

The Scandal of EMPIRE

 *India and the Creation
of Imperial Britain* 

NICHOLAS B. DIRKS

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卐 Preface 卐

As a historian of India, principally southern India, with interests in matters ranging from political sovereignty to caste society, and from precolonial state processes to the British colonial state, how did I come to write a book about Edmund Burke and Warren Hastings? The spectacular impeachment trial of Hastings is a natural subject for any historian of India or empire. Indeed, it has been much written about. Historians of India have explored the meanings and larger contexts of the various events featured in the trial; imperial historians have investigated the political contexts for the trial in England as well as for the history of the East India Company; and literary critics along with cultural historians have used the trial to think about some of the larger implications of early colonial rule—its anxieties and ambivalences, as well as its significance for the unfolding of the gendered, racial, cultural, and national entailments of early empire. What more could I contribute to the discussion?

Significantly, I began thinking seriously about the trial during the years when President Clinton was impeached. The impeachment of Hastings had been the second last use of impeachment provisions in England, though there had been talk of impeaching Hastings's associate, Elijah Impey, who was the first supreme court justice in India and the man who had condemned Hastings's nemesis, Nanda Kumar, to death by hanging in 1775. The last impeachment also had India connections; in 1806 Henry Dundas, who had been for years the most powerful dispenser of patronage in his position as member

and then president of the board of control for the Company, was brought up for impeachment on grounds of corruption. But in the United States, impeachment took on a more modern career, with (unsuccessful) prosecutions of Andrew Jackson and Bill Clinton, and preliminary charges against Richard Nixon around the Watergate break-in and cover-up. In the last decades of the twentieth century, impeachment has provided some of the great moral spectacles of our time, and allowed us to see in dramatic ways the peculiar relationships that have grown up around, and in recent years changed significantly, political ethics, public responsibility, and private virtue. The impeachment trial of Warren Hastings takes on special interest in this context.

But if I came to consider writing about the impeachment trial in the wake of the massive effort to bring down a relatively progressive President—an effort that failed to impeach but succeeded in distracting attention from many of Clinton's domestic policy agendas while probably bringing Bush to the presidency—the urgency of rethinking the origins of British empire increased dramatically after I had begun the project. I spent a year of sabbatical leave in 2000–2001 reading the transcripts of the trial, consulting archival collections in the British Library, and reading works of and about Edmund Burke, only to return to my teaching duties in New York a week before September 11, 2001. Soon thereafter, the U.S. administration began to use the terrible events of that day to provide an alibi to attack Iraq and establish what increasingly looked like, and even came to be popularly described as, an American imperial presence in the Gulf. The use of the charge of weapons of mass destruction as the false pretext for the invasion, the direct economic interests of many of the masters of war, the atrocities associated with the invasion and

the occupation as well as with the internment facility in Abu Ghraib, all began to look very similar to an earlier period of imperial history, that of the British conquest and occupation of India in the eighteenth century. As I thought about the various historical parallels, I realized how important it was to revisit the most scandalous origins of imperial history in Britain. And I realized that the impeachment trial of Hastings, far from being the moment when scandal was genuinely expunged from the imperial record, played a much more complicated role in the history of empire. As I continued to research and write, I felt I was writing the history not just of the eighteenth century, but of the present as well. Never has the history of the eighteenth century seemed so self-evidently relevant.

If the corruption of power and money has been the main story of empire, then and now, I have always been more interested in the justifications of corruption than in corruption itself. In particular, I have focused on the way in which sovereignty was a key part of the imperial story: how the contradictions of early empire played themselves out through theories about sovereignty in India, assumptions about the meaning of military victories and political treaties, and proclamations about legitimacy—both for the East India Company in relation to the English state and for British imperial activity in relation to the sovereignty of the Mughal rulers (as well as myriad other Indian political powers). Few contemporary commentators were unaware of the need to address issues of sovereignty in the Indian context, and no contemporary was as exercised about the duplicity of Company rule as Edmund Burke. Nevertheless, the sad irony was that the impeachment trial seemed to consume this concern. By the end of the trial there was a consensus that the 1765 grant by the Mughal ruler to the Company of the “*Diwani*” (the

right to collect revenue in Bengal) was a sufficient basis on which to predicate imperial occupation. At the same time, the Company was newly ennobled as the legitimate agent of British interests in political as well as commercial and economic matters. The trial had brought the corruption, venality, and duplicity of the British presence in India to the attention of the world, and yet in enacting the reformist agenda of Edmund Burke, it had ironically made empire seem a natural extension of British sovereign and commercial rights and interests. Burke's extraordinary empathy for colonized India and Indians, something that has seemed to many as inconsistent with his conservative political ideas, is still moving, even as it unintentionally helped to sanctify the colonization of India. After the trial, as scandal became identified increasingly with India itself—Indian customs and culture—it became the principal justification for empire rather than the unfortunate means of empire's creation.

My previous book, on the colonial history of caste, explored this shift in how empire was justified, and I was already well aware of the imperial role in the representation (not to mention the constitution) of India as a land of backward and barbaric custom. The aim of the present book has been to understand how the well-known scandals of the East India Company in the eighteenth century became either forgotten or subsumed within the larger and more compelling imperial narrative of an exhausted land that virtually invited the British to conquer it. Historians of India have frequently observed that the social, political, cultural, and economic buoyancy of India in the eighteenth century was not just forgotten but suppressed by a narrative in which the decay of India became the primary reason for the ease, and inevitability, of European conquest. These same historians have documented with increasingly detailed and robust arguments the

extent to which the subcontinent was far from decadent in the decades before imperial conquest. But while most historians have also been well aware of the scandals of early empire, the implications of these scandals, either for the impoverishment of India's own history or for the history of Britain itself in the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, have been little noted of late. They have also been largely ignored in much of the recent resurgence of writing, either in imperial history or for that matter the new critical histories of colonial South Asia, much of it inspired by work in subaltern studies, and concerned with the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the larger historical context of nationalist mobilization.

As I delved into the scandals of empire, I soon realized that along with the rampant greed of Company traders (who were far more interested in using Company access and perquisites for the purposes of their own private trade than they were in stocking the coffers of their employer), the greatest scandal in fact concerned the matter of sovereignty—the principal subject of my own early work. Much of the ruinous private trade was in fact predicated on the unscrupulous use of a Mughal imperial decree of 1717, which granted a suspension of tariff for some Company trade under limited conditions. This situation set the tone for the systematic misuse and abuse of other grants, treaties, agreements, and understandings, each of which—most dramatically in the case of the Diwani grant of 1765—became the pretext for the assumption of sovereign rights over trade, revenue, law, and land on the part of a monopoly joint stock company that was at the same time systematically violating the terms of its own relationship to the Crown and Parliament of England. As I read further into the archive, I found myself rereading debates over the relative sovereignty of different Indian rulers, some of which had

been principal sources for my own early dissertation work on the princes and principalities of southern India in the eighteenth century. And I realized anew the extent to which even my early “ethno-historical” efforts to unpack the indigenous meanings of sovereignty in the eighteenth century had been affected by the imperial context of scandal. In particular, as I situated the arguments of Edmund Burke, the chief interlocutor of this book, alongside those of James MacPherson—the forger of Ossian fame and a major beneficiary of corruption around the nawab of Arcot (the Mughal “governor” of southern India)—I realized that arguments about sovereignty in India were almost always contingent on the particular political relations that were in play during the years of conquest and scandal about which I was now writing.

And so it is that writing this book has brought me back to my first efforts in historical scholarship, begun thirty years ago. While seeking to address topical issues having to do with the crimes and misde-means of high office and the reclamation of the idea of empire as a legitimate political form in the new world order of the twenty-first century, I found myself rereading arguments over whether the princes and kings of southern India were independent rulers or part of a complexly layered political system culminating in Mughal sovereignty. I read anew arguments made by Burke and others about the relationship between sovereignty and culture—Burke made the specious (but ironically prophetic) argument that sovereignty depended on a shared religious culture between ruler and ruled, an argument that must have caused embarrassment when he subsequently crafted the universalist basis for British sovereignty in imperial settings. And I came to see once again how historical questions have a way of resurfacing, even as they are regularly reframed

and recontextualized over time. It has been refreshing to return to texts and questions I first considered more than a generation ago, and humbling to realize how flawed was my naive belief that I could simply reconstruct Indian understandings of sovereignty without considering contemporaneous European debates about sovereignty. But it has also been gratifying—and more than a little exhilarating—to come to appreciate the ways in which the arcane ethnohistorical ambitions of a young graduate student marinated in the enthusiasms of 1970s area studies continue to seem relevant not just to the larger global history of the eighteenth century, but also to the pressing global issues that confront us today.

I began working on this project during a year of sabbatical leave from Columbia in 2000–2001, and finished writing the book during subsequent summers spent in our quiet and sustaining retreat in the Berkshires. Although I used materials I had consulted in the library of the Tamil Nadu Record Office and the Connemara Library in Madras many years before, I found most of the sources for this project either in the British Library (which includes the records of the India Office as well) or in the library at Columbia University. I am grateful to the archivists and librarians of both institutions for their assistance throughout this project.

My principal interlocutor from the beginning to the end of the project has been my wife and colleague, Janaki Bakhle. Although during my work on the book she struggled with the daunting tasks of writing her dissertation and then her first book, she never hesitated to take time off from her own work to read, edit, and comment on drafts or discuss my persistent questions about Burke’s contradictions, the debts of the nawab of Arcot (which she still thinks I

Prologue

Every schoolchild in Britain, at least during the years of Britain's imperial glory, knew of the atrocity of the "Black Hole" of Calcutta. According to the canonical account, the Mughal governor, or nawab, of Bengal, upon capturing the English fort of Calcutta in June 1756, forced all remaining English prisoners, along with a motley collection of Portuguese, Armenian, and other soldiers, into a detention cell used by the British to house their most troublesome prisoners. On the stifling night of June 20, this cell, known as the "Black Hole," became a death trap for the 146 unfortunate souls who were crammed into the tiny eighteen-by-fourteen-foot space, which had only two small windows "strongly barred with iron, from which we could receive scarce any the least circulation of fresh air." In the morning, when the guards finally reopened the room, 123 of the prisoners were dead, "smothered in the Black-Hole prison." As Jonathan Holwell,—the self-appointed scribe among the survivors—put it, "The annals of the world cannot produce an incident like it in any degree or proportion to all the dismal circumstances attending it."¹

An unparalleled event to be sure, the Black Hole became a legend of and for the atrocities committed by the natives of India against the heroic traders of the East India Company, at least until the atrocities of the 1857 "Sepoy Mutiny"—when English men, women, and children were slaughtered in Kanpur and Lucknow—eclipsed the earlier ones and filled the schoolbooks with new parallels of the horrors of empire. Although the Black Hole event was lit-

he reported at the time—only coming to the attention of the English authorities in London a year later when Holwell himself arrived by ship—it was seen in retrospect as the necessary occasion for the defeat of the nawab (provincial governor) in late June 1757. Holwell himself, then the governor of Bengal, made sure to erect a monument of the Black Hole in a central square in Calcutta in 1760. He profited personally as well as politically from the sympathy extended to him for his woeful part in the atrocity that prefaced the recapture of Calcutta and the assumption of dramatically new powers over Bengal.

Holwell wrote his account of the atrocity during the winter of 1757, when he spent five months aboard the *Syren* sloop in transit from Calcutta to London. His narrative gives pitiful details of the deadly night. Desperate for air, the men disrobed, drank their own sweat, and clambered for position in their pit of despair. "Figure to yourself, my friend, if possible, the situation of a hundred and forty six wretches, exhausted by continual fatigue and action, thus crammed together in a cube of about eighteen feet, in a close sultry night, in Bengal," he wrote, before describing in melodramatic detail the situation itself.² Friends dropped dead with growing regularity: "I traveled over the dead, and repaired to the further end of it, just opposite the other window, and seated myself on the platform between Mr. Dumbleton and captain Stevenson; the former just then expiring . . . Here my poor friend Mr. Edward Eyre came staggering over the dead to me, and with his usual coolness and good nature, asked me how I did? But fell and expired before I had time to make him a reply."³

As for Holwell, he felt his own death was unavoidable, only lamenting "its slow approach, tho' . . . my breathing grew short and

painful." While Holwell took care not to blame the nawab for any deliberate cruelty, the prison guards were contemptible. "Can it gain belief, that this scene of misery proved entertainment to the brutal wretches without? But so it was; and they took care to keep us supplied with water, that they might have the satisfaction of seeing us fight for it, as they phrased it, and held up lights to the bars, that they might lose no part of the inhuman diversion." But the story was full of internal contradictions: the ease of Holwell's movement was belied by the claims about numbers of people in such a small space, the windows were apparently barred shut but nevertheless the guards enjoyed peering in, and there was even great uncertainty about who was actually inside the cell, dead or alive.⁴

According to Holwell, he himself was found alive the next morning, and immediately hauled before the nawab, who was incensed by the fact that he had found no treasure in the fort. When Holwell tried to describe to the nawab the horrible suffering of the prisoners, the nawab merely "stopt me short, with telling me, he was well informed of great treasure being buried, or secreted, in the fort, and that I was privy to it; and if I expected favour, must discover it." But it was not to be found, possibly because it had already been removed, perhaps by Governor Drake, who had retreated from, or in Holwell's prose "deserted," the fort with fifty-nine merchants and military men a few days before.⁵ Part of the mystery surrounding why Holwell himself did not quit the fort revolves around another possibility, namely that he was arranging for the transfer of some of the treasury's contents for his own use. Historians have begun to cast considerable doubt on Holwell's general account of the events during the siege and leading up to the infamous night of June 20, suggesting that even the entry to the fort of the nawab's soldiers might have

been prearranged.⁶ Moreover, serious historians doubt that the story of the Black Hole itself is true.⁷ At the very least, it seems likely that most of the deaths of Englishmen in the fort were the result of combat rather than imprisonment, however unpleasant imprisonment might have been. Whatever else happened, the account of the Black Hole turns out to rely entirely on Holwell's "eyewitness" narrative; all but one of the fourteen standard accounts of the Black Hole have been traced back to Holwell's general narrative, and the fourteenth was narrated sixteen years later.

If the great atrocity story of eighteenth-century imperial history was fabricated, it was of course based on the facts surrounding the nawab's efforts to drive the British out of Bengal. When Siraj-ud-Daula became nawab in April of 1756, taking over affairs of state from his grandfather, Alivardi Khan, who had just died at age eighty, he was well aware that the British were engaged in more than simple trade of the sort they claimed. Even one British sea captain, Captain Rennie, wrote about the injustice accorded the nawabs by various agents of the Company just after the fall of Calcutta (without a mention of the so-called Black Hole): "The injustice to the Moors consists in that, being by their courtesy permitted to live here as merchants—to protect and judge what natives were our servants, and to trade custom free—we under that pretence protected all the Nabob's servants that claimed our protection, though they were neither our servants nor our merchants, and gave our *dusticks* or passes to numbers of natives to trade custom free, to the great prejudice of the Nabob's revenue; nay, more, we levied large duties upon goods brought into our districts from the very people that permitted us to trade custom free, and by numbers of impositions . . . caused eternal clamour and complaints against us at Court."⁸ It was small wonder

that the nawab had become concerned, and no surprise either that he began to feel that the Company's treasure represented ill-gotten gains at his own expense. But however one might represent the siege of Calcutta, the most conspicuous violence had been done to the Indian part of the town, which was set ablaze by Company soldiers on the first word of the nawab's advance.

For the British, the fall of Calcutta was short-lived, reversed dramatically by the victory at Plassey in 1757. Plassey itself was not a major military victory—despite the reputation it subsequently received around the putative military genius of Robert Clive—so much as it was the negotiated outcome of the decision by Mir Jafar to conspire with the English. But by 1757, the British had begun on a trajectory of military conquest and occupation that gave them control, at least for a time, not just of growing swaths of India, but of Indian history too.⁹ It is the story of this last, and perhaps most important, conquest that constitutes the real subject of this book. Built on fabrication, colonial history mirrors the general distortions and displacements of imperial self-representation—the use of imputed barbarism to justify, and even ennoble, imperial ambition. As this book shows, empire was only able to realize itself once its ignominious origins were recast, once its scandal could lead to, and make necessary, the triumph of empire itself. But first we must turn to the scandals themselves, for they will provide the themes that make the fabrications of empire relevant not just for those who were colonized, but for those who did the colonizing as well. For in the scandals of empire we see not just the basis for the creation of British imperialism, but also the origins of modern understandings of corruption, sovereignty, public virtue, the market economy, the bureaucratic state, history, and even tradition, the final repository of scandal for empire.

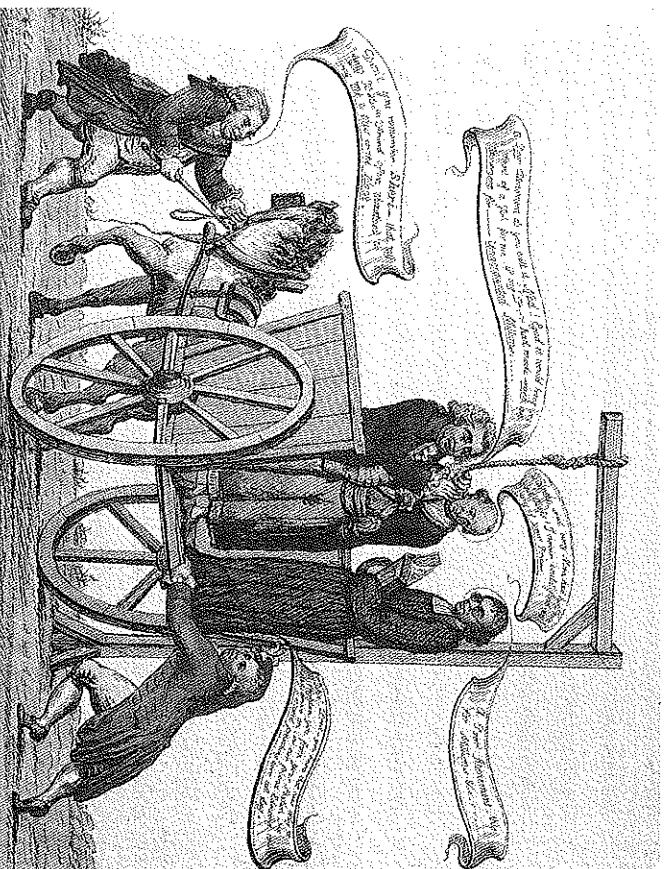
Scandal

Europe is literally the creation of the Third World.

—FRANTZ FANON, *THE WRETCHED
OF THE EARTH*, 1965

Empire was always a scandal for those who were colonized. It is less well known that empire began as a scandal even for those who were colonizers. Imperial expansion for England began either with the explorations of adventurers and often less-than-honorable men (such as pirates) or with the outright expulsion of less-than-desirable subjects. One of the many lessons of America for England was the need to control the circulation of its own people. Otherwise they would first claim to be more English than the English—startled into identity politics and national claims by their violent if often also intimate encounters with other “races,” then they would siphon off the potential profits of empire, and finally they would declare independence. And if the loss of America led to the heightened realization of the importance of India, it also heightened concern about scandals of the East. And there was scandal aplenty.

The East India Company was launched in 1600, but it conducted



A 1788 caricature showing Edmund Burke about to hang Warren Hastings, with Lord North and Richard Sheridan as accomplices.

its first century in relatively desultory fashion, establishing coastal forts; engaging in trade; forming alliances; contesting the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the French; and on occasion attempting to take on the Mughals themselves. Late in the century, the Company tried to develop an imperial foothold, without success. The Mughal empire was at its peak in the seventeenth century, when Maratha power rose across western and southern India in the wake of the withdrawal of Vijayanagara rule. Fortunes were made, battles were fought, trade was expanded, and territories were claimed, but the seeds of empire were slow in germinating: the British imperial presence did not take on major significance, even for Britain, until the "long eighteenth century" commenced in 1688. The Glorious Revolution might have been designed principally to alleviate the political turmoil of the previous century, but it also had important economic effects, not least the establishment of the English stock market. And the most prominent stock shares traded on Exchange Alley were of East India Company. Empire and capitalism were born hand in hand, and they both worked to spawn the modern British state.

Scandal was the crucible in which both imperial and capitalist expansion was forged. When the East India Company's charter was technically forfeited in 1693, Company shares were used to influence parliamentary support for charter renewal. In 1695 the report of the parliamentary investigation into the developing scandal over quick fortunes made through bribery and insider trading led to the dismissal of the speaker of the House of Commons, the impeachment of the lord president of the council, and the imprisonment of the governor of the East India Company. If the Company did in the end secure its renewal, the experience left a bad taste, suggesting to many that the only choice was between a licensed monopoly and a

free-for-all in which pirate vessels could vie with East Indiamen for control over a new global marketplace, as well as new territories. Nevertheless, the Company not only survived into the new century, it soon also became a steady source of wealth for parliamentarian and investor alike. In addition, the Company took much of the credit for—and profits from—the new trade in tea. In the last years of the seventeenth century and the first of the eighteenth, tea from China, laced with sugar from the West Indies, became the staple that it has remained in the English diet. Spices, silk, cotton, and an increasing array of other Asian commodities established Britain's dependence on the global economy even as they secured growing legitimacy for the role of the East India Company.

But scandal, and its deep association with mercantile trade and imperial venture, hardly disappeared. In fact, the eighteenth century could be said to be the long century of imperial scandal, a time when trade and empire led to successive crises around the fundamentals of English politics, culture, and society. By 1788, when Edmund Burke passionately denounced imperial excess at the spectacular impeachment trial of India's governor-general Warren Hastings, it had become generally recognized throughout England that India had been pillaged by a growing succession of increasingly unscrupulous nabobs. (Nabob was the term used for Englishmen who returned from the East with huge fortunes that allowed them to live like princes, with "nabob" itself an English corruption of "nawab," the term used for governors of provinces in the Mughal empire.) In a speech about the need to regulate the East India Company in 1783, Burke had painted a terrifying picture of nabobs marrying into the families of the old gentry, buying their way into Parliament, and destroying stable patterns of investment and economy.¹

Imperial corruption had been at its highest point well before the time of Hastings, cresting during Robert Clive's years of greatest influence—from the 1750s through the 1770s. And there had been two major and several minor parliamentary inquiries into Eastern scandal and a successful—if somewhat limited—attempt at regulatory legislation, in 1773, amid many other efforts to stem the rising tide of corruption. But major concern about this corruption came later, only preoccupying the metropolitan conscience in the 1780s, a new era of reform both at home and abroad. During this decade, the Pitt Act of 1784, which was designed to rein in Company excesses, was one of the most important measures passed by Parliament.

The most significant inquiries concerned the personal activities and acquisitions of Robert Clive. Clive, later knighted and christened the "founder" of empire, was unabashed in his extraction of loot and his collection of "presents." He was almost brought to disgrace because of his insistence on keeping a *jaghire* (land grant) given him by Mir Jafar, the nawab of Bengal. This thank-you gift came at the expense of Company profits and was much criticized by Clive's enemies. But Clive was not only able to convince everyone that it was a present from the Mughal emperor (and not part of some sort of underhanded negotiation); he also secured from the Company the right to draw £27,000 a year from the Bengal revenues for the rest of his life.

The Battle of Plassey in 1757 had indeed been the occasion both for the establishment of the first stages of imperial rule in eastern India and for the massive private enrichment of Company servants. The select committee of the House of Commons that sat in 1772–1773 estimated that "presents" worth over two million pounds had been distributed in Bengal between 1757 and 1765.² A growing num-

ber of Company servants were amassing extraordinary fortunes simply by taking bribes from successful contenders in the internecine quarrels of state.

Presents, as they were called, were perhaps the most direct, and speedy, means of enrichment (and the one preferred by the higher echelons of Company employees), but they were only one way to amass a fortune. While the Company maintained a monopoly on trade between England and India, it allowed great freedom for its servants in India to engage in "country" trade, both up-country trade in India's hinterland and trade between India and other ports in Asia. Despite some impediments for Europeans trading in Bengal in the eighteenth century, profit margins were two to three times what a merchant could expect in Britain, and on some commodities—such as salt, betel nut, and tobacco—that were in effect reserved for European trade, profits in the 1760s were routinely 75 percent or better. The Battle of Plassey led to increased British control over trade to China—both because of new access to commodities such as opium, and because of the amount of new capital circulating in European hands—as well as additional opportunities, and capital, for inland trade.

In southern India during the same period, vast sums were being extracted by Company servants from the nawab of Arcot (the putative governor of the Mughal empire in the south but in fact a largely independent ruler), as fortunes were made not only from trade but also from a complex web of relations centering on his growing indebtedness. Successive Company officials returned from Madras with huge fortunes after only a few years, some returning to London with the promise of a regular salary for representing the nawab in political circles there. Presents were given by the nawab both to these

lobbyists, as a way to secure influence with the king, and more immediately to Company representatives, many of whom were senior Company servants, as a way to defer (and supposedly guarantee) repayment of debt. These unscrupulous representatives not only made vast fortunes from extortionate rates of interest, they also came to dictate the nawab's political and military policy in the interest of securing greater revenues. The nawab's vulnerabilities in the faltering Mughal empire were thus translated into ever greater profits for the English.

Perhaps the greatest beneficiary of the nawab's "generosity"—and associated Company policies and politics—was Paul Benfield, who though vilified by Burke in Parliament was never subjected to parliamentary review of the sort experienced either by Clive or Hastings (in 1786, however, he was banished from India by Cornwallis).³ But associates, representatives, and beneficiaries of the nawab of Arcot continued to exert pressure on Company politics for years: some contemporary observers have suggested that as many as twelve members of Parliament—most of them with parliamentary seats purchased with money from Arcot—continued through much of the century to advance the interests of the nawab.⁴

It is thus small wonder that the growing number of Company servants who returned to England with fortunes to invest in huge estates, titles, and seats in Parliament were called nabobs and roundly condemned, and scorned, by older gentry and rising mercantile elites alike.⁵ For some observers, such as Lord Chatham, these nabobs brought with them the corruption of the East: "The riches of Asia have been poured in upon us, and have brought with them not only Asiatic Luxury, but, I fear, Asiatic principles of government. Without connections, without any natural interest in the soil, the

importers of foreign gold have forced their way into Parliament by such a torrent of private corruption as no hereditary fortune could resist."⁶ That this new "Asiatic corruption" was very like the "old corruption"—the system described by historians as a network not just of any particular class or interest, "but as a secondary political formation, a purchasing-point from which other kinds of economic and social power were gained or enhanced"⁷—only highlights the claim by Chatham that the nabobs had been contaminated by "Asiatic principles of government." Indeed, the more that both political and economic corruption could be pinned 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. This fact was nowhere more dramatically illustrated than in the widespread support for Edmund Burke's assault on Hastings—even among many with little specific interest in Company affairs. But if the servants of the Company were seen to carry with them the fruits of this Asiatic corruption, and the accompanying threat to the stability of gentry privilege when they returned to England and played their part in the eighteenth-century transformations of English political economy, the Company itself represented scandal of an even higher order. What was supposed to have been a trading company with an eastern monopoly vested by Parliament had become a rogue state: waging war, administering justice, minting coin, and collecting revenue over Indian territory.

Those Company servants who survived the rigors of the steamy Indian climate not only accumulated massive private fortunes; they also engaged the British state in actions and commitments that occasioned considerable skepticism and sometimes widespread disap-

proval. The Company waged almost constant warfare, both against the French—making Asia not for the last time a principal theater for European conflict—and against a growing array of Indian armies. Even the much heralded assumption in 1765 of Bengali Diwani rights—the transfer of the right to collect revenue directly from Bengal's landholders—which led to a negotiated commitment to pay Parliament a subvention of £400,000 a year, hardly compensated for Company deficits, which were also the result of the spectacular profiteering of Company "servants." The subvention was in part a massive bribe to Parliament to maintain the Company monopoly, but it was also part of a compromise to stem the force of the assault on the Company from the Chatham Ministry, concerned as it was with the statelike character of the Company.

Indeed, acceptance of the subvention effectively gave the Company sovereign rights over conquered territories.⁸ But it also increased financial pressure on the Company, especially when it turned out that Clive's exuberant estimates were vastly exaggerated. Military victories had come at great cost to the Company and the British state, and speculation in Company shares after the assumption of the Diwani put unsustainable pressure on profits. Such financial crises put pressure on Company support at home and often led to greater exploitation in India, where the Diwani led to the outbreak of grievous famine conditions throughout Bengal in 1770. The Diwani also led to an exploding bull market in Company shares, a bubble that burst by the end of the decade after news of Company military setbacks.⁹ By 1772, the Company had not only brought about a world credit crash; it had also come close to bankruptcy, in both financial and political terms.

The parliamentary inquiry into the acquisitions of Lord Clive in 1772, combined with the near bankruptcy of the Company, occa-

sioned the passing of Lord North's India Bill of 1773, also known as the Regulating Act. Hailed as an effort to control the independence of the Company leadership in India, in reality the act was little more than a justification for bailing the Company proprietors out of a huge financial hole, since Lord North had arranged for the state to lend the Company £1.4 million to avert bankruptcy.¹⁰ The bailout in part demonstrated the extent to which Parliament itself had come under the sway of nabob money and influence, because it had become clear from the previous decade how many sitting members had significant shares, and often proprietary interests, in Company fortunes. Clive himself had been completely vindicated by Parliament in 1772, despite widespread concern about the means he had used to assemble his fortune, not to mention policies to which he had committed the Company. Horace Walpole wrote,

The oppressions of India and even of the English settled there under the rapine and cruelties of the servants of the Company had now reached England and created general clamour here. Some books had been published, particularly by one Bolts and Mr. Dow, the first a man of bad character, the latter of a very fair one, which carried the accusations home to Lord Clive; and the former represented him as a monster in assassination, usurpation and extortion, with heavy accusations of his monopolizing in open defiance of the orders of the Company . . . To such monopolies were imputed the late famine in Bengal and the loss of three millions of the inhabitants. A tithe of these crimes was sufficient to inspire horror.¹¹

Such criticisms and scruples notwithstanding, Clive was still seen by many in Britain as the only man—whatever his moral charac-

ter—with the courage and the vision to secure Company interests in India.

Robert Clive, by all accounts an impetuous man who was judged a bully by his contemporaries, had become a "writer" for the East India Company at the tender age of seventeen, and had begun his Indian career in Madras. After establishing a reputation for heroism in southern India (especially in the famous siege of Arcot), he was given primary responsibility for relieving Calcutta after its seizure by the nawab Siraj-ud-Daula in 1756. His troops defeated the nawab at Plassey, a haphazard encounter that only emerged as an English victory because of Mir Jafar's negotiated support for Clive. And yet the Battle of Plassey sealed Clive's reputation as the conqueror of India and founder of empire. Shortly thereafter he was named governor of Bengal, and then, after a brief return to England between 1760 and 1764, he was sent back as governor with the mandate to restore Company authority and to accept the Diwani (right of revenue collection) over Bengal from the Mughal emperor. Although he only arrived after the more important battle of Baksar was concluded in the Company's favor, he attained his public apotheosis in the acceptance of the Diwani and his inauguration of a new form of territorial rule for the Company. In his speeches in the House of Commons, exhorting parliamentary approbation for and recognition of the extraordinary accomplishments of the Company under his leadership (often in the context of defending himself against charges of personal corruption), he proudly boasted that the Company had been transformed from its earlier status as a band of merchants engaging only in commercial enterprise. He told the House in 1769 that he had been solely responsible for the transformation of Company rule from its origins as a minor and inconsequential trading operation to

a great sovereign power. For now, he claimed, "The East India Company are . . . sovereigns of a rich, populous, fruitful country in extent beyond France and Spain united; they are in possession of the labour, industry, and manufactures of twenty millions of subjects; they are in actual receipt of between five and six millions a year. They have an army of fifty thousand men. The revenues of Bengal are little short of four million sterling a year."¹² Three years later he spoke even more confidently, asserting, "By progressive steps, the Company have become Sovereigns of that Empire."¹³ But in the intervening three years, the famine, the stock crash, and then the collapse of Company fortunes put a rather different spin on his remarks.

Clive's personal actions, then—in particular his acceptance of certain presents as well as his *jaghire* (land grant)—were in the larger scheme of things small beer. On the one hand he explained that it was customary in India to give and receive presents. On the other hand, having compared himself to the nawab at the same time he charged all of his Company colleagues with corruption, he claimed his own relative virtue. As he went on to say when concluding his defense in 1772: "A great prince was dependent on my pleasure, an opulent city lay at my mercy; its richest bankers bid against each other for my smiles; I walked through vaults which were thrown open to me alone, piled on either hand with gold and jewels! Mr. Chairman, at this moment I stand astonished at my own moderation."¹⁴ Although Clive was vindicated, his self-defense led to many more questions, both about his own actions and about the character of Company rule in India, leaving a taint on the origin story of empire for many years to come.

Clive himself had chastised Parliament both for insufficiently appreciating his contributions and for not acting boldly enough to

consolidate Company gains. "It was natural to suppose," he argued, that such a glorious imperial conquest "would have merited the most serious attention of administration, that in concert with the Court of Directors, they would have considered the nature of the Company's charter and adopted a plan adequate to such possessions. No they did not. They treated it rather as a South Sea Bubble, than as anything solid and substantial."¹⁵ But given the misfortunes of the Company between 1769 and 1772, these comments were largely dismissed, and although Clive was allowed to retire with his fortune intact, the select committee recommended a different kind of intervention than that argued for by Clive. Indeed, Clive correctly understood the consequent Regulating Act of 1773 as a personal rebuke. He committed suicide—though perhaps in part for reasons of ill-health—the next year.¹⁶

Warren Hastings was elected governor of Bengal in 1772, and elevated to the position of governor-general in 1773, precisely to oversee the reform of Company activities in India. Hastings's first act was to take direct control of the financial administration of Bengal. He also took direct responsibility for the administration of justice in Bengal, establishing a supreme court in Calcutta and implementing his own plan to draft new codes of civil law for Hindus and Muslims. With a hefty annual salary of £25,000, he was supposed to not only be above corruption but also root it out across the range of Company activities. He was given the difficult task of ensuring a reasonable financial return for the proprietors and political accountability for Parliament while keeping the peace, assuming new forms of administrative control, and extending Company operations more generally. Successful in much of his agenda, he spent most of his time in an epic struggle with Philip Francis, one of four appointees to

Hastings's executive council. Francis opposed all of Hastings's expansionist activities in an enmity that became personal because of competing political ambitions and mutual disdain, which included moral censure over sexual scandal on both sides. Injured in a duel with Hastings in 1780, ostensibly over the war against the Marathas, Francis returned to England intent on continuing his war by other means. He became the close confidante of Edmund Burke, and soon after his arrival in England began to supply the detailed information that led directly to Burke's decision to pursue Hastings's impeachment.¹⁷

The famous Articles of Charge that were drawn up by Burke and presented to the House of Commons in 1786 provide a clear picture of the new forms of scandal that had accumulated around Hastings in the decade after Clive's departure from the scene. Hastings was an educated man, unlike Clive. Schooled at Westminster, a committed administrator rather than a soldier, he worked his way patiently up the Company ladder and got into trouble for reasons that even Burke construed as having more to do with political ambition than with personal gain. In holding Hastings accountable to Parliament, Burke believed that he was interrogating the duplicity of empire itself. The two principal charges concerned Hastings's relations with Indian rulers. In the first charge, Burke argued that Hastings had deliberately violated the Company's agreement with the raja of Benares, making a variety of unauthorized demands on him and ultimately provoking him to rebel, an act that led to the raja's defeat and the annexation of Benares in 1781. In the second charge, Burke held that Hastings had also violated the Company's guarantee in regard to the lands held as *jaghires* by the mother and grandmother of the nawab of Awadh (who were also known as the "begums of

Awadh" because of their high rank). Other major charges brought by Burke against Hastings were of a more traditional sort. Burke alleged that Hastings had received "presents" in a way (and on a scale) much like Clive before him, though he acknowledged that many of the documented presents in fact were handed over to the Company. He also charged Hastings with using a wide variety of contracts, from selling opium to provisioning the army, for reasons of patronage.

And yet Hastings came to be known as the savior of empire in large part because his relations with the rulers of Awadh and Benares were driven by his assessed need to both protect the territorial gains of Clive and check the expansionist ambitions of the Marathas. In fighting the Marathas, Hastings—like Clive before him—ran up huge debts, and clearly used a variety of irregular means to balance the budget. But he also followed the successful Company strategy of deliberate deception, professing disinterest in expansion while working relentlessly to secure greater and greater power, and territorial authority, over those fertile regions that constituted a buffer between the Mughals to the north and the Marathas to the west. Even though his political methods spanned a period when standards of public virtue and private corruption—especially for the British in India—changed dramatically, his own relative moderation (compared, that is, to Clive) came to seem scandalous from the hindsight of the impeachment trial. In fact, most of the presents that could be documented were taken before the 1773 Regulating Act went into effect (though even then it had been nominally illegal for Company servants to take presents), and those received afterward were declared to the Company, and in most cases returned. As for the first two charges, Hastings defended himself by

noting that both the raja of Benares and the begums of Awadh had forced his hand by engaging in acts of hostility first. He also argued that he had made reasonable demands—given the relations of protection between the Company and both Benares and Awadh—for financial contributions to war efforts that had been precipitated by the threatening activities of the Marathas. But his most successful defense was in fact that his methods had worked, that by the time he stepped down from the governor-generalship he had secured India for the Company. Burke's tirades against Hastings might have been the national expression of a bad conscience, but Burke no more offered to give India back to the Mughals than did Hastings offer to return his early winnings to the Company. Indeed, the trial of Warren Hastings was at one level simply the continuation of earlier parliamentary efforts to take control over a rogue English state, to harness imperial power—and wealth—securely to Britain. And once that was accomplished, whatever the particular political, or financial, fortunes of Warren Hastings, empire would no longer be a scandal.

The trial was in part the extension of the India Act of 1784, known as the Pitt Act. The act was meant to bring the Company under control by stemming its territorial expansion and reforming the politics and finances of the Company and its servants.¹⁸ But while the Company was put under the authority of a board of control that itself was now answerable to the Crown and Parliament, the governor-general was given far greater powers in India than Hastings had possessed. The first new governor to benefit was Lord Cornwallis, fresh from his defeat at Yorktown, but with a reputation for probity and reform that he sustained until his retirement in 1793. Cornwallis implemented new regulations concerning private trade and presents, increased salary scales, and standardized procedures for recruitment

and promotion. He also dealt Mysore's Tipu Sultan, adopted son and successor of Haider Ali, his first major defeat in 1792. His crowning achievement was the Bengal Permanent Settlement of 1793—a fixed-revenue agreement with local landlords (*zamindars*) fashioned in large part from the physiocratic proposals of Philip Francis—that was designed to provide the regular funds necessary to pay new salaries and maintain Company solvency.¹⁹ He was succeeded by John Shore, a Company servant who had been a major player in debates over revenue systems. Shore continued the nonexpansionist policy of Cornwallis. But when the marquess Arthur Wellesley (later known as the “Iron Duke”) took the governorship in 1798, the military profile of the Company escalated back to the level of Clive and Hastings. Despite much concern in London and the return of major financial woes, Wellesley used the power that had been conferred on his position to mobilize Company forces once again. His forces defeated, and killed, Tipu Sultan—whose alliance with the French made this victory all the sweeter—and engaged Hyderabad and Awadh. In so doing, Wellesley not only filled in more of the map of British India; he also worked to make the map itself seem the natural outcome of British interest. And unlike Clive and Hastings, he did not get into trouble. Instead, he was catapulted by a new aggressive, and militaristic, nationalism to a position of national hero for his exploits. Empire was no longer a scandal; trade was no longer the primary mission of English enterprise; patriotism in the imperial theater was no longer a vice. Burke had done his work well.

Although Wellesley's profligacy landed the Company in a new set of financial troubles—the India debt rose from £18 million in 1802 to £32 million in 1810—subsequent debates over charter renewal no longer focused on the spectacles of corruption that had character-

ized the long eighteenth century.²⁰ But the debt made arguments for free trade increasingly persuasive. When the Company charter was renewed in 1813, all trading privileges and monopolies were removed, save for the tea trade with China. Indeed, the greatest controversy of the renewal debate concerned the role of missionary activity in India; before 1813 missionaries had been prevented from proselytizing in Company territory because of the potential disruption it would cause. The rising influence in Company politics of Charles Grant and William Wilberforce, prominent evangelicals, forced a change, and the directors reluctantly accepted the entry of missionary activity.

The public debate around charter renewal, much of it generated by missionary publicists, worked to focus public attention on spectacular examples of “barbarism” in India. Now when scandal was associated with India, it was attached to Indian customs rather than British activities.²¹ Indeed, India became a land of scandal in an entirely new way, with scandal now a feature of generic Indian custom rather than personal English excess. Under new missionary pressure, it became a scandal that the Company allowed the continuation in British territory of the barbaric practices of *sati* (widow burning) or *thuggee* (highway robbery and murder with cultic overtones) or rituals such as “hookswinging” (a form of devotion involving hooks embedded in the back). After the first decade of the nineteenth century, it is hard to imagine a British parliamentarian—Whig or Tory—berating the British in India for their barbarism as Burke had done just a few years before. Even as nabobs were replaced by bureaucrats who were earnest, mostly middle class, and increasingly professional, Indian rulers were progressively converted from their positions as either allies or enemies into puppets of a new

imperium. And even as scandal itself became institutionalized, it was displaced onto a civilizational map shared by British progressives and conservatives alike. "Anglicists" such as James Mill and Thomas Macaulay might have criticized Orientalists such as William Jones for their rosy view of India's past and their disinterest in India's potential progress, but they were all committed to the imperial project at least in part because of a shared condemnation of the Indian present.

The new imperial mandate was as congenial to the next generation of Company leaders—including Thomas Munro, Mountstuart Elphinstone, John Malcolm, and Charles Metcalfe—as it would have been much earlier to Clive and Hastings. And although after Wellesley's departure from India in 1805 imperial expansion proceeded in fits and starts, even as it continued to be condemned in Britain for its expense and sometimes for its appearance, it continued unabated for the next half century. The Gurkhas were defeated in 1814–1816, the Marathas were brought down in 1817–1818, Sind was taken in 1843, and Punjab was annexed after the Sikh wars of 1848–1849. By the time Lord Dalhousie annexed Awadh in 1856 there could be little doubt that the Battle of Plassey had inaugurated a century of relentless imperial expansion, whatever dissension there had been either within the Company or between it and the British state. Charles Metcalfe, one of the early nineteenth century's most respected Company grandees, wrote in 1820 what appears now as the creed of all imperial powers to the present day: "I abhor making wars, and meddling with other states for the sake of our aggrandizement—but war thrust upon us, or unavoidably entered into, should, if practicable, be turned to profit by the acquisition of new resources, to pay additional forces to defend what we have, and extend

our possessions in future unavoidable wars."²² As he made clear, while the British preferred not to take responsibility for their imperial aggression—shifting their own agency onto India—they were more than happy to take advantage of Indian "agency" whenever they could. Only the Great Rebellion of 1857 put a stop to formal expansion, but by that time expansion was no longer necessary. What the British state—which finally declared itself as the imperial authority and dismantled what had become the empty shell of Company rule—did not control directly, it could now control just as well by other means.²³

Despite the taint of scandal that permeates British imperial history, what is perhaps most disturbing in retrospect is the extent to which the scandals that were at the heart of imperial beginnings—not to mention the scandal of empire itself—have been either laundered or converted into narratives of imperial, nationalist, and capitalist triumph. Burke's rhetoric and British reforms have been taken at face value, accepted as the end of an era rather than the basis for its reinvigoration and legitimization. The history of empire—or of the Company—in the eighteenth century has been written about as a problem of management and control, in which scandal was an impediment to the success of the Company rather than endemic to it.²⁴ At the same time, the overall importance of India for England in the eighteenth century has been largely ignored despite some efforts to break down the barrier between metropolitan and imperial histories.²⁵ And even historians who have accepted John Seeley's charge that most English history in the eighteenth century took place overseas also accept his conviction that empire was won more by accident than by design, in a "fit of absence of mind."²⁶

Yet the scandals that came from both private profiteering and imperial aggrandizement were the necessary features of a system of conquest, expansion, and exploitation that has not only been seriously underplayed in imperial history but virtually erased from the history of early modern Britain. On the one hand, the traditional field of imperial history has been unable to accept either the fundamentally scandalous character of its principal subject or the extent to which that scandal—however much it is conceded to have been disadvantageous for the colonized—has been constitutive of the history both of colonizing nations and the modern world more generally. On the other hand, the history of Britain in the long eighteenth century is still written as if India (or for that matter the East India Company) was almost entirely irrelevant to the main events of the time.²⁷ New works in imperial history have made increasingly clear that empire has been constitutive for Britain, arguing that even the older work in imperial history that took on global themes has been deeply complicit in the celebration—and naturalization—of the national boundaries of knowledge itself.²⁸ As Kathleen Wilson has recently suggested, “Empire was, in a very real sense, the frontier of the nation, the place where, under the pressure of contact and exchange, boundaries deemed crucial to national identity—white and black, civilized and savage, law and vengeance—were blurred, dissolved or rendered impossible to uphold.”²⁹

During the last half century of decolonization, when new nations have been forged with all the contradictory legacies of their histories of imperial subjection and nationalist mobilization, new national histories have also emerged. First born as histories of freedom struggles, these histories have generated counterhistories, which in turn have spawned new kinds of historical controversies and debates. But

with all the vital contention in these new fields of history that have challenged the neat divide between history and anthropology (in which history was accorded to Europe and North America, and anthropology was the domain for any real knowledge about the rest of the world), the one point of agreement has consistently been that imperial history had been written in the service of empire itself. Despite widespread recognition of the force of this critique, imperial history has persisted in upholding many of the perspectives of its own imperial past, despite revision, reformulation, and the occasional onslaught from other histories. Astonishingly, much imperial history is today still written as if the task of the historian is to achieve balance, and perspective, in the historical account of the costs and benefits of empire. Indeed, a postimperial sigh of relief has been almost audible in some recent writing, in which the historical stance of objectivity is said to be possible now that historians no longer need to take sides.³⁰ Imperial history—as is eminently clear from a brief perusal of the new five-volume *Oxford History of the British Empire*—has largely ignored the explosion of revisionist writing that has subjected most histories of empire to withering critique.³¹

New historical writing, much of it from the margins of the historical profession, has begun to excavate the range and intensity of the sometimes invisible, frequently unwritten, and often long-delayed effects of colonial rule on the colonized.³² Indeed, it is now widely accepted that colonialism had a far greater influence on the colonized world than has been recognized even in accounts that take for granted that empire was driven by the relentless forces of economic and political exploitation. The institution of caste, for example, a social formation that has been seen as not only basic to India but part of its ancient constitution, was fundamentally transformed by British

colonial rule. Colonial rule has often been depicted as weak, and yet it produced ethnic violence, religious exclusion, political weakness, civilizational embarrassment, and nationalist extremism, often in the name of precolonial tradition. Colonialism played a major role not only in the creation and delineation of institutions and formations that have been characterized as "traditional," but also in the fracturing and compromising of those that have been accorded at best only provisional status as "modern." "Colonial modernity" has become shorthand for describing forms of modernity—including, for example, democracy and the public sphere, secularism and cultural pluralism, as well as science, music, and the arts—that both bear the traces of colonial domination and expose the fundamental fissures of something that not long ago was widely presumed to be progressive, universal, and value free.³³ In many parts of the world, colonialism was the fundamental fact of modern history.

Colonizers were in some sense even more successful in erasing the enormity of the influence of imperialism on life at home than they were in suppressing the effects of their actions abroad.³⁴ After all, the self-representations of imperialism were hardly taken at face value by the colonized, even under the most apparently hegemonic conditions.³⁵ But things were different "at home," where self-representation was not only carefully fashioned to underplay the colonial encounter, but also deeply complicit in nationalist triumphalism and imperial bad conscience, if not from the start, certainly from the late eighteenth century. And that is where we return to scandal, for to focus on the scandals of empire and its representations—especially once Burke had done his work—is to reopen the history of Britain in the long eighteenth century and reexamine the foundational role of empire in the history of modernity itself.

Many of the elements we have come to see as fundamental to the rise of the modern West were produced in large part through the imperial encounter.³⁶ The scandal of empire is not merely the simple fact that empire has always been a scandal (even in the days before the full elaboration of racial theory and national suppression). Nor is it simply the larger history demonstrating the extent to which the history of empire is a history of one scandal after the next. The greatest scandal, in other words, has been the erasure of empire from the history of Europe (itself seen, even in some of the most critical accounts, as the fount of modernity). And so we will return time after time to the moment of erasure, when scandal became normalized in the assumptions and categories of modernity itself, for which the divide between the worlds of colonizers and colonized was fundamental. For this history, then, the trial of Warren Hastings will serve as the emblematic moment, when scandal was decreed with public fervor and eloquence, and yet when scandal was not so much obliterated as it was appropriated by Britain's own launch into the modern world, with implications for its state structure, its national economy, its confident claims of modernity and civilization, its embrace of bourgeois reform at home and abroad, as well as its global political ambition. Thus we return to histories in which private corruption was converted into public virtue, a rogue trading state fashioned as the means to acquire an imperial jewel, a scandalous monopoly made the political basis for global capitalist domination, an invidious history rewritten as the national epic.

Scandal itself is a peculiar historical form that only reveals its real meaning long after the public outcry and formal investigations have ceased. Scandals point to the underlying tensions and anxieties of an age, even as they work ironically to resolve crises by finding

new ways to repress these tensions and anxieties. Scandals require careful management, and they elicit widespread vicarious attention, because they invariably produce a spectacle in which we see how the mighty have fallen. Whether caused by sexual indiscretion, extreme political ambition, undue greed, or other appetites driven by the desire for self-fulfillment and self-aggrandizement, the public unfolding of scandal provides public titillation at the same time it becomes a morality play.³⁷ Despite the threat either that authority will be subverted or the rules and conventions of public (or private) life radically changed, scandals in fact usually lead to far more benign outcomes. For the most part, public scandals become ritual moments in which the sacrifice of the reputation of one or more individuals allows many more to continue their scandalous ways, if perhaps with minimal safeguards and protocols that are meant to ensure that the terrible excesses of the past will not occur again. Scandals often do lead to reforms, but the reforms usually work to protect the potential agents of scandal rather than its actual victims. Indeed, it is the scandal itself that must be erased, not the underlying systemic reasons for scandal. The scandal is only the tip of the iceberg, the moment of excess that in the end works to conceal the far more endemic excesses that, at least for modern times, have become normalized through our modern convictions about free trade, public virtue, corporate responsibility, political self-determination, and national sovereignty.

The scandals of Clive, Hastings, and Benfield were both parables of the larger structure of imperial greed and exploitation, and only the most extreme examples of imperial business as usual. If the early scandals of empire had been taken seriously, empire itself would have been the victim rather than Hastings. Not only was empire

hardly abandoned; it was reformed precisely so that the private and idiosyncratic excesses of venality and corruption attached to particular individuals could be transformed into the national interest, both metaphorically and literally. As it turned out, the most egregious scandals of empire played a critical role in making empire safe for Britain—and for that matter much of Europe as well—in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for it was precisely the grandeur and scope of eighteenth-century scandal that allowed Burke to perform such powerful political magic. In the rhetorical excess—and as the historian Seeley would later say, “unreasonable violence”—of Burke’s assault on Hastings, a century of “unreasonable violence” against the imperial subjects of India could be not only justified, but also institutionalized for an imperial future that would last another hundred and fifty years. Without scandal, in other words, it is possible that empire would not have emerged as so dominant a force in the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By the same token, it would have taken much more than these scandals of empire to bring down the British empire. Scandal both allowed empire to be “reformed” and made empire itself far less the issue than the scandals themselves.

Thus it is that the larger narrative of this book hinges on the indelible relationship between empire and scandal. The history of empire is narrated through the successive parliamentary inquiries that brought imperial scandal to national attention, culminating in the trial of Warren Hastings and his eventual acquittal in 1795. Edmund Burke is the key protagonist, and Robert Clive and Warren Hastings the major actors, of this drama. But the drama is not primarily about the excess of scandal, as fascinating as it is, so much as it is about the constitutive character of scandal for empire, and the constitutive

character of empire for England. What follows, then, is a different kind of imperial history—an imperial history of modern Britain that uses scandal as the cover to investigate what became the normal, and legitimate, enterprise of empire. In the chapters that follow, the imperial “encounter” is the foundational moment of British modernity, not to mention a story with monumental relevance for the present. This encounter is used to set the stage not just for the history of the British empire in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but also for the history of other empires, with implications for the twenty-first century as well.

Despite this large canvas, what follows only concerns the imperial encounter between Britain and India. As a consequence, perhaps the major scandal of imperial history is left unexamined. I refer to slavery, of course, the subject of extraordinary attention in Britain during the very years that Burke prosecuted his case against Hastings in Parliament. On May 12, 1789, William Wilberforce, a reformer who later denounced Britain for its failure to abolish *sati* (widow burning) in India, gave the first major abolition speech before the House of Commons, introducing multiple petitions calling for the abolition of the slave trade. In the years before this speech, the newly formed Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade had begun its agitations to recognize the scandal of slavery and regulate the trade in slaves, for reasons that ranged from shame at the complicity of the British empire in such heinous activities to concerns about emancipating slaves as part of a Christian conversion effort. During the same years that Parliament considered the charges of impeachment, it also investigated and examined evidence on the slave trade. Parliament defeated a bill to abolish such trade that was

introduced by Wilberforce in 1791, though it had, a few years before, sought to regulate the slave trade in some small measure. Edmund Burke was an early supporter of abolition, though by 1791, in part because of his desire to distance himself from Jacobin positions, he declared that “the cause of humanity would be far more benefited by the continuance of the trade and servitude, regulated and reformed, than by the total destruction of both or either.”³⁸ But Wilberforce and the abolitionists continued to press their case, succeeding only in 1807 in finally pressing Parliament to call for an end to the slave trade.

The history of slavery thus tells a very similar story about efforts to cleanse the stain of scandal from imperial Britain. Since Eric Williams, historians have argued that the abolition of slavery was designed to allow an emerging market in labor to take over the task of slavery, controlling labor through the scarcity of employment and the use of cheap wages rather than through the egregious exercise of proprietary rights over people.³⁹ Other historians have viewed the abolitionist movement as a fundamental part of the general reformist concerns of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁴⁰ But recent work further suggests that the abolitionist movement was only able to secure any hope of success after the loss of the American colonies began to make it clear that empire itself was imperiled by slavery. While the assumption that empire could only be profitable with the use of slaves was widespread and little contested until the American Revolution, the concern of one clergyman in 1781 that slavery called into question the “moral state of the British Empire” was perhaps the real sign that slavery could become the scandal of record.⁴¹ By the end of the eighteenth century, it was clear that scandals were no longer good for empire, and that scandals that could be

seen as a blot on the moral justifications of imperial activity had to be exorcised once and for all.

In writing the history of the making of British empire, scandal thus occupies a key role. For empire to be both moral and secure, the principal scandals of Britain's global engagements had to be expunged from the imperial record, and then shifted inexorably onto the colonized subjects of empire. Slavery was an especially insistent problem, requiring further legislation and much greater vigilance after the 1807 Act of Parliament proved largely ineffective. But it was no accident that William Wilberforce shifted his attention from slavery to *sati* during the second decade of the nineteenth century, symbolizing the more general displacement of scandal from colonizer to colonized. As empire became the morally sanctioned expression of the national interest in the global context, the histories of imperial formation shifted in turn from the scandals of Europeans to the scandals that both explained and justified European rule. While these scandals were written into the cultures and customs of the colonized through an emergent ethnographic imperial imagination, they were also evoked with special sharpness in the use of atrocity stories to predicate imperial involvement. And so in the writing of a canonic history of empire in the nineteenth century we note the almost sacred status accorded to the gruesome tale of the "Black Hole" of Calcutta, a natural forerunner in many ways to the atrocities of the Great Rebellion (or "Sepoy Mutiny") of 1857–1858, which rehearsed the earlier horrors and gave rise to a generalized sense of the natural right of empire in late-nineteenth-century Britain. If Indian atrocity became the pretext for imperial conquest, Indian scandal became the clarion call for the imperial mission, based as it was on the idea of the burden of empire.

In thinking about the role of scandal and atrocity in the history of imperial formation and legitimization, it is impossible not to be deeply disturbed by the continuities with a present in which scandals, most recently of the U.S. relationship with Iraq—including the original arming of Saddam Hussein by the United States, the delayed reaction to Hussein's use of torture and genocide, the shameless use of the fabricated pretext of weapons of mass destruction to justify an imperial war, the use of the occupation to secure lucrative contracts for companies such as Halliburton, the horrific images of civilian casualties, and the systematic torture and sexual humiliation of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib—have failed to stem the tide of a new imperial resurgence. The final scandal of empire is that empire has not yet been consigned to the past tense once and for all. Empire, as many observers of contemporary globalization have observed, is transforming itself into new forms of global power that use markets, corporate influence, international banking systems, and law rather than military conquest, colonial occupation, or direct economic domination—but in recent years the United States has retreated to imperial ways and means.⁴² Without prejudging the vast potential for globalization to rehearse and even enhance the past abuses of empire, it is, nevertheless, high time for the sun to set on all the empires of old. If history can ever serve as a lesson for our present and future, the history of empire as recounted here should remind us that no imperial ambition can ever be unencumbered by scandal. Indeed, scandal is what empire is all about.