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A British Rome in India: Calcutta – Capital for an Empire

by Michael Mann, Worms, Wernersche Verlagsgesellschaft, 2022, 214 pp., €78.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9783884624111

William Whyte

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and philosophy. Levack writes very clearly and accessibly and cites many works in these fields. He does an admirable job of deconstructing complex institutions and ideas into easily understandable prose. However, in attempting to accommodate his work to these different audiences and to include so many diverse examples, Levack also utilises such a broad definition of trust that the term loses much of its analytical edge. This is particularly apparent in the difficulty exhibited in distinguishing between personal and institutional trust in this work. Institutions themselves are frequently treated as impenetrable bureaucracies of ‘strangers’ but this seems somewhat anachronistic in light of the very personal, often-parochial, and propertied dimensions of office-holding in the early modern British world. Such ‘mediating’ factors in the interactions between individuals and institutions, though acknowledged in the introductory section on historiography, remain largely absent in the substantive chapters.

While it may be of some use to have a succinct and broad synthesis of many of the failures, scandals, and inadequacies of early modern governance discussed in this book, particularly for the interested non-expert, there are far more comprehensive and insightful works available on each of the individual topics covered in this book, many of which Levack cites therein.

Notes on contributor

Ben Gilding (ben.gilding@history.ox.ac.uk) is a junior research fellow at New College, Oxford. His PhD dissertation examined the British State’s attempts to reform the East India Company between 1773 and 1784. He has published several articles on the intersections between domestic and imperial politics in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain and its empire and is currently reworking his dissertation into a monograph entitled *Sovereign Merchants: East India Company Reform and the Transformation of the British Empire, 1757–1784*.

Ben Gilding
New College, University of Oxford

 ben_gilding@hotmail.com

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A British Rome in India: Calcutta – Capital for an Empire, by Michael Mann, Worms, Wernersche Verlagsgesellschaft, 2022, 214 pp., €78.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9783884624111

Michael Mann’s latest book opens with an epigraph from a long-forgotten poem, *City of Palaces: A Fragment*, published in 1824 by the surgeon, translator, journalist, artist, and pioneering orientalist James Atkinson. *City of Palaces* itself opens with a reference to the fate of all empires, which ‘rise from the dust, extend, decay,/Slow in their growth, oft rapid in their fall’. The poem then goes on to evoke Calcutta as ‘A Babel of strange tongues’, a place of ‘oppressive heat’, of ‘opulence and vice’. In Atkinson’s account, only visions of home – of England – can make this bearable. And Mann’s choice of epigraph captures this ambivalence: ‘thou’rt a little London in

Bengal', Atkinson opines; 'A microcosm; loose, and yet compact/A snug epitome, a capital/ Concentrating every folly, brief, abstract/The essence of all worldliness' (p. 7).

That Calcutta became a wonder of the world towards the end of the eighteenth century is undeniable. That it both expressed and was intended to express great commercial wealth and growing British political power is also abundantly clear. Visitors were struck by the scale and the opulence of the new European buildings. Yet if all could agree on the importance of the place, then its meaning remained – and still remains – somewhat opaque. Atkinson is a useful case in point. If Calcutta reminded him of Rome, then it was the Rome in its dotage that it evoked, calling to mind the ultimate and inevitable fate of all empires to degenerate into luxury and vice. If Calcutta was like London, then it was the city described by William Blake or John Bancks that Atkinson perceived: a place, in Bancks's words, with 'Gaudy things enough to tempt ye,/Showy outsides, insides empty'. And yet, for all his disapproval of the place and all his longing for England, Atkinson was to spend 42 years of his life in India – almost half of that time in Calcutta.

A British Rome in India is a beautifully produced, exquisitely illustrated, and thoroughly engrossing exploration of how both the city and attitudes to the city changed between 1772, when Calcutta became the headquarters of the East India Company, and 1836, when a two decade-long process of re-planning was concluded. It was, in many respects, an unlikely metropolis, growing almost accidentally out of what Mann describes as 'a conglomeration of three Bengali villages and an English trading station' (p. 33) in the late-seventeenth century. It was also, as he goes on to show, a city over which successive generations of colonists sought to impose what they understood as order. As early as 1706, authorities in London encouraged a planned approach to Calcutta's urban space. In the aftermath of the war in 1756, further rebuilding was attempted. A new Government House in 1798 and new road systems from the following year also slowly reshaped the city. Above all, from 1817 to 1836, funds raised by the Calcutta Lottery Committee enabled large-scale development. This process was what inspired Atkinson's *City of Palaces* and what Mann seeks to explain.

In six short but dense chapters, *A British Rome in India* thus describes Calcutta's development. Chapter One looks at the early years; Chapter Two at the evolution of streets and squares; Chapter Three at public buildings; and Chapter Four at prestigious residential accommodation. Going beyond the purely architectural, Chapter Five examines what the author calls 'ceremonies of sovereignty and rituals of rule', while the final chapter fittingly explores funerals and funerary monuments. The key claim that unites these essays and which underpins the whole book is that all this should be understood as different forms of 'built sovereignty', with Calcutta gradually amassing 'representative buildings' that equally expressed and exerted the colonial regime's power (p. 39). As an overarching thesis, this is entirely convincing. More questions emerge, however, on closer analysis. Some are specialist and do not really belong in a book review; others concern translation and proof-reading and can also be set aside. Most importantly, there are some key conceptual and terminological ambiguities that need further exploration.

Not least, the book consistently argues that 'built sovereignty' in Calcutta drew on two intersecting aesthetic traditions: Palladianism and the Picturesque. Both were, of course, European in origin; indeed, the latter could be understood as distinctively English. Certainly, an older generation of historians, especially that doyen of the field Nikolaus Pevsner, argued that the Picturesque was England's singular contribution to art history. In that sense, both are useful ways of accounting for how the British imposed their visual regime on Calcutta. But in order to draw together hugely


different structures and a long period of time, the terms are stretched almost to breaking point.

At times, in particular, Palladianism seems to equate to anything Classical. At other moments, the text distinguishes between ‘Neo-Palladianism and classicism’ (p. 52) or ‘neoclassical and Palladian style’ (p. 95). At still others, buildings are described fusing ‘European renaissance, baroque and Neo-Palladian Georgian architecture’ (p. 90) and at others they can be found reflecting ‘the principles of neoclassical, neo-Palladian and Georgian architecture’ (p. 111). Yet either these buildings are in fact all Palladian – in which case, as Giles Worsley once argued, the term needs to be broadened considerably; or they are not – in which case, the author’s argument falls. Readers will need to make up their own minds.

But the fact that Mann’s work will prompt such reflections is entirely to his credit. The extension of the concept of ‘built sovereignty’ beyond military and penal structures will also undoubtedly be useful for writers on a range of other themes. Above all, through its skilful use of written sources and a staggering array of full-colour images, *A British Rome in Calcutta* succeeds in evoking the difficult, contested, polymorphous, and protean place that Atkinson once sought to describe. Unlike his execrable verse, this book is a considerable achievement.

Notes on contributor

William Whyte (william.whyte@sjc.ox.ac.uk) is professor of social and architectural history at St John’s College, University of Oxford. His recent books include *Unlocking the Church: The Lost Secrets of Victorian Sacred Space* (2015) and, as series editor with Dan Hicks, *A Cultural History of Objects* (2022). He is currently writing *The University: A Material History* for publication by Harvard University Press.

William Whyte
St John’s College, University of Oxford
 william.whyte@sjc.ox.ac.uk

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Out of His Mind: Masculinity and Mental Illness in Victorian Britain, by

Amy Milne-Smith, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2022, 311 pp., £74.27 (hardback), ISBN 9781526155030

Considerations of gender have become increasingly prominent in the burgeoning literature on the history of mental disorder and mental health service provision in Britain. Earlier work by Elaine Showalter and Joan Busfield brought this dimension to the forefront and it has been more recently reinforced by Louise Hide. With its focus specifically on men and masculinity, the new study by Amy Milne-Smith makes an important contribution to historical