linda Colley has identified one of the most distinctive features that marked the system of eighteenth-century imperial organisation.¹¹⁶ Many navy officers desperately needed employment during peacetime. Paxton was fortunate enough to get an officer's position on one of the private merchant ships that then crisscrossed the Indian Ocean. At that time, it was highly aspired by young men to become a free-mariner as one could reasonably hope to make a fortune in the East. Through the connection of John Stewart, a friend of the Paxton family and also an associate of Hastings, William gained a letter of recommendation by Robert Clive that allowed him to reside in Bengal.¹¹⁷ When Paxton entered the Company's service in 1774, he was already thirty-one years old. In 1778, he became the master of the *Mint*, a position of considerable personal power that offered manifold possibilities for personal abuse.¹¹⁸

Under what circumstances, then, did Paxton encounter the widespread practices of corruption within the EIC? According to his main biographer Willem Kuiters, it was only after taking up this position that Paxton started to accept the commissions of other nabobs to help them transfer their fortunes to Britain. Through intense connections to the Dutch and Danish East India

<http://www.gardenofwales.org.uk/about-2/history-of-the-gardens/biography-of-william-paxton/> (accessed on 12 August 2010).

¹¹⁵ Willem G.J. Kuiters, *William Paxton, 1744-1824: Middleton Hall and the Adventures of a Scottish "Nabob" in South Wales* (unpublished paper), p. 5-6.

¹¹⁶ Linda Colley, *Britons*, pp. 65-71.

¹¹⁷ Willem G. J. Kuiters, *William Paxton, 1744-1824*, p. 10.

¹¹⁸ See Hira Lal Gupta (ed.), *Fort William – India House Correspondence, 1777-1781*, vol. 8 (Delhi, 1981), p. 63.

Companies, he built up one of the first agency houses in Calcutta.¹¹⁹ Paxton exchanged the Sicca Rupees of his fellow merchants for bills of exchange of foreign livery companies. The reason for this was that nabobs did not want the Company's government to know the exact amount of their private fortunes. In 1781, William Paxton 'even agreed to supply the Dutch with one million Sicca Rupees, a sum no less than half of the Dutch Company's Bengal investment for that trading season'.¹²⁰ The members of the Dutch Company certainly had a great interest in such business arrangements, as they did not need to import bullion from their home country for the acquisition of Indian merchandise.

In this context, it is worth remembering that it was then strictly forbidden to engage in business with rivalling Companies. This interdiction, however, did not impede Paxton from doing so on a very large scale, supplying the Dutch *inter alia* with saltpetre and cotton cloth on a regular basis.¹²¹ While he took advantage of his public office, his practices seemed thereby to confirm the image of the nabob as an avaricious, self-interested figure. Without any doubt, Paxton managed to engage in a wide range of private trading activities that seemed to be only realisable in the extraordinary situation in British India. The agency house he had founded was, for instance, involved in the financing, the shipping, the selling as well as the planting of commodities for his clients. These activities proved to be quite rewarding. In fact, he managed to accumulate a substantial fortune of almost £300,000 with his pioneering business.¹²²

¹¹⁹ On the systematic transmission of private savings to Europe through the channel of the Dutch East India Company, see Om Prakash, 'The English East India Company and India', in H.V. Bowen et al. (eds.), *The World of the East India Company* (Woodbridge, 2002), pp. 12-13.

¹²⁰ Willem G. J. Kuiters, *William Paxton, 1744-1824*, p. 14.

¹²¹ See *ibid.*, p. 15.

¹²² See Willem G.J. Kuiters, 'The History of an East Indian Fortune'.

Paxton's business activities were sometimes deeply affected by forces outside his control. The Fourth Anglo-Dutch war that broke out in 1781 did not only damage his flourishing private arrangements with Dutch Company servants, but also his status within EIC circles in London. That the British would take over the Dutch settlement in Chinsura (Bengal) must have been a surprise to Paxton who had much of his clients' capital invested in the Dutch EIC. Unexpected incidents like those could destroy the business of any merchant with ease. He had, therefore, to react quickly and effectively in order to ensure that the bills of exchange promised by Hope&Co in Amsterdam would be cashed in London. He informed the governor-general Hastings as well as the Council in Calcutta about his dilemma. Fortunately for him, Warren Hastings and other members of the government were ready to secure the investments that he had placed in the name of many other British residents. Back in the metropolis, however, the Court of directors had a somewhat different opinion on this illegal act. With regard to Paxton – and in fact all similar future cases – the Court of directors advised the Council in Calcutta to dismiss any EIC servant who assisted foreign Companies.¹²³ Being aware of the fact that his career would now come to an end in Calcutta, he sought to resign from his post before he could be removed in disgrace.¹²⁴

William Paxton was not tired, however, of engaging in Asian trade. In order to maintain his influence and business relations, he established a partnership with the young and ambitious factor Charles Cockerell. Private partnerships of up to four merchants were widespread in the eighteenth century. As David Hancock has shown, the advantage of small business

¹²³ See B. A. Saletore (ed.), *Fort William – India House Correspondence*, vol. 9 (Delhi, 1959), p. 160.

¹²⁴ See Willem G. J. Kuiters, *William Paxton, 1744-1824*, p. 17.

collaborations that were based on shared risks, responsibilities and gains, was regarded both by businessmen and their clients as the most reliable form of commercial association. In the hope of increasing the prestige, profit and security of his newly established firm *Paxton & Cockerell*, William presented the business in London.¹²⁵ The plan was that the Calcutta house would continue its work as an agency house for European clients – with Charles Cockerell and little later also John Palmer as its leading figures.¹²⁶

The fortune that Paxton took with him to Britain was great, even in comparison with other successful Anglo-Indians such as Warren Hastings. He seems to have been a very disciplined person throughout his career. Similar to Hastings and Charles Cockerell, he gave fabulous parties for the fashionable society in Calcutta, but he was not known for excessive drinking or for indulging in other vices. Although he had lived in great splendour in Bengal and would not entirely abolish his affinity for magnificence and precious stones back in Britain, he was a rather inconspicuous figure, at least for the press in Britain. The sale of Paxton's property appeared as an advertisement in the *Calcutta Gazette* on 17 February 1785, and this document gives us a glimpse of his riches. His two fashionable garden-houses, two luxurious riding horses, exquisite furniture, plates and other household goods as well as a modern European chariot appeared in auction after he set sail to England.¹²⁷

Clearly in Bengal he could afford a life in luxury on such a scale that would not have been justifiable in Britain. Paxton took his little daughter Elizabeth with him to England. He had been a bachelor for over forty years. It is not unlikely that Elizabeth's mother had been a native from India. In order to

¹²⁵ See *idem.*, 'The History of an East Indian Fortune', p. 9.

¹²⁶ See Anthony Webster, *The Richest East India Merchant*, pp. 25-26.

¹²⁷ See *Calcutta Gazette*, 17 February 1785, p. 7.

pursue his political ambitions, he kept his illegitimate offspring in secret. According to his will, she was to inherit £2,000 after his death of William Paxton in 1824.¹²⁸ In 1786, barely one year after his return, William married Ann Dawney. She was the daughter of a local magistrate in Aylesbury. It is noteworthy that in contrast to the common idea of the nabob, Paxton did not try to marry into a renowned merchant family in London, or into the established gentry. The decision to acquire land in Carmarthenshire and – a little later – also in Pembrokeshire was certainly intended to improve the social status of the family, but also Paxton's standing as a banker.

What were, then, his main activities besides his business as a banker and East India agent? Paxton was first and foremost greatly interested in new technologies and he was, rather unusually, passionate about water. In 1802, Paxton 'supplied Carmarthen town with a new pure water supply at his own expense', and he later embarked on building an entire spa resort in Tenby, a walled city which had once been a busy seaport in Wales.¹²⁹ Bath towns were highly fashionable in the late eighteenth century, not only for the cure of manifold afflictions, but also as a place for polite sociability. The front entrance of the elegant establishment in Tenby bears an inscription, namely a quote from Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*. In translation it reads: 'All man's pollution does the sea cleanse'.¹³⁰

It is an interesting fact that a nabob would choose this phrase. In Paxton's case, it is certainly more than a decoration, or a simple reference to bodily health. This quote rather seems to bear another striking message. Apparently,

¹²⁸ P.R.O., Prob 11/1683 Nr. 173: The will of Sir William Paxton, 8 March 1824.

¹²⁹ P.K. Crimmin, 'Samuel Pepys Cockerell: His Work in West Wales, 1793-1810', in E. Vernon Jones (ed.), *The Carmarthenshire Historian*, vol. 4 (Carmarthen, 1967).

¹³⁰ Cited in Willem G. J. Kuiters, *William Paxton, 1744-1824*, p. 54.

Paxton hoped that he would be cleaned from his corrupt past, and he sought to reinvent himself as a gentlemanly capitalist and patriotic man. By crossing the ocean from the Indian subcontinent to Britain, he hoped to start a new life. By means of his acquired fortune, he was able to pursue his private interests and to materialise his hopes and desires. The urge to improve is very visible in the case of William Paxton. For the rest of his life, Paxton would generously donate for many of the new patriotic societies that were so typical of the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His public spending led to his being knighted in March 1803, which took place at St. James' Palace.¹³¹ For what other social recognition could an EIC servant, who had turned into a wealthy merchant, hope for in Britain?

By looking at the life of William Paxton, one can understand the chances and strategies that returning Anglo-Indians might have used for the improvement of their status. There were, as we have already described, many constraints and concerns that returning nabobs had to face. For instance, Paxton's ambitions for a seat in Parliament in 1806/07 were accompanied by smear campaigns against him. Although he had been a Member of Parliament for Carmarthen from 1803 to 1807, when he could take up the seat of a MP friend of his who had resigned in favour of him, his nabob image still haunted him some twenty years after his return.¹³² Pamphlets were distributed which depicted him, among other things, as a 'Scotch herring, ... [as] highly scented' and, therefore, eligible for election only 'to those who have no objection to a popish flavor.'¹³³

¹³¹ See *Gentleman's Magazine*, 94:2 (London, 1824), p. 475.

¹³² See Willem G. J. Kuiters, *William Paxton, 1744-1824*, p. 47.

¹³³ Cited in idem., *William Paxton, 1744-1824*, p. 49.

The argument that his Scottish origin could be a clear impediment to social ascent can be substantiated if we look at some of the wrong accusations and prejudices that were used against him. For instance, in the same pamphlet, it was claimed that Paxton would attend every Sunday the Catholic service – a lie that could be used as a serious charge against him at a time when Protestantism was a strong component of British identity. It is noteworthy that a great number of Scotsmen actually joined the East India Company after the Act of Union in 1707. As a result, associations between Scottish mercantile networks and the EIC were quickly made. Regarding his career in the Company's service, it was clear for his opponents that 'he has always pursued his own aggrandizement, he has proved himself careless of the liberties and heedless of the interests of our native land'. The pamphlet from 1807 ends with the call: 'Let no such man be trusted'.¹³⁴ And so it was. The election ultimately brought an end to Paxton's short political career.

Soon after the election, Paxton was confronted with substantial bills from his campaign that included expenses for '11,070 breakfasts, 36,901 dinners, 25,275 gallons of ale, 11,068 bottles of spirits'.¹³⁵ Paxton, who had spent a small fortune on his election campaign, felt betrayed by some of his 'false friends', who had promised him support, but who turned out to be his rivals. The likely idea that nabobs would simply buy their way into Parliament can, however, only partly be substantiated. Although it is true that an increasing number of East India merchants entered the House of Commons toward the end of the eighteenth century, it seems mandatory to differentiate this group of political upstarts. It were especially those who cleverly positioned themselves in gentry

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ John E. Lloyd, *A History of Carmarthenshire*, p. 57.

circles, rather than those who spent lavishly to collect some votes, who in the end successfully entered Parliament. As we will see in the case of Charles Cockerell, the most important factor for a successful political career was the ability of nabobs to win an aristocratic patron who effectively supported their political ambitions.¹³⁶

What we know so far is that the origin, personal trajectory and interest of William Paxton greatly differed from those of Warren Hastings. Both were equally depicted as fulfilling the stereotype of the nabob – at least in the eyes of their opponents. Neither of them, however, fully fits into the popular images of EIC servants, which were generated in the press and shared amongst the landed élite. In one crucial aspect, it is true, did both Warren Hastings and William Paxton confirm the received wisdom of nabobs, namely that they enriched themselves at the expense of the East India Company or local rulers in South Asia. The accusation so often launched against nabobs by newspapers and contemporary commentators, that is that those were corrupt agents of the East and for that reason entirely un-British, seems to be, at least in the case of Paxton, Cockerell and Hastings, rather misleading. In fact, all of them were, in their particular ways, patriotic Britons. Private enrichment and corrupt practices seem to have been directed against their common employer, the East India Company, rather than against fellow-merchants or the British nation as an imagined whole.

In retrospective, the EIC seems to have become blurred with British state politics and power. The Company, then, appears as the instrument of the British

¹³⁶ For more information about the strong connection between Charles Cockerell and the Wellesley family including the Duke of Wellington, see R.G. Thorne, *The House of Commons 1790-1820: III Members A-F* (London, 1986), p. 469.

government to rule out imperial expansion for the sake of the Union. In the perception of many contemporaries, however, I want to argue that there existed a clear distinction between this powerful trading company and the fate of the British state. William Paxton, for instance, who violated several EIC rules that were intended to limit the possibilities of Company servants to increase their private fortunes, probably did not intend to harm Britain with his economic pursuits. Rather, he directed his illegal business against an *institution*. Even if this organisation could offer great possibilities for Britons going abroad, it was nonetheless a very particular one, because it effectively demanded from Paxton and all its other servants to risk their lives in order to work on the Indian subcontinent. The high mortality rate of nabobs in India was a fact that affected all Britons abroad in some way. Death, or the constant fear of illness, was part of the everyday life of EIC employees and visitors in South Asia. It does not come as a surprise, then, that those few who were lucky enough to survive the numerous wars and lethal diseases sought for a compensation for their risks taken.

Instead of keeping up with the stereotype of nabobs as 'fallen Englishmen', corrupted and selfish, it is worth noting the similar mentality of nabobs and other mercantile actors that then lived back in London. According to Linda Colley, it was in the eighteenth century that the 'cult of commerce became an increasingly important part of being British'.¹³⁷ As a moral concept, which included certain rules of conduct and virtue, this 'cult of commerce' was shared by nabobs such as Charles Cockerell and William Paxton as well as by transatlantic merchants, London's shopkeepers and the like. The self-

¹³⁷ Linda Colley, *Britons*, p. 59.

understanding of a merchant who shipped opium to China did not differ greatly from one who invested in cargoes of Russian timber. For a better understanding of Company servants and mercantile actors in general, it is important to acknowledge that patriotism and individual commercial pursuits did not exclude one another, but were compatible. Indeed, some company merchants tried permanently to change their negative image – by trying to be the greatest patriots of them all.

Charles Cockerell

In 1789, Francesco Renaldi was commissioned to paint a large conversation piece in Calcutta for the celebration of the marriage of Charles Cockerell – at that time Postmaster-General in the Bengal service – and his young wife Maria Tryphena Cockerell (née Blunt).¹³⁸ It is a painting that was intended to reflect the polite taste and sociability of the pictured group (plate 2.3). We see Charles Cockerell, sitting comfortably but attentively in an upholstered chair in European style. He holds a couple of single sheets in his hand, which he seems to have been studying just a minute ago. Next to him, an elegant side table is depicted, on top of which we can recognise two leather bound books. The marble floor in a chessboard pattern, pillars and drapery in the background reminds the viewer of a drawing room in Europe. In general, the scenery is elegant without being opulent. In the centre of the painting, two fashionably dressed women are playing music.

¹³⁸ For more information on Francesco Renaldi (1755-c.1799), a talented painter, who resided almost ten years in British India and who was working mostly for European clients in Calcutta, Lucknow and Dacca, see Mildred Archer, *India and British Portraiture*, p. 288.



Plate 2.3. *Charles Cockerell and his wife, Maria Tryphena, with her sister, Charlotte Blunt* by Francesco Renaldi, Calcutta, 1789.

Objects of artistic accomplishment such as the harpsichord were highly fashionable in paintings in colonial settings, just like in contemporary European depictions.¹³⁹ Seated on a stool or bench, the full white dress with a rose coloured waistline is tumbling in profusion around Maria Tryphena's slim figure. She is playing the harpsichord, while her younger sister Charlotte in elegant feathered hat is assisting the player by turning the sheets of a book of music. The eyes of Charles and Maria are turned towards the observer, marking them as the central figures of this group portrait. Charlotte's gaze, by contrast,

¹³⁹ See Richard Leppert, 'Music, domestic life and cultural chauvinism: images of British subjects at home in India' in Richard Leppert and Susan McClary (eds), *Music and Society: the Politics of Composition, Performance, and Reception* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 88.

rests on the book in front of her, which stresses her polite sensibility for the beauty of the piece that is being played.

This painting should not only be read as an attempt to commemorate the life and social status of this young family in Calcutta. Rather, it is a fine example of how nabobs and nabobinas sought to express their Britishness to other European observers back home. The possession of a harpsichord and the commission of an oil painting were both rare markers of education and wealth, especially in British India.¹⁴⁰ It is striking that the entire picture bears not a single indicator of the imperial setting in which it originated. Many portraits of the late eighteenth century, such as the one of Warren and Marian Hastings mentioned earlier (pl. 2.1), depicted Indian servants, landscapes, indigenous objects or at least some jewellery in order to show some of the wealth that had been acquired in the East. As Mildred Archer and Ronald Lightbown have rightly noted: 'Until the last thirty years of the eighteenth century the British public had no visual idea of India which was based on first-hand observation by British artists.'¹⁴¹ Charles Cockerell chose a subject that demonstrated his cultivation and moderation. He thereby cleverly escaped any association with 'Oriental' or nabobish magnificence.

Charles Cockerell lost his young wife shortly after the portrait was taken. However, he kept a lifelong contact with her extended family. Only a couple of years later, Charlotte Blunt was married to Charles von Imhoff, the step-son of Warren Hastings. Her father Charles William Blunt, himself a merchant in the Company's service, made his fortune in supplying the Company troops in Bengal with beasts of burden such as bullocks and other necessary items. Hastings, who

¹⁴⁰ The transport with one of the EIC ships was very expensive and often difficult to arrange.

¹⁴¹ Mildred Archer and Ronald Lightbown, *India Observed*, p. 8.

in 1784 had granted Charles Blunt an exclusive contract for this profitable business, was later charged for this specific case of patronage.¹⁴² To give another example of the strong bonds between the families: James Blunt, the uncle of Charlotte and Maria, was in charge of Cockerell's account as a trustee during his time in Calcutta.¹⁴³ The relation to the Blunt family was, like so many other contacts that Cockerell cultivated in his lifetime, both personal and professional in its nature. The list of clients that he gathered first in Calcutta and later in London greatly overlaps with the names of friends and supporters that we encounter when we study his political and family life. Networking was the basis for merchants to gain and maintain their commercial and, sometimes, political influence. Indeed, maintaining a web of relationships appears to have been a crucial means for nabobs in particular, as they actively sought to overcome their marginal position in the British society.

This complex net of relations was, however, not created by chance. Rather, it seems to have been a characteristic trait of Charles Cockerell to engage with a wide range of people for his own interest – a talent that few of his fellow nabobs seem to have possessed to such an extent. Cockerell masterfully played within the web of patronage that was offered by the EIC and élite circles. The fact that he managed to get everything that was needed to become respectable, that is: a marriage into the English aristocracy; a baronetcy for his personal achievements; an ample fortune, a political career and a splendid country seat, needs some further explanation.

Before he returned from Bengal to England in 1801, Cockerell's career in the East had been impressive, though not exceptional. An offspring from a

¹⁴² Peter J. Marshall, *The Impeachment of Warren Hastings*.

¹⁴³ Cockerell Papers, Dep. c. 857-8, *James Blunt to Charles Cockerell*, 18th January 1791.

middle-class family with high ambitions and interests in the West Indies, he was appointed as a writer in the civil service of the EIC at the age of twenty-one.¹⁴⁴ His eldest brother John already served in the Company's army. John, who had become a Colonel, was an intimate friend of Warren Hastings. It would therefore not be surprising if the appointment of Charles Cockerell for the position of the Postmaster-General in 1784 could be linked to this personal connection. In the same year, Charles Cockerell entered the renowned agency house of William Paxton, who was – as we have seen – a household name amongst fellow nabobs, and a thorn in the Company's flesh. During a period of leave he spent in Britain in the early 1790s, Cockerell was asked to give his testimony in the impeachment trial of Warren Hastings, presumably in favour of the former governor-general.

Cockerell himself had profited greatly from the good will and patronage of powerful individuals. For instance, his approval of the politics of the governor-general Wellesley (1798-1805) led to an intimate friendship between them. Subsequently, Cockerell would become the banker of many members of this renowned family in Britain. The late Marquess Wellesley, in turn, played a crucial role in recommending Cockerell for a baronetcy, as the latter has helped to finance the strategic war against Mysore in 1798/99, at that time Britain's greatest enemy in India.¹⁴⁵ Cockerell was now rich and influential. He had served the EIC without forgetting to amass a private fortune that allowed him to

¹⁴⁴ Peter J. Marshall and Willem G. J. Kuiters, 'Cockerell, Sir Charles, first baronet (1755–1837)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition, 2008. Available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/47774> (accessed 20 Aug 2010).

¹⁴⁵ The defeat of Tipu Sultan and his army, who was effectively an ally of France, found high recognition in the British press. See J. R. Osborn, *India, Parliament and the Press under George III: A Study of English Attitudes Towards the East India Company and Empire in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Oxford University, unpublished D. Phil. thesis, 1999).

operate in the highest circles of the British society.¹⁴⁶ His networks were similar to those of other Anglo-Indians, but, in great contrast to Warren Hastings or William Paxton, he was never the target of public criticism.

Once Charles Cockerell had again set foot on British soil in 1801, he pursued a clear strategy of self-invention into the metropolitan setting. Basically he sought to expand his commercial activities from the work of an East India agent into the realm of the growing industrial sector in Britain, thus a branch of business that had some patriotic value attached to it.¹⁴⁷ In the 1820's the agency house in which Charles Cockerell was a Senior partner, *Paxton, Cockerell & Trail*, changed their portfolio and personnel so that the origin of the partnership was veiled. Moreover, after the death of William Paxton in 1824, Cockerell established an association with George Gerard de Hochepped Larpent. The result of these changes was in fact to erase all lasting traces of his nabobish past.¹⁴⁸ Both Cockerell and Larpent embarked yet on another line of business, namely the shipping of passengers to India by boats that were partly powered by steam engines.¹⁴⁹ Thus, they appropriated the technological advances of the nineteenth century to their own economic activities.

Part of Cockerell's re-integration was certainly his membership in many clubs, charities and patriotic societies. As Linda Colley has convincingly shown, such an engagement did have manifold reasons, in particular for trading men like Cockerell. As she has noted: 'For many merchants, the fact that these

¹⁴⁶ Cockerell Papers, Dep. c. 857-8, *James Blunt to Charles Cockerell*, 18th January 1791. On the reverse side of the letter by Blunt, Cockerell made a calculation of his fortune in Britain, which amounted to £209,198 in the year 1791.

¹⁴⁷ Anthony Webster, *The Richest East India Merchant*, p. 116.

¹⁴⁸ George Gerard de Hochepped Larpent (1786-1855) was born in London. One part of his family was of Huguenot origin, the other part were members of the Hungarian nobility. See Anita McConnell, 'Larpent, Sir George Gerard, first baronet, and Baron de Hochepped in the Hungarian nobility (1786-1855)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition, 2008. Available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/16076> (accessed 12 Aug 2010).

¹⁴⁹ See Anthony Webster, *The Richest East India Merchant*, p. 54.

patriotic societies offered occasional opportunities for mingling socially with people of rank and influence ... was of the more concrete attractions of membership.¹⁵⁰ At the same time, the belonging to such an association had a decisive influence on the question with what social group a person became publicly identified. Similar to his partner William Paxton, Cockerell gave on several occasions substantial sums to charities.¹⁵¹ At this point, it can be shown how much the self-understanding of returning nabobs was also deeply shaped by their practical interests. Both Cockerell and Paxton were aware of the importance of becoming a member in a charity club that might be dedicated to supporting causes such as the military advancement of Britain in her Eastern territories, or to help the metropolitan poor at home. Such a membership was a unique way to exchange corrupt fortunes into what Pierre Bourdieu would call symbolic capital, 'whereby dominant groups secure esteem in public opinion for their activities.'¹⁵²

It is noteworthy that Cockerell's strategy of improving his social rank proved in the end to be successful, as he took up influential positions in the British economy. For instance, he became the director of the Globe Insurance in 1811, and he was, like William Paxton, one of the leading figures of the Gas, Light & Coke Company. The latter was an ambitious enterprise that sought to furnish the city of London with streetlights and other technological improvements. During his last decades, Cockerell even managed 'to become a Commissioner on the Board of Control, the state ministry responsible for

¹⁵⁰ Linda Colley, *Britons*, p. 93.

¹⁵¹Newspaper articles show his generous support of many charities such as the 'United Committee of Subscribers for the relief of the suffering clergy of France, Refugees in the British Dominions', and the 'Central United Society for supplying the British troops upon the continent'.

¹⁵²David Swartz, *Culture & Power: the Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago, 1997), p. 92.

overseeing the East India Company.¹⁵³ This clearly was a prestigious post, demonstrating his high recognition as one of the leading gentlemanly capitalists of Britain at that time. How much Cockerell was now part of the higher patronage circles in the EIC is, for instance, reflected in a letter which he received promptly after his appointment to his new position. The son of Warren Hastings' former secretary, the young John Henry Belli, addressed him with the words: 'You might be of influential service to me if you could find an opportunity of speaking to him [Sir John Hobhouse]', who was at the time the current President of the Board of Control.¹⁵⁴ The primary aim of Belli's letter to Charles was to secure himself a post in the East India Company. Now, Cockerell seemed to be the right person to address. The system of patronage that had once helped Cockerell to climb the social ladder was now to be maintained for the next generation.

For a successful man of trade, the engagement into another kind of élite circle proved to be rewarding. Cockerell, like many other established merchants in the early nineteenth century, seemed to have been a freemason from his early days in Calcutta. His diaries indicate that Cockerell visited the Freemason's Tavern and Eagle Lodge in London almost on a weekly basis.¹⁵⁵ The same diaries, which have the character of a memo book, also refer to friends and visitors of a lodge in Calcutta. One can only suspect what sort of impact Masonic networks in colonial settings might have had on the successful re-integration of their members in domestic Britain because, surprisingly, scholars have not yet looked at this question. In regard to the Company's servants, we can only

¹⁵³ Anthony Webster, *The Richest East India Merchant*, p. 25.

¹⁵⁴ Cockerell Papers, Dep. c. 862, John Henry Belli to Charles Cockerell (from Paris), 25th May, year illegible.

¹⁵⁵ Cockerell Papers, *Diaries of Sir Charles Cockerell*, Dep. b. 254, (fols. 1-50), Aug. 1815, Mar. - Dec. 1835.

suppose that such informal networks that effectively linked the British empire and the British nation, might have had an important impact on the social standing and chances of a nabob, both during his career in British India, as well as later in the metropolis. Further research could fruitfully be pursued in the archives of the many brotherhoods that were scattered over the Indian subcontinent.

In contrast to his fellow nabobs Warren Hastings and William Paxton, who had either married a socially subordinate person (Ann Paxton), or – in the eyes of contemporary critics – a dubious woman (in the case of Marian as a German divorcée), Cockerell sought for a match in the established gentry. In 1809, he married Harriet, who was the second daughter of John Rushout, Baron of Northwick.¹⁵⁶ Together, they had two daughters and a son. Their eldest daughter Harriet Anne Cockerell would later marry George William, Viscount Deerhurst of Coventry. Sir Charles Cockerell was thus successful in establishing stable ties to the ruling élite. His son would – after his father's death in 1837 – delete all remaining signs of the humble origin of the family by changing his name to Rushout. The establishment of a lineage was certainly the greatest goal of a rich nabob, but only few succeeded in doing so. Wealth was one of the common features that many of the EIC employees shared. To be in possession of an ample fortune did not assure, however, that nabobs were automatically included into the polite society in metropolitan Britain. The display of Eastern luxuries or the possession of a country house, on the contrary, could be a reason for aristocratic snobbery and vilification.

¹⁵⁶ Sylvanus Urban (ed.), *The Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 10, July to December (London, 1838), p. 668.

To sum up, wealth alone was not sufficient to get access into powerful circles. Private and political influence seems to have been a central factor for the achievement of social status. All three merchants under consideration pursued more or less successfully a political career. Charles Cockerell was becoming MP 'first for Tregony, then successively Lostwithiel, Bletchingley, Seaford and finally Evesham in 1819.'¹⁵⁷ Warren Hastings, by contrast, made first a glittering career as the first man of the Eastern empire as the governor-general in Bengal. Later, he experienced a dramatic fall that began with his involuntary withdrawal from political power through the impeachment trial. In the end, his public prosecution harmed equally his status, personal pride and private fortune. Fanny Burney, author of the famous novel *Evelina* and *Second Keeper of the Robes to Queen Charlotte*, once wrote in her diaries with empathy about Hastings' trial and 'his present hard disgrace'.¹⁵⁸ Burney was equally concerned with Marian Hastings' inappropriate behaviour, as the nabobina would still dress like 'an Indian Princess', instead of showing her 'sensibility ... by a modest & quiet appearance & demeanour'.¹⁵⁹ In the case of Warren Hastings, the stereotype thus had a great impact on his personal fate, making him not only the icon of imperial corruption but also the victim of public denigration. Lastly, the political ambitions that William Paxton demonstrated during his retirement were greatly impeded by his opponents. His network of influence seemed to have been too loose to offer real advantages for a significant political career.

With regard to the issue of patriotism, we can conclude that it certainly played a major role in the life of all three merchants. The case of Warren Hastings is the most striking one, since he came to be seen as the personification

¹⁵⁷ Anthony Webster, *The Richest East India Merchant*, p. 25.

¹⁵⁸ Fanny Burney, *Madame d'Arblay*, in J. Hemlow (ed.), vol. I, 1972, 25 May 1792, p. 166.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

of nabobish corruption; orientalised in taste and judgement, weak in character, he was essentially seen as being un-British. Paxton's Britishness was both undermined by his Scottish origin as well as by his luxury spending. Only Charles Cockerell, then, seemed to have been free of accusations that pointed to a lack of patriotism. In fact, he was the only individual under consideration in this work who was never socially rejected because of his nabob background. Rather, he succeeded in positioning himself in line with other merchant-bankers and gentlemen improvers – without ever denying the origin of his fortune. The reason for his success may have been due to his talent for social networking. As we have seen, Cockerell's political and personal ambitions were always supported or guided by his changing aristocratic patrons. The fact that he succeeded in overcoming the social obstacles for a nabob in domestic Britain tells us also something about the significant changes that happened on a larger scale in the early nineteenth century. A shift in attitudes towards the Eastern empire seem to have helped to rehabilitate the Company's servants in the first decades of the new century.

The prohibition of private trading activities in the wake of Pitt's India Act in 1784, as well as the abolition of the Company's trading monopoly in 1813 (except for the profitable trade with China), had a great influence on the practices and the perception of East India merchants. Discursive shifts had a palpable impact on the self-understanding and social location of EIC employees. The abolition of the trading monopoly had a strong influence on the relations between Britain and South Asia. It opened up India not only to a much larger group of European investors, but also to a great number of travellers and artists

with an scientific interest in this still unknown subcontinent.¹⁶⁰ This interest led subsequently to a distinctively European conception of India – constructed through evaluations and comparisons with other ‘newly discovered’ places around the globe.¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ In this context, David Arnold has stressed ‘the importance of the Romantic gaze as an integral part of the colonial scientific enterprise of the period and as a critical means by which India was appropriated to European imagination, experience, and exploitation.’ Idem, *The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze: India, Landscape, and Science, 1800-1856* (Seattle: WA, 2006), p. 32.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 7.

Conclusion

This paper has been a study of the relation between the concepts of empire, nation and the figure of the nabob around the turn of the nineteenth century in Britain. It takes its starting point at a time when the future of the British Empire was not yet a fact of life, but stood at a historic crossroad. From this uncertainty originated a range of social anxieties that were not played out only on an abstract intellectual level, but which had a deep impact on the everyday life of different groups of people. In particular, Anglo-Indians, who moved constantly between the poles of metropole and periphery, became the target of anti-imperial and social criticism. As personifications of corruption, they were thought both to ruin India by their avaricious practices, as well as to further undermine the already precarious social order in Britain. As Linda Colley has shown, a British identity was partly forged by a succession of wars against Catholic states, and especially France. The question of Britishness was, as I have argued, equally fought out *within* domestic Britain, namely over nabobs who represented 'the Other' at the very heart of society. This work has used the analytical framework of a collective biography in order to demonstrate the many existing mechanisms of exclusion that defined the boundaries of what it meant to be British. In contrast to the existing literature that tends to focus only on public representations of nabobs, this study has sought to go beyond such one-dimensional approaches and to unfold the actual chances, limitations and conflicts of these repatriates.

Instead of reproducing contemporary stereotypes of nabobs as rapacious, uneducated social upstarts, the actor-centred approach of this study

has stressed the creative agency of these imperial vanguards in negotiating their social position and personal identities. One of their most important social strategies was to cleverly position themselves within powerful systems of patronage. As could be demonstrated, these networks were not confined to EIC circles, however important the personal channels here might have been. Rather, this study has revealed that the system of the so-called 'old corruption' within Britain's political sphere was in fact inextricably linked to EIC circles, and thus to the practices of the much feared 'Asiatic', or 'new' corruption. When returned Britons sought to secure their entrance into Britain's polite society, it became clear that the sole possession of an Eastern fortune was not sufficient to become respectable. Therefore, they had to use their wealth for a much more valuable resource on their way to social recognition: this was to gain the support of an aristocratic patron.

Lastly, one of the most serious charges against nabobs was their supposed foreignness, as epitomised in their exotic taste, immoderate and unmanly behaviour. All these characteristics were regarded as unpatriotic and, ultimately, as un-British. It was a central finding of this study to show that each of the three chosen individuals placed great emphasis on demonstrating their unambiguous identification with Britain. One emblematic example of this conscious display of patriotic sentiments was the decision of William Paxton to dedicate a great tower in his own estate in Wales to Admiral Nelson, who was at that time regarded as the embodiment of British courage and manliness.

Apart from their personal strategies of re-integration, there were also important impersonal forces at work that changed the perception of nabobs as a group over the period with which this study is concerned. This could be

exemplified in the shifting attitudes towards Warren Hastings, who was first regarded as an icon for all things corrupt in the East, and who was later rehabilitated and, in fact, depicted as a role model of British superiority and colonial rule. This, of course, only reflected the broader historical process that led to the clarification of the relationship between empire and nation. After a long period of reforms and debates that started in the late eighteenth century, the British state subsequently replaced the East India Company as the ruling power on the subcontinent. Merchants were turned into colonial bureaucrats, representing Britain rather than a trading enterprise. Now, a new confidence and a new sense of ownership towards India led, in the end, to an appreciation of Britons who served at the margins of Britain's empire in the East.

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