

The Most Mercenary of Men

We have outdone the Spaniards in Peru! They were at least butchers on a religious principle, however diabolical their zeal. We have murdered, deposed, plundered, usurped ... All of this is come out, is coming out – unless the gold that inspired these horrors can quash them.

Horace Walpole was never knowingly understated, but in this case his furious words really did capture the public mood. In the early 1770s, London society was stunned by revelations about the conduct of the British East India Company (EIC) in Bengal. This distant Indian province, famed for its riches and once the jewel of the magnificent Mughal empire, was conquered and controlled not by the British government but rather a private company based in the City of London. A colony run solely for the benefit of shareholders had led to egregious corporate mismanagement, including exacerbating a terrible famine that was estimated to have killed 10 million Bengalis, around a third of the population. Now, as publications like the *Gentleman's Magazine* and the *London Post* exposed the catastrophic death toll, whistleblowers were revealing the violent, underhand methods by which Company officers had extorted and looted their newfound fortunes. On March 30 1772 Robert Clive, the ex-Governor of Bengal who established British rule in India, was hauled before Parliament to defend his name.

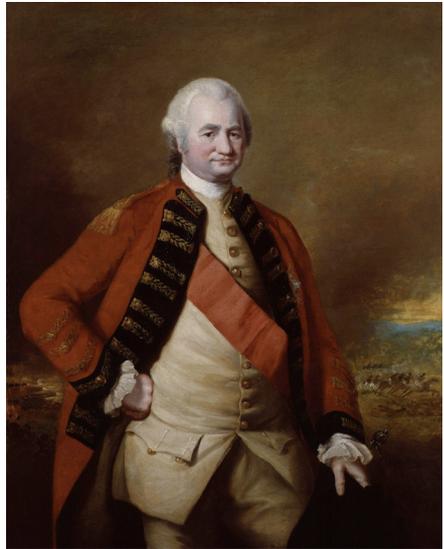
The May 1772 issue of *The London Magazine* gives a remarkable impression of what was at stake that spring. Stressing 'the strict impartiality we wish to maintain', the editor Edward Kimber chose to reprint Clive's speech to Parliament in full, alongside a long extract from the most damning and influential critique against the EIC published that year. Clive's defence is pitted against a blistering prosecution by William Bolts, a disgruntled ex-Company employee who was determined to tear him down. It is left to the reader to make up their mind about the Company's record – though Bolts's evidence had been praised as 'strong and conclusive' in an earlier edition.



Fort William, the East India Company stronghold in Calcutta, 1760.
By 1765 all of Bengal was under EIC control



Horace Walpole, 1756. He despised Clive and the nouveau-riche 'nabobs' returning from India



Robert Clive, the richest self-made man in Europe, by Nathaniel Dance, c.1770



Map of Bengal from 'Considerations on India Affairs', 1772



William Bolts at his writing desk, from the 1775 French translation of 'Considerations on India Affairs'. The book enjoyed wide success in continental Europe



'The Madras Tyrant', a satire attacking Clive's greed and misrule by Matthew Darly, 1772

Today, a steely-eyed statue of Robert Clive, sword in hand, stands outside the Foreign Office on Whitehall, but this image of the heroic ‘Clive of India’ was an early twentieth-century invention. William Dalrymple points out that, at the time of his death in 1774, Clive was ‘widely reviled as one of the most hated men in England’, satirised in pamphlets as the cruel ‘Lord Vulture’, ‘whose avarice knows no bounds’. Evidently, Clive was deeply anxious about his reputation in the press when he addressed Parliament in 1772. His speech begins, in fact, with a complaint: ‘The press has,’ he told ministers, ‘for some time past, teemed with so many reflections upon the servants of the East India Company, and particularly upon me, that, were I not first to remove the bad impressions thus made, I am afraid any observations I could make...would have had little or no effect’.

Removing these ‘bad impressions’ would be a formidable task. Twelve years earlier, in 1760, the 35-year-old Clive had returned to England from Bengal as the richest self-made man in Europe, with a personal fortune of around £90 million in modern terms. It was his reward for leading a daring – and extremely lucky – victory over the Nawab of Bengal at the Battle of Plassey and installing a puppet ruler on the throne. He immediately set about buying land and estates in England and Ireland, a townhouse in Berkeley Square, a seat in Parliament, and a peerage, which no doubt encouraged the suspicion and envy of the observing gentry.

Parliament’s scrutiny in 1772, however, revolved around the next and final time Clive went to India. In 1764 he returned to the subcontinent, where he obtained a deal known as the Diwani that formally granted the economic management of the Bengal, Bihar and Orissa provinces to the EIC and paved the way for their systematic asset-stripping. Clive argued that he undertook his return to India out of a sense of duty, rather than a self-interested attempt to increase his already vast wealth:

Possessed as I was not only of an independent, but of an affluent fortune, happy in my connections, happy in my relations, happy in my family, happy in my friends, happy in every thing but my health, which I lost in the company’s service, never to be regained, how can I be supposed to have undertaken the arduous task imposed upon

me by the company from pecuniary motives? I must have been the most mercenary of men, to have, upon such principles, again tempted the faithless deep, to have again exposed my enfeebled constitution to the sultry climate of Hindostan, and to the fatigues and dangers of war.

It is true that Clive had little interest in Indian people or their culture: once, he referred to Calcutta as ‘one of the most wicked places in the Universe’. Yet by drawing attention to his indifference, even contempt, for India, he was doing little to alter the Company’s reputation of greedy self-enrichment to the devastating detriment of the native population.

Clive assured Parliament that he never took part in ‘an iniquitous trade in cotton’ or ‘an illegal trade in diamonds’, nor did he mismanage the Bengal mint. What he did not mention is that he had exploited his position in other ways throughout the 1760s, firstly by engaging in private trade despite a supposed ban on all involvement in Bengal’s internal market, and secondly with what would now be considered insider trading of Company stock. Before another astonishing EIC victory at the Battle of Buxar became public, he went ‘all in’ by writing to his agent in cipher, instructing him to remortgage all his properties and buy as much stock as he could. Though it was not illegal at the time, this was seen as unconscionably immoral.

Clive then turned to one of the most criticised aspects of life in India under the EIC: the widespread giving and receiving of bribes, or ‘presents’, over £2 million worth of which had been distributed in Bengal. He tried to shift some of the blame onto the Bengalis:

An Indian comes to you with his bag of silver, and entreats you to accept it as a present. If your virtue be proof against this trial, he comes next day with the same bag filled with gold. Should your stoicism still continue, he returns with it stuffed with diamonds... presents are so common and prevailing in India, that it is almost impossible not to be carried along by the torrent.

More interestingly, though, Clive also acknowledged that the Company’s reputation as a place for young Englishmen to make their fortune – as

he himself did – had blurred the line between merchant and mercenary. He remarked that ‘Now-a-days every youth possessed of any interest endeavours to go out as a writer to the company’, and that selfishness and greed are inculcated in them by their fathers before they have even set foot in India:

My dear boy, says the father, I have done my part, I have set you in the way of fortune, and it will be your own fault if you are not a made man. See what a fortune has been made by this lord, by Mr. such-a-one and such-a-one: what hinders you to be as successful? Thus are their passions enflamed, and their principles corrupted, before they leave their native country.

In effect, he admitted that the EIC did not just tolerate a Theophrastan gallery of corrupt, thuggish officers – its reputation actually encouraged it. Yet who did more to establish the Company and its rapacious reputation than Clive himself? Perhaps at this point he was thinking of the whistleblowers, who had joined the Company as young men much like the imagined one in his speech. Indeed, his description of a man with ‘passions enflamed’ and ‘principles corrupted’ aptly fits the slippery, intelligent, unscrupulous author performing the role of his prosecutor in May’s *London Magazine*, a man described by a contemporary pamphleteer as ‘a full-grown mercantile monster’ from the age of twenty-five.

William Bolts first arrived in Calcutta as a factor for the EIC in the summer of 1760. The journey from Britain had taken the best part of a year. As his boat skirted the Bay of Bengal and snaked up the Hughli river, where the land frays and dissolves into the swamps and mangrove forests of the Ganges river delta, profit was on his mind. In his own words, he was ‘Regularly bred to business, almost from his childhood’. Yet in almost every other way Bolts was an enigma. Even his reassuringly English-sounding name was not quite what it seemed: it was actually an Anglicised version of his former name, Willem Bolst. For though Bolts had the manners and accent of a thoroughbred Englishman, he had been born in mainland Europe. He was an establishment outsider: shrewd, rebellious and consummately cosmopolitan (he learned Bengali, rarely

studied by Europeans at the time, in addition to his other languages (English, Dutch, German, Portuguese and French), he was just as at home working for the Austrian East India Company as for the British when he eventually switched allegiances. As a result he was eyed, not unfoundedly, with suspicion by his fellow officers, who suspected him of colluding with the Dutch and French.

In India Bolts immediately began a series of private trading schemes with some of the Company's most corrupt officers, which made him far more money than his official salary. His biographer N. L. Hallward says that he was 'entirely unembarrassed by any scruples in his methods of trading' and did not hesitate to use the authority of the Company name, which Clive had re-established, to further his own private ends. Eventually, he fell out with Clive and was repeatedly reprimanded by the Company for his private trading. When he refused to return to Britain in 1768 he was arrested and deported to London. Bolts appealed to the Company's court of directors, but they declared him a 'very unprofitable and unworthy servant' and began a lawsuit against him. It was then that he went on the offensive.

Bolts had entertained literary ambitions for a while, previously announcing that he intended to start a newspaper in Calcutta (which would have been India's first modern newspaper). Now he would take his case to the court of public opinion, cleverly exploiting the growing outrage about the Company's methods – methods he knew all too well. The first volume of his *Considerations on India Affairs* appeared in 1772, where it instantly found an audience not just in London but also on the European continent. One observer warned Warren Hastings, who would soon become the new Governor of Bengal, that despite the book's exaggerations 'it is swallowed very greedily by the public whose eyes are fixed on the correction of these abuses by the interposition of Parliament'. For Horace Walpole, meanwhile, it confirmed everything he had long suspected about the evils of the Company. Bolts 'carried the accusations home to Lord Clive', he wrote, and 'represents him as a monster in assassination, usurpation and extortion, with heavy accusations of his monopolizing...A tithe of these crimes was sufficient to inspire horror'.

The long extract from *Considerations* reprinted in *The London Magazine* was titled 'The Nature and Defects of the Constitution of the English

East India Company'. Anticipating the Parliamentary intervention into Indian affairs, Bolts addressed himself to the King, suggesting that he should assume his rightful role as sovereign of Bengal rather than let the Company run riot with 'all the powers of despotick sovereignty': 'such possessions are of too much consequence to be abandoned to twenty-four directors', he wrote, who are driven 'by no better motives than the acquisition of power and influence to themselves, and of rapid fortunes to their families'. Bolts also couched his argument in history, comparing the Company's conduct in India to the 'pro-consular ravages' that swept the Roman empire 'during the last, luxurious, corrupt and rapacious stages of that once glorious, but then degenerated and sinking commonwealth'. Men like Clive, whose talents lay in military strategy and money-grubbing trading, were not to be trusted with the government of a colony of twenty million people.

Elsewhere in the book, Bolts went into grisly detail of the horrors of life in Company-controlled Bengal. He described Indian weavers who 'cut off their own thumbs' in order to prevent them being forced by the British to wind silk in factory camps. (This is the origin of a later Indian nationalist myth, that the British themselves cut off workers' thumbs to hinder Indian textile production and assist the import of Lancashire cotton.) Bolts's most interesting argument, however, was that the Diwani, which Clive claimed to have obtained by treaty with independent princes, was in fact a sham, created to mask the Company's military conquests and signed by 'nominal nabobs' and 'puppets'.

Dalrymple points out that although *Considerations* was 'full of embittered half-truths and false accusations; and many of the worst abuses enumerated were actually the work of Bolts himself', it was nonetheless enormously influential. Bolts anticipated not just Lord North's Regulating Act of 1773, which attempted to rein in the EIC, but also the eventual nationalisation of the EIC after the Indian Rebellion in 1857. It articulated many criticisms of the British Empire for the first time and asked how to deal with a corporation that was so unusually rich and powerful, with its stock owned by so many MPs, that its financial failure could affect the entire national economy – as indeed it did, later in 1773, leaving the Company pleading to the government for a bailout.

It did not end well for Clive, or Bolts. Although Clive's name was ultimately cleared by Parliament, he was still widely scorned when, ill and depressed, he cut his own throat with a paperknife in 1774 and was buried in an unmarked grave. Bolts, bankrupted by his lawsuits against the Company and the cost of publishing *Considerations*, joined the Austrian East India Company until it went bust in 1784, then travelled Europe pitching ambitious trading schemes to governments with little success. He died a ruined man in a Paris poorhouse in 1808. Yet the issues that occupied Parliament and *The London Magazine* in early 1772 are more relevant than ever, as nation-states confront vast multinational companies that abdicate themselves of moral responsibility and use their economic heft to intimidate governments who propose their regulation. Clive's speech to Parliament concluded with a veiled threat, using the image of a jewel to convey the towering wealth of the Company: 'Bengal is the brightest jewel in the British crown...if it be once suffered to drop out and be lost, the crown will lose half its splendour and dignity.' His tone is not dissimilar to that of Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg in a conversation with Matt Hancock, then Secretary of State for Digital, at a technology conference in 2018. According to minutes obtained in December 2020 by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, Zuckerberg: accused the UK of having an 'anti-tech government'; joked about making it one of two countries he would not visit; and threatened to pull Facebook's investment from the UK, saying that while it was the 'obvious' place for them to invest in Europe they were now 'considering looking elsewhere'. Another kind of troubling modern mega-company is Huawei, often accused by Western critics of being a vehicle and agent of Beijing but recently described by Linda Colley as something more, 'a kind of modern company-state operating in a world where kinds of empire still exist'. Mercifully, today's mega-companies do not have their own private armies like the EIC. But, as Colley points out, they don't need them: a modern company-state 'only needs to possess, as Huawei does, the advanced technologies and cyber techniques which allow it to control and subvert all these expensive weapons of war'. Though they may not be able to replicate the direct violence of the EIC, these companies may yet be able to bend state power to their will more successfully than Clive could have dreamed.