

The 'glorious' colonial subjugation of India

by Daniel B. Platt

The Nabobs at Home

by Michael Edwardes

Constable, London, 1991

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The historical period which is the topic of inquiry for *The Nabobs at Home* can be neatly encapsulated in the following paragraph: "The East India Company remained on the sidelines of this [opium] trade until the 1757 military victories that made Bengal a crown colony. But the beneficiary of the new move into the opium trade was not Britain, nor even the company itself. The company paid the costs of the 1757 military expeditions, but saw none of the profit, as the lucre from the opium trade went to line the pockets of the company's officials in India. Repeatedly, the East India Company had to apply for a parliamentary bailout, until Shelburne moved in, reorganized the company, and made it the central instrument of loot for the maintenance of the British Empire."

Unfortunately, however, this paragraph does not appear in *The Nabobs at Home*. It is taken from part two of the book *Dope, Inc.*, by the editors of *EIR*. The author of *The Nabobs at Home* has managed to write an entire historical analysis of this rather infamous episode in British history, without mentioning the word "opium" more than once or twice in passing. There is no listing in the index for "opium." The book is a veritable triumph of discretion and delicacy, one that cannot fail to excite the admiration of the most devoted connoisseur of obfuscation.

If the late Mr. Edwardes were around to respond, he would doubtless insist that his book is an exhaustive and very frank examination of one of the most heated political controversies in the history of the Empire. And he would be right. The problem is, in the circles where such matters are debated, colonialism is not controversial—and neither is the dope trade. The controversy arises over matters of administrative finesse, and the levels of corruption and brutality that should be deemed permissible, when one is conducting the time-honored business of subjugating other nations, and drugging their inhabitants.

The appellation "Nabob" was a corruption of the Indian word *Nawab*, meaning a Muslim prince. It was applied to those East India Company officials who "lined their pockets with lucre," and then returned home to England, bent on achieving prominence and respectability. Edwardes characterizes this quest for social acceptance in his introduction:

"In the second half of the 18th century, the British upper classes felt, and displayed, both publicly and privately, the sort of panic that might have been caused by the arrival in England of the hordes of Genghiz Khan—carrying the plague. The actual invasion was that of a comparatively small number of men who had acquired, by various means, usually dubious, large fortunes in India which they intended to spend in ensuring their entry into 'society.' That is to say, into the political, social and economic preserves of the English landed gentry."

At the time, the nabobs were assessed by the Earl of Chatham as follows: "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 corruption, as no private hereditary fortune can resist." And it was the Earl of Chatham, author Edwardes observes, "whose brilliant political career had been made possible by the acumen of his grandfather, Thomas Pitt, in acquiring, when Governor of Madras, the famous stone known as the Pitt Diamond, in a manner that would hardly survive serious scrutiny." Mr. Edwardes is certainly not oblivious to the possibilities for comic irony, implicit in titanic struggles for honor among thieves.

Sympathy for scoundrel

Two nabob case histories are the primary foci of *The Nabobs at Home*. One is Robert Clive, who led the military victories in 1757 that ushered in the nabob heyday. The other is Warren Hastings, who for years was governor-general in Bengal, and whose impeachment in 1788 became, in Edwardes' words, "the longest and most notorious political trial in British history." Edwardes is clearly sympathetic to Hastings, and the bulk of this book seems intended to be the definitive historian's vindication of his role. Because of the sordid nature of the business that was conducted by both Hastings and his rivals who became his accusers, it was difficult for this reviewer to summon up much sympathy for either side of the conflict, but one can only marvel at the flights of eloquence and vitriol which characterized this trial. The chief spokesman for Hastings' accusers was Edmund Burke, a fount of rhetorical excess:

"He accused Hastings of 'crimes which have their rise in the wicked dispositions of men—in avarice, rapacity, cruelty, malignity of temper, haughtiness, insolence—in short, in everything that manifests a heart blackened to the very blackest—a heart dyed in blackness—a heart gangrened to the core. . . . We have brought before you the head, the chief, the captain-general of iniquity—one in whom all the

fraud, all the tyranny of India are embodied, disciplined and arrayed.' The charges were manifold. The accused had 'taken away the lands of orphans.' He had alienated the fortunes of widows,' 'wasted the country, and destroyed the inhabitants after cruelly harassing and distressing them.' Burke charged Hastings with 'having tortured their persons, and dishonored their religion through his wicked agents, who were at the bottom and root of his villainy.' He had 'gorged his ravenous maw,' 'feeding on the indigent, the dying and the ruined' like the 'ravenous vulture who destroys and incapacitates nature in the destruction of its object while devouring the carcasses of the dead.' Hastings, Burke revealed, was a man of pretense, 'a swindling Maecenas.' And all was a part with his origin, which was 'low, obscure, and vulgar.' "

This notwithstanding, the final vote, in 1795, was for acquittal.

The etiquette of plunder

Having shepherded the reader through the byzantine intricacies of this infighting amongst the most eminent scoundrels of the day, Edwardes allows himself the last few pages of the book, in the midst of eulogizing Hastings, to set forth some of his own views on how a truly civilized empire ought to practice colonialism—a sort of etiquette of plunder, if you will:

"Among the hard-headed, single-minded men of trade and profit, one nabob, at least, towers above the commonplace. Warren Hastings did not spend all his time in India amassing a fortune or fighting his own people and Indian rulers. Among all the diversions he made the effort to understand India, the country, the people, and their civilization. In doing so, he made a lasting contribution to the general culture of mankind.

". . . Hastings' enthusiastic patronage of oriental scholarship had a practical as well as an intellectual base. He believed that India should be ruled in traditional ways and that those British set in authority should speak Indian languages, understand Indian laws and customs. Such knowledge would contribute to the facility, as well as the stability, of British rule, just as his horticultural and agricultural experiments would result in new commercial products, and the expeditions to Tibet in an increase in external trade.

". . . Indians would understand and accept British rule if they realized that their rulers respected and admired their religion, their laws and their institutions."

This appreciation of Hastings by Mr. Edwardes prefigures the essentials of modern colonial practice, where one can avoid the expense of undue bloodshed simply by sending in a few anthropologists, followed by a swarm of non-governmental organizations, and by giving the Nobel Peace Prize to Rigoberta Menchú. Of course, it is always prudent to keep a few Blue Helmets on hand; there will always be a handful of ingrates, who fail to appreciate the blessings of subjugation.

A World War I fairy tale from the 'Great Game' historian

by Mark Burdman

Like Hidden Fire: The Plot to Bring Down the British Empire

by Peter Hopkirk

Kodansha America, New York, 1994

431 pages, hardbound, \$25

August 3, 1994 will be the 80th anniversary of the British and Belgian declaration of war on Germany and the formal beginning of the First World War. Many conferences and events are taking place over the spring and summer bringing together historians and experts from many countries to discuss the origins of that war. One such conference took place in Moscow in late May.

Peter Hopkirk's *Like Hidden Fire* (published in Britain as *On Secret Service East of Constantinople*) is a salvo fired by the British for this occasion. The bulk of the book is an account, written from an obvious partisan British standpoint and based on archival material and other documents, of the unsuccessful attempts by Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany, acting in alliance with the Ottoman Empire's Enver Pasha after World War I had begun, to unleash a "holy war" in the Islamic areas of the Near and Middle East and in Central Asia, with the ultimate aim, thereby, of destroying the British grip over India. Hopkirk is a capable and talented writer who knows how to draw the reader into his story line. But he is very economical with the truth, and he has concocted a British intelligence fairy tale.

As he admits, he is doing this for geopolitical purposes, to feed into the British campaign to portray a united Germany as the new "Fourth Reich" threat to Europe. His war history attempts to build the case not only that Germany was unilaterally responsible for the First World War, but that the war's deeper origins lay in Germany's ambitions, dating from the first half of the 19th century, to be a locomotive force for industrial development in Europe. Hopkirk roots such "provocative" German projects as the famous Berlin-to-Baghdad railway network in the 1840s work of Friedrich List, whom he labels "the first German imperialist."

He writes, in his first chapter: "In 1846, the political economist Friedrich List wrote that the lower reaches of the