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Britain’s geographic ‘smallness’ can be confirmed by glancing at a map of the world. And metaphorically speaking it is that smallness, in each and every sense of the word, which is crucial to understanding Linda Colley’s study of Britons held captive during the empire’s formative years. Just as the imperial process shackled British idealism to the competing dynamics of economic and military expansion, so it was that some well-intentioned but unfortunate souls found themselves held fast by forces beyond their control. Colley avoids becoming ensnared in an argument over how the nation attained its empire. Instead she draws our attention to an analogy of vulnerability that relates Britain’s imperial profile to the relative state of the human condition. The fragility of Anglo-Saxon health in extreme climates and the frailty of British male sexual identity are two of the many themes that find their way into discussions about captivity, freedom and the individual’s role in the machinery of empire. The author refers to this as a ‘big book’ and it is that in terms of geographic scope as well as objective. Chapters are grouped to form three distinct segments of study: Mediterranean North Africa, America and India. Afghanistan is relegated to the Epilogue, forming a lesser case study.

Within the compartmentalized world of academic historians it has not always been popular to write about British imperial history from the standpoint of ordinary people. Some scholars have imposed impersonal macro-economic models. Others wrote about Britain’s imperialism by way of comparison with Rome. In the process they produced ill-fitting cliché templates such as that associated with the term Pax Britannica. However it is the muck of social and economic minutiae, drawn from the everyday lives of the captives, that yields the most fertile seedbed for the growth of Colley’s ideas about the uncertainty of empire. She balances the captives’ historic perspective with a culturally sensitive synopsis of the captors. This enables us to assess the potential of published captivity narratives and evaluate them as historically contemporary accounts of seemingly alien societies. Captives demonstrates the timeless way in which militarily powerful empires can be reduced to vulnerability by preying upon their citizens.

A succinct statement of the author’s overall objective is difficult to find within the book’s pages. But Colley neatly summarized her focus in a paragraph written from a Delhi hotel room while watching the 2003 War with Iraq unfold on television. ‘The aim of my recent book, Captives, was
less to advance an alternative interpretation of the rise of British imperium, than to uncover and draw attention to parallel and important stories of the same process that had subsequently been forgotten or downplayed. I wanted to show how, to Britons living at the time, empire seemed for a long time uncertain and fraught with risk; how the imperial experiences of the mass of ordinary Britons were often very different from those of the proconsuls, generals, capitalists, politicians, pundits and memsahibs who customarily dominate imperial history books; and how, for countless men, women and children, Britain’s overseas enterprises led not to power, prestige and profit, but to different forms of captivity’.1

‘Part One: MEDITERRANEAN Captives and Constraints’, is the most consistent section of the book. The component chapters owe their integrity and poignancy to the manner in which Colley skilfully ties geography, economics and history together. A healthy critique of the captives’ stories reveals the race and gender imbalance woven into the historic record. The author, knowing full well the comparisons she could have drawn, refrained from pointing out similarities between the history of North African captivities and the events we have seen since September 11th 2001. If she had fallen victim to that temptation the book would have become dated rapidly and not withstood the test of time. These chapters stop short of bludgeoning the reader with interpretive observation. Colley trusts we will recognize the degree to which British society acted to—as she terms it—‘other’ non-British cultures. Protestant England was effectively pre-programmed to demonise African Muslims. They were ‘other’ than Christian and ‘other’ than white, naturally that made them ‘other’ than British. But intrigue and trade also led to double standards when it came to negotiating with some of those ‘other’ powers. Essential weapons components were funnelled from London to the Sultan of Morocco to secure the freedom of captives’.2

‘Part Two: AMERICA Captives and Embarrassments’ starts from a position of strength in examining the British interaction with the indigenous people of North America. Colley’s comments on the works of colonial clergyman Cotton Mather (1691) seem to echo those of Michael Kraus: a mid-twentieth century American historiographer who saw Mather’s chronicle to be in the English ‘ecclesiastical narrative tradition’. Religious zeal and a sense of imperial identity were not uncommon in the writings of men who felt they were chosen by God to go forth and live in the Promised Land. Colley then pushes forward with the Seven Year’s War (1756–1763), thereby broadening the study to parallel the expansion that took place on the American frontier. This serves to buttress the argument that colonial Britons were also held captive—like later Americans—by the lure of the frontier. Its beckoning call was a metaphor for the temptation to try and escape from the drudgery of a work-a-day existence.


2 Colley, Captives, p. 68. (All page reference numbers are derived from the hardback edition.)
As Colley progresses chronologically, a collage of observations emerge about the War of the American Revolution (1775–1783). Initially the thread of continuity is apparent, but then the narrative fabric deviates significantly from the existing pattern. We are provided with a vignette on the Americans’ capture, imprisonment and execution of Major John André, the aide-de-camp of British Commander-in-Chief Henry Clinton. André was apprehended as he was returning from covert negotiations with Benedict Arnold. This brief ten-day captivity scenario ended in hanging, not forced labour, ransom, or trade. That breaks the consistent series of ‘cultures in conflict’ that had been established thus far. The Major’s story, detailing the execution of a very privileged British soldier apprehended out of uniform while on a covert mission during wartime, is misplaced and not in harmony with the overall direction of the book. John André was not one of the ‘other’ ranks drawn from the working class and he was far from being one of those ‘other’ peripheral people detached from the imperial process. His death tells us less about the uncertainty of empires and the vulnerability of ordinary Britons, than it does about an emergent American military culture that continues to seek reassurance and legal approval in its prosecution of war. André was a potential gold mine of intelligence and, at the very least, a hefty bargaining chip in prisoner trades. But in his trial as a spy, a charge that carried the death sentence, we can see the evolution of an American military ethos wedded to achieving political purpose via the selective application of egalitarian rules of war. This aristocratic British officer represented everything that was imperialistic. But no one had to feel guilty or morally responsible for killing him if the proper justification could be found. In fact, it might be rather comforting to hang him as a spy because that was the sanctioned course of action under the appropriately suitable laws of war.

‘Part Three: INDIA Captives and Conquest’ should interest most readers of this review. It is composed of chapters that bracket the period from 1750–1850 and it features the story of ‘camp follower’ Sarah Shade, Tipu Sultan’s British military prisoners and an examination of white working class soldiers held as ‘captives in uniform’ by the British garrison state in India. Linda Colley, in an interview conducted after the publication of Captives, said ‘Prisoner-of-war [POW] dramas have been a staple of British and American history since the 1600s’ and she noted that the British and American commitment to re-build Iraq would reveal ‘the central paradox of empire. That those who practise it, and not just those on the receiving end, are in different ways made captive’. Perhaps it is our fascination with POW stories and the timely relevance of Colley’s work that explains why the pages she devoted to Tipu and his prisoners have featured prominently in other reviews of this book.

During the Second Anglo-Mysore War Lieutenant Colonel Baillie’s detachment suffered a stunning battlefield loss at the Battle of Pollilur in 1780, which led to the captivity of many Britons. A large and detailed painting

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3 Linda Colley The Costs of Empire, in the ‘Culture’ Section (supplement), pp. 40–1, Sunday Times, London, 30 March 03.
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of ‘Baillie’s Disaster’ can be seen on display at Tipu’s so-called ‘summer palace’ at Daria Daulat Bagh, about a kilometre east of Srirangapatnam. The artwork constitutes one of two key pieces of iconographic evidence used in Linda Colley’s discussion of events in Mysore. . . . [Baillie’s] white soldiers all appear in uniform jackets of red, a colour associated with blood, fertility and power, but also in India with eunuchs and with women. Baillie’s men are also conspicuously and invariably clean-shaven. Neatly side-burned, with doe-like eyes, raised eyebrows, and pretty pink lips, they have been painted to look like girls, or at least creatures who are not fully male’.4 True, red was linked to ‘eunuchs and with women’ in various South Asian settings. William Dalrymple’s White Mughals notes the Indian women associated with the British Resident at Delhi as having slept in a red silk tent.5 But categorical cultural statements about what was or was not done in India are always dangerous. Red military uniforms had a specifically masculine association in the eighteenth century military science common to South Asians and Europeans alike. Red uniforms were easier for a commander to spot and therefore direct effectively on a battlefield obscured by the smoke from black powder weaponry. Red was also said to hold a psychological advantage in that blood did not show as conspicuously, supposedly reducing the contagion of panic when things got messy. But red was also a traditional colour of power and authority in some rather significant regions of India. Several Maratha regular infantry units had their scarlet uniform cloth purchased from European merchants. Red was the colour of turbans worn by some of the most militarily powerful Maratha leaders. And despite what one might think about the relationship between masculine identity and aggression, it would have been tempting fate to address the likes of Mahadji Sindia and Yaswunt Rao Holkar as ‘eunuchs or women’.

What about those ‘pretty pink lips . . . painted to look like girls, or at least creatures who are not fully male’? The painting at Daria Daulat Bagh is over 200 years old and resides on an exterior wall—granted a wall sheltered by a porch to which sunscreens were later affixed. When I studied the painting nearly twenty years ago, it showed not only the strains of climatic degradation but the historic legacy of what must kindly be called attempted restoration efforts. Pigment deterioration alone could account for colour distortion, but I think the colour is within the value range intended by the artist. Caucasian Britons do have comparatively pink lips by South Indian standards of complexion. Was pink considered effeminate to Mysorian Muslims in the 1780s? How reasonable is Colley’s statement that ‘they have been painted to look like girls, or at least creatures who are not fully male’ given the painting’s comparative physiological and historic accuracy? This amounts to the cross-cultural retrofitting of gender-based interpretations, by means of projecting a current stereotype back into history.

4 Colley, Captives, pp. 260–70.
Arguably the most famous of Tipu’s British prisoners was David Baird. But Colley limits her analysis of his captivity to a historiographical comment that Baird’s biographer contributed to the ‘strangely gentle’ transformation of British warriors that took place as part of a ‘highly effective formula of focusing attention on the emotional and moral development of Westerners caught up in extra-European conflicts’. Colley writes nothing of substance concerning Baird’s pivotal captivity experience, his release, or his later triumphant return to Srirangapatnam. Having formerly been held prisoner by Tipu, Baird was destined to play a special role in the concluding act of the Anglo-Mysore drama that spanned more than three decades. Baird was known for his indomitable Scottish warrior spirit. Out of respect for his previous suffering in captivity, consideration of his leadership skills, as well as first-hand knowledge of the fortress, British authorities gave Baird command of the assault party that led the final attack and penetrated Srirangapatnam where Tipu was killed; concluding the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War in May 1799. Following his heroic battlefield success, Baird was considered as the leading candidate to be appointed as Military Governor of Srirangapatnam. A great scandal then erupted as Governor General Richard Wellesley snubbed Baird. Richard rushed to appoint his younger and rather inexperienced brother Arthur Wellesley (the then future Duke of Wellington), to the coveted governorship.

Rather than exploring Baird’s story, Colley dwells on the forced circumcision of Tipu’s captives. For pessimists, as we have seen, the circumcision inflicted on some British captives in Mysore seemed an ultimate and definitive emblem of national castration and unmanning. British soldiers dreaded forced conversion to Islam while being held captive in Mysore. Their terror at the thought of circumcision was well founded for reasons other than Colley’s posited fear of the naked exposure of Britain’s ‘smallness’ (yes giggle, giggle—as opposed to Britons’ smallness). In pushing her assumptions, about the symbolic relationship between a British captive’s circumcision and national castration, Linda Colley looks momentarily ethnocentric. India’s so-called successor states were not locked in suspended animation awaiting the formation of the British Raj. At the same time that the British were testing the Mysore frontier, so were the Marathas who had their own political designs on the region. Not all those held captive in Mysore’s prisons were Britons. Among the more infamous of Tipu’s forced Hindu converts to Islam was the Maratha ‘freebooter’ Dhundiah Waugh who managed to escape during the chaos accompanying the fall of Srirangapatnam. One would be hard pressed to make a case that Dhundiah’s circumcision and conversion to Islam in Tipu’s

6 Colley, Captives, p. 305.
7 The First Anglo-Mysore War started in 1767.
8 Colley, Captives, p. 305.
9 During the Third Anglo-Mysore War the British were allied with the Marathas and beholden to southern jagirdars for cavalry support as well as logistical relief. Major Alexander Dirom, A Narrative of the Campaign in India which Terminated The War With Tippoo Sultan in 1792 (London, 1793).
dungeon was symbolic of the Marathas’ political castration—that would be left to the British in the form of the Treaty of Bassein.

Leaving aside the tenuous relationship between circumcision and national castration, let us return to the previously discussed painting of Baillie’s Disaster and Colley’s important assertion that Britain’s imperial experience held captive the very agents of imperial expansion on which it depended. A mural of this magnitude would only be commissioned for significant victories. If the British had not fought as worthy opponents they would not be honoured in such a manner. Following Tipu’s death and Baird being passed over for promotion, the palatial home at Daria Daulat Bagh—complete with mural—served as the Residence for Military Governor Arthur Wellesley. It seems improbable that Arthur, the no nonsense soldier credited with military victory over Napoleon, would have allowed the painting of Baillie’s Disaster to survive intact if he thought for one moment that it cast aspersions on the sexuality of British soldiers as suggested by Colley. The odds seem more likely that he deemed the painting to be historically accurate and he left it intact as a warning to other British soldiers. It exemplified Arthur Wellesley’s often-repeated maxim for victory in South Asian warfare; move out and attack—never retire before a native opponent. Demonstrations of this doctrine were apparent in Wellesley’s personal leadership of the cavalry charge that killed Dhundiah Waugh as well as his human wave tactics against the Marathas’ regular infantry at the Battle of Assaye. A battle necessitated by the Marathas’ unwillingness to accept the yoke of British imperialism contained within the Treaty of Bassein proffered by Arthur’s dear brother—Governor General Richard Wellesley.

Another related and equally debatable piece of iconographic evidence, introduced by Linda Colley, is Thomas Rowlandson’s bawdy cartoon ‘The Death of Tippoo or Besieging a Haram!!!’ The rude little caricature should be interpreted as an outrageously satirical portrayal of the dangers and hardships faced by the British veterans of Srirangpatnam. For years British regulars serving in America discounted the efforts of their comrades who fought in India. There was a belief that the latter enjoyed a soft life. And certainly the mile-long baggage train of an Indian army on the march—complete with a bazaar and nautch girls—offered dining and entertainment options superior to those found in the frozen blockhouses along the Niagara frontier. More than a decade before Rowlandson drew his scene, Major Innes Munro had written ‘I will venture to say that some detachments in America would have been glad to begin a campaign upon the fragments to be found in the frozen blockhouses along the Niagara frontier. More than a decade before Rowlandson drew his scene, Major Innes Munro had written ‘I will venture to say that some detachments in America would have been glad to begin a campaign upon the fragments to be found in an Indian army after their return from an expedition’. It seems the British military was as ethnocentric about its self-image as it was about

This advice was said to have been neglected by soldiers like Monson (hence the need for Monson’s Retreat before Yaswunt Rao Holkar in the 1804–1805 Campaign) and extolled by Napier who allegedly referred to it in 1843 in terms of lessons from the ‘Great Master’.

the challenges it faced in combat. If one had not fought the Americans or the French, had one ever experienced ‘real’ combat? The downgrading of dangers associated with campaigns in India continued until shortly after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815. Was the timing coincidence? Or, did British victory at the Battle of Waterloo have more to do with Arthur Wellesley’s military apprenticeship in India than anything that occurred on the ‘playing fields of Eton’? Later in the nineteenth century, as a prolonged period of peace on the continent reduced the opportunities to soldier in Europe’s racially fratricidal wars, British warriors began to look longingly towards India. One could do some ‘real’ soldiering in the Sikh and Afghan campaigns. They were serious theatres of war, ideal for the acquisition of combat experience and, if you were lucky enough to survive disease as well as the enemy, a few medals.

Colley passes-up the opportunity to comment on the satirical downgrading of Indian campaign experience—another variation on culturally oriented racism that was entwined in British inter-service rivalry. Instead she homes in on the overtly sexual aspects of the British officers’ behaviour in Rowlandson’s cartoon. ‘Their faces are disfigured by lust: their noses in particular are wildly elongated by the artist so as to suggest phallic urgency. Any restraint, like chivalry, is conspicuously absent. One British officer lies helpless beneath his ravished, half-naked Mysore victim, a rapist who has become captive, and is even ridiculous’. In all fairness to Rowlandson, of the seven officers depicted, only one seems to match Colley’s description as having a nose ‘wildly elongated by the artist so as to suggest phallic urgency’. Although it is undoubtedly coincidence, Arthur Wellesley—the newly appointed Military Governor of Srirangapatnam—had what we might term a rather large proboscis. It was that endearing appendage that allegedly earned him the nickname Nosey among enlisted men. That British plundering got totally out of control at Srirangapatnam is part of the historic record. Arthur, with strong reliance on the lash, restored order. In retrospect Rowlandson’s drawing may be taken as a bitingly sarcastic lampoon; a tongue-in-cheek depiction of the hardships and dangers of soldiering in India that many white Britons in the early nineteenth century would dismiss as a ‘naughty bit-o-fun’ in the form of a cartoon. But one might also interpret it as serious swipe at the imperial policy of the day. As the home island held its breath and waited to see what Napoleon would do next in Europe, the government continued to spend more to underwrite the EIC’s endless series of wars in India. Plunder was not enough to bankroll the EIC’s military operations and the lust of imperial conquest, as coupled to a debauched ‘India policy’, is also present in Rowlandson’s cartoon.

One of the more controversial aspects of Captives concerns Colley’s assertions about the British deployment of working-class white troops in India. She has asked us to accept that the majority of British soldiers in

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Asia ‘after a fashion, were captives of their own state, captives in uniform’. Braving potential criticism Colley assures us that ‘These men were obviously not captives of empire in the same straight-forward sense as the individuals we have encountered in earlier chapters’ but ‘these white soldiers overseas shared levels of unfreedom with black slaves’. This hypothesis applies Colley’s previously stated observations on ‘othering’ to British society; specifically those ‘other’ than the English middle and upper classes, those ‘others’ held captive by their socio-economic circumstances and ethnicity. These soldier captives were cogs in a war machine. She states, ‘without Irishmen, the rampant growth of Britain’s empire at this stage would scarcely have been possible. By the 1830s they made up over 40 per cent of its legions. Before the Famine, more than half of all white soldiers in India were Irish’.

Peter Stanley’s benchmark study of British military culture in India is useful in assessing Colley’s theory of ‘captives in uniform’. Stanley wrote, ‘Desperation and enterprise were central to Victorian society, fundamental responses to an economy regulated largely by individual conscience. British social historians have traditionally concentrated on the working-class predicament of desperation. By contrast, aspiration and enterprise have been largely overlooked. In that the Company’s soldiers aspired modestly to marriage, a bungalow, servants, four hours’ work a day, and a pension . . .’. Indeed there is much in Stanley’s work that challenges Colley’s assumptions about those Britons who served in India during the nineteenth century. ‘The Company’s recruiting parties (ironically, mostly retired Queens sergeants) could afford to be relatively selective. During the mid-1850s (when the force expanded) recruiting parties still needed to find only twenty men each month in each of its seven recruiting districts to meet the ‘beating orders’ specifying their quotas’. The limited number of spaces and the popularity of EIC service also helped account for the quality of men the Company was able to find, albeit some tended to see the Company’s armies as a refuge in much the same way that the French Foreign Legion was viewed by later generations. Stanley’s exploration of this phenomenon gave him cause to comment that the Company’s list of new privates included ‘law students, opticians and accountants, and notably medical students or surgeons—at least 26 enlisting in the Bengal regiments during the 1840s, perhaps fleeing the horrors of the operating room, or, more prosaically, the financial insecurity of medical practice’.

On the subject of Irish enlistment, Stanley admitted that these were soldiers ‘often impelled by a broader economic imperative’ but his exhaustive research showed that their numbers represented an anomaly in overall nineteenth-century trends. ‘Following the great famine, a time coinciding with one of the force’s periodic expansions, Irish recruits became more

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13 Colley’s Captives, p. 311.
14 Colley’s Captives, p. 310.
16 Stanley’s, White Mutiny, p. 13.
17 Stanley’s, White Mutiny, p. 15.
prominent than before... A survey of the composition of drafts throughout the period reveals, inevitably, a more complex picture. Rather than constituting a predominantly Irish force throughout the period, Irish recruits comprised between a third and three-quarters of particular drafts, and predominated only in the 1830s and the late 1840s.18

What are we to conclude from such debates? Some historiographers think the phrase ‘definitive history’ is an oxymoron because they consider it the duty of each generation of historians to re-write history; a cyclical process of revision based on seeing the past through the lens of one’s own life and times. During the past two decades British imperial history, like other forms of history, has been subjected to a wave of ‘politically correct’ revision. Linda Colley’s Captives is written in a tone that suggests that we may now be entering the post-politically correct era, a timeframe that is more conducive to talking about the comparative suffering of people who found themselves in difficult positions during the clash of cultures inherent in any imperial process.

Colley’s work is important because it helps students of history to make sense of the politically correct movement’s aftermath. Her writing demonstrates a way forward. And although I may disagree on the interpretation of specific aspects of South Asian military history, I respect her role as a pathfinder in helping us get back on track. She urges a more balanced consideration of the embedded forms of bias (gender, race, ethnicity and religion) as found in the historically contemporary accounts that were published in the imperial period. Colley moves her analysis of captivity narratives beyond the level of victim studies by incorporating a broad spectrum of relevant information that places the individual more holistically in the context of empire. This is not an attack on the existence of empire, nor can it be said to assuage the burden of imperial guilt in the manner popularly associated with Niall Ferguson.19 Captives is a clever micro-macro juxtaposition that reveals the comparative condition of empire by examining the woeful tales of individuals caught-up in an imperial process fraught with hazard. This tome should be of particular interest to the increasing number of historians who study ‘frontiers in history’, ‘the concept of masculinity’ and ‘the construction of borders in trans-national environments.’ Captives can provide those specialists with a vehicle for the exploration of a theoretical point in time where national boundaries, religious beliefs, racial frontiers, and sexual identities, all intersected by way of captives’ experiences.

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18 Stanley’s, White Mutiny, p. 17. Some historically contemporary authorities noted the Bengal Horse Artillery’s greatest period of Irish enlistment as being from ‘the mid-1840s to mid-1850s’, Stanley p. 33, footnote 27.

The second half of the eighteenth century witnessed accelerating global trends in commerce and warfare. France and Britain devoured foreign resources on an ever-increasing scale, expanding their imperial reach in the process of supplanting local markets. Their competition was simultaneously economic and military in nature; conflict flaring whenever restraint buckled under the pressure of geo-political posturing. Given their adversarial roles in the Seven Years War (1756–1763), The War of the American Revolution (1775–1783) and The Wars of the French Revolution (1792–1800), it would seem reasonable to speculate that relations between Paris and London were continuously poisoned by antagonism. However, Arvind Sinha’s Politics of Trade demonstrates that within the commercial activity along the Coromandel Coast, we can find windows of Anglo-French cooperation from 1763 to 1793.

Sinha reveals that French and British private business interests were keen to formulate mutually beneficial agreements when there was a peaceful lull between wars. Entrepreneurs, especially those with an eye for creative financing and logistical arrangements, were willing to work together despite the bellicose pronouncements of their respective governments. Unfortunately the era of cooperation was doomed as these two historically contemporary superpowers became engrossed in an increasingly lengthy series of campaigns for supremacy. It was a conflict that morphed into the Napoleonic Wars and it would not end until the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. Ultimately it was military rivalry and not trade rivalry that worked against Anglo-French joint ventures.

The ‘Introduction’ to Sinha’s book takes the form of a bibliographic essay. The author covers the standard works in both French and English, advising the reader on how much India-specific information one can expect to find in pages devoted to trade and commerce during the period. Chapter One ‘Ports, Society and Economy’ is a brief survey that emphasizes the Coromandel Coast’s regional identity and economic geography. ‘The Rise of Rival Companies’ forms Chapter Two and it deals more with the eighteenth century than the heading suggests. Yet it is crucial to the story in covering the abolition of la Compagnie des Indes in 1769 and the growing debate surrounding ‘The Period of French Free Trade’—that specific discussion lending its name to Chapter Three. Practical use is made of French shipping tables and within the context of ‘country trade’ we find Bengal rice sold in Mocha and Mauritius at consistent profits of over 200%.¹ Margins of that magnitude might be useful

¹ Sinha, The Politics of Trade, Table 3.8, p. 106.
in explaining how and why local shipping interests exacerbated periodic Indian famine conditions. But some shipmasters that sailed the Coromandel Coast carried cargoes of a different nature. Pondicherry was a transhipment point for those who engaged in trafficking human beings and up to one-quarter of the Indian slaves bound for Mauritius died at sea.

There are several aspects of the ‘Free Trade’ or third chapter, that make it potentially useful as an undergraduate reading assignment in World History, entry level economic history, or first year South Asian studies. This suitability is showcased in Sinha’s explanation of the East India Company’s (EIC’s) frustration with British citizens who facilitated France’s ‘Indian trade’. French procurement agents needed as much cash as possible when negotiating in South Asian market places. At the same time many British citizens had considerable sums of currency in India that they wanted to transport to London—without risk and preferably at a profit. The answer to both their problems lay in an exchange of cash for credit notes as French traders borrowed money from Britons in India. French commercial agents then arranged, through London bankers, to have the sums re-paid in England by direct deposit. This demonstrates how private sector credit mechanisms increased liquidity and opened additional markets to Indian vendors, an event that was not warmly welcomed by the EIC—an excessively bureaucratic state-authorized monopoly.

Chapter Four, ‘The Birth of Nouvelle Compagnie des Indes and Coromandel Trade 1785–1793’ is related to the preceding chapter by way of the debate that continued to rage in France over laissez-faire trade policies. Despite esoteric disagreements on the strategic role of free markets in a society increasingly dedicated to revolutionary change, the French had settled on one tactical trade practise that disturbed the British Directors of the EIC. That was the custom of using cash/silver/bullion/specie, rather than European manufactured trade goods, to obtain the best quality Indian commodities. France did not lack products that appealed to the Indian market. Guns were always in demand. But during the period of free trade, the French had unwisely sold weapons to their own enemies—a mistake not to be repeated. Gold thread from Lyon was highly sought after by India’s textile industry, but there were other domestic and European markets that often took precedent for French deliveries of that luxury item. Cash in the form of silver coinage—regardless of its national origin—was acceptable at any time for the purposes of procuring goods. Money was a greater incentive than counter-trade. Using cash, the French could attract South Asian middlemen with goods that might otherwise have gone to the EIC.

‘Weavers and Merchants in the Vortex of Trade Politics’, Chapter Five, stresses the importance of the weaver and the role of merchant intermediaries within the Coromandel economy. We learn that the EIC sought to prohibit the weavers from participating in the South Asian military economy by banning their employment as Sepoys. Soldiering paid better wages that weaving.

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However, the EIC’s military recruiting ban on weavers was not altruistically aimed at saving those poor souls from death or disfigurement on the battlefield. Rather, the Company was becoming obsessed about preserving its industrial labour base; those underpaid human resources were needed to produce lucrative trade goods. The penultimate chapter ‘The Role of Indian Textiles in Anglo-French Relations’ is much broader in scope. It examines Indian textiles (Doorea, Mooree, Betteela, Organdi, Jamedani, etc.), Europe’s import competition policies, as well as the increase in South Indian cotton cultivation. The book’s ‘Conclusion’ consolidates the preceding chapters in recapping a cause and affect relationship in the rise and fall of Anglo-French trade relations on the Coromandel Coast 1763–1793.

If there is a quibble to be had with Arvind Sinha’s treatment of Indian history, it concerns the repeated references to the significance of The American ‘Revolutionary War’ and its impact. In one case this takes the form of a direct quotation from Holden Furber’s John Company at Work: A Study of Commercial Expansion in India in the Late 18th Century.4 But Sinha goes further in stating the outbreak of the war ‘totally dislocated the Indian trade’.5 This minor difference in perception over the significance of The American ‘Revolutionary War’, as a causal factor in South Asian trade disruption, should not be considered as a scholarly deficiency within The Politics of Trade. However, one would not want to condone any intellectual tendency to portray India as a constant historic ‘victim’ of events beyond her borders. Although the ‘American War’ (1775–1783) was significant in the overall balance of European forces in South Asia, it was in large part concurrent with other events arising in India such as the First Anglo-Maratha War (1775–1776, 1779–1782) and the Second Anglo-Mysore War (1780–1783).

The coexistence of multiple local wars, specifically in the period from 1779–1782, suggests that the disruption of South Asian trade patterns was attributable to more than distant battles in the Thirteen Colonies. Furber’s comments looking vaguely like academic shoring for the Amero-centric assertion that the first musket fired on Lexington Common produced ‘the shot heard round the world’.6 One can undoubtedly say that the British had seized Pondicherry and Mahe (1780) in retaliation for French naval support of American military operations. But it was Haidar Ali’s invasion of Arcot that provoked the EIC’s regional dispatch of 8,000 troops from Bengal under Eyre Coote. Their sea borne insertion culminated in British victory at Porto Novo (1781), a significant local event on the Coromandel Coast that had repercussions in London.

EIC debt mounted and profits plunged whenever the delicate balance between business and war got out of kilter. Any British Governor-General who was seen to have mishandled the Company’s trade, in comparison to the status quo antebellum, risked rebuke by corporate investors. Those who got it wrong were rightfully challenged in parliament as well as in the press. And

5 Sinha, The Politics of Trade, 79. See also pp. 42, 95.
6 Emerson poetically attributed this to Concord and not Lexington.
‘price-to-earnings’ ratios are not new tools for the assessment and evaluation of a stock’s performance. As financial historian Niall Ferguson explained, events within India could directly impact the economy of Britain.

In 1779 the Marathas defeated a British army sent to challenge their dominance of Western India. A year later Haidar Ali of Mysore and his son Tipu Sultan attacked Madras. As revenues imploded and costs exploded, the company had to rely on bond sales and short-term borrowing to remain afloat. Finally, the directors were forced not only to reduce the annual dividend but to turn to the government for assistance—to the disgust of the free market economist, Adam Smith.7

The Politics of Trade deserves better than to be rigidly typecast as ‘an economic and political history of the Coromandel Coast’. The tome’s exploration of southern regional textile production is a welcome change from those now tired and discredited Marxist labour histories that tended to dwell on the plight of Bengal’s weavers. Sinha’s work also lends itself to those studying the History and Philosophy of Science as we see how British mechanization of the textile industry influenced not only specific aspects of industrial output, but also resource consumption patterns and the trade demands of a colonial power seeking to maximize its market supply chain. The EIC gradually moved from being a distributor of India’s hand printed textiles to supplying British industry with raw cotton.8 This policy shift was at the expense of Indian textile producers that, until that time, had derived ‘value added’ profits from fabric dyeing and printing. As Britain reaped the benefits of the industrial revolution, it printed yard goods in a fraction of the time and undercut the price of Indian textiles in Europe.

The modesty of Sinha’s approach tends to underplay some rather significant observations on what many will recognize as the history of globalization. The author has indirectly provided us with background notes on the issue of job security in an eighteenth century period of global business re-location. Those who are following the current ‘outsourcing debate’ in America—as jobs are exported to firms in India—will be struck by the degree to which ‘what goes around, comes around’.9 It is not that corporate interests systematically target one population or another. Rather it is the nature of the beast, a ceaseless and unrelenting search for advantages in an environment of corporate competitiveness. The quest for sustained profits continues to shift labour supply cycles as it did in the second half of the eighteenth century. Publicly traded companies still try to insure continuing international investor support by way of reduced resource and production costs that enhance their share prices.

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The Deccan or central plateau of India forms a distinctive geographic region and the demanding environment has exerted a cultural influence of its own in art, industry and trade. The arrival of Islam in the area brought political and religious change, but continuity prevailed in the parallel structuring of social hierarchies. Muslim and Hindu communities both contained religious men, warriors, merchants and labourers. The overarching Muslim Bahmani Kingdom (founded in 1347) eventually fragmented and in so doing it contributed to the rise of five separate Sultanates. During the sixteenth century the Deccani Sultanates enjoyed considerable wealth and power. Yet life in the Deccan was rarely easy for those at the lower end of the socio-economic scale. War and its handmaiden famine, were frequent visitors to the region and a brutal natural selection process hardened the population. Despite all the conflict associated with the Sultanate period and its decline in the seventeenth century, some historians have assumed that the Deccan’s overall level of prosperity remained high as the result of economic diversification and vibrant trade networks.¹

The demise of the Deccani Sultanates created a power vacuum at a crucial time. The growth of Mughal power in central India remained problematic owing to issues associated with the projection of force. Eventually the Mughals had to assume a higher military profile in the Deccan; the rise of Maratha power in the second half of the seventeenth century having necessitated increasingly frequent expeditions to show the flag or relieve besieged fortresses. But things became somewhat chaotic following Emperor Aurangzeb’s death (1707). The man destined to become the next major Muslim powerbroker to dominate the region was the Nizam-ul-mulk. His Asaf Jahi dynasty (1724–1948) was initially based in Aurangabad but later it re-located to Hyderabad. A rather sizeable portion of the Deccan became incorporated into what emerged as the state of Hyderabad.

Yallampalli Vaikuntham’s State, Economy and Social Transformation Hyderabad State delivers the indictment that the Asaf Jahis failed to tap Hyderabad’s natural resources and/or stimulate commercial activity. That failure is said to have combined with the persistence of regressive feudal practises to destabilize the state, keeping the peasantry ‘in a perpetual state of want’.²

Vaikuntham’s book contains some very useful economic data pertaining to a broad range of topics but generally speaking it focuses on land revenue, agriculture, famine, trade, industry and transportation in Hyderabad. While some of the demographic tables overlap the late nineteenth century, the

¹ The Qutub Shahi dynasty of Golconda (AKA Golkunda), which rested on the ancient ruins of the Hindu Kingdom of Warangal, was particularly well known for its trade in diamonds and textiles.
² Vaikuntham, State, Economy and Social Transformation, pp. 14–15.
majority cover the first half of the twentieth century. The concern expressed in this review is not with the extensive employment of numbers, but rather with the unanswered questions that they raise.

Toll roads and private funding initiatives are not new ideas; they can be seen in the pre-European history of India. The economic benefits of state-improved transportation systems were apparent during the reign of Ashoka and similar standards were rigorously up-held in the golden age of Mughal administration. Why did Hyderabad apparently ignore the wisdom of other South Asian empires? Did limited trade and transport work to the advantage of a merchant class that had their own reasons to encourage trade restrictions? Could the small number of access routes have increased the efficiency of collecting the state’s notorious importation tariffs? It is not enough to bemoan the deficiencies of the region’s logistical arteries and say that Hyderabad ‘continued to be backward after it joined the Indian Union since the roads of the state were basically on wrong feudal foundations’. Regrettably, this sort of sniping occurs too often in this book.

Throughout history Hyderabad has had a number of prosperous merchants and entrepreneurs. Those wealthy individuals did not all spring from a single religious group. To what demonstrable degree was economic communalism a factor in the economy of Hyderabad? If it existed, was it a conscious Machiavellian control device manipulated for the benefit of those at the centre of society? We are teased into speculating on the economic extent of *intra* communal relations in Hyderabad. Did the historic division of greater Hyderabad, into three linguistic zones (as reflected in the Telugu, Marathi and Kannada language areas), represent a deeper cultural divide that retarded collective economic growth? Without a thorough examination of the cultural dynamics, found in trade and commerce, we are at a disadvantage in trying to understand what amounts to a rather biased mosaic-like rendering of Hyderabad’s economy. The author may be entirely correct in laying the blame at the feet of the Asaf Jahis. But the case lacks the depth—as opposed to breadth—of research needed to sway the readership as jury in a societal case of economic malpractice.

It is generally accepted that ‘timing is everything’ and that is especially true in the publishing world. Publications are often judged in the context of the three universal references we use to describe time—the past, present, and future. Meaning that we tend to form opinions of books based upon our subjective consideration of their historic forerunners, existing competition in the field and how we think works will fair in the future. Yallampalli Vaikuntham’s commentary and style would have been much more favourably judged in the 1960s. The Nehru era produced a unique genre of Indian scholars who knew that their stylistically distinctive writings often bordered on the compensatory. But they were necessary—one might even say patriotic—in that they fulfilled the need to bolster the Republic’s confidence and identity. Glib comments about the historic failings of so-called despotic Muslim states could be savoured in those days. However, times have

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changed in several respects. Vaikuntham’s book seems anachronistically out of step with recent trends in the writing of economic history; a sequential anomaly that is highlighted by Hyderabad’s current climate of business-driven transformation and Delhi’s warming relations with Islamabad. *State, Economy and Social Transformation*, lacks a contemporary analytical framework as well as a holistic investigation of the socio-political issues that governed economic interaction.

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Jos Gommans’ 1993 book, ‘The Rise of the Indo-Afghan Empire c. 1710–1780’, made us rethink the model of Indo-Islamic Empires in India. His pioneering study of the 18th century Indo-Afghan Empire questioned the geographically limited and agrarian society rooted understanding of a bureaucratically top-heavy Empire. It brought center stage the importance of the nomadic pastoral communities and their economies in sustaining the Indo-Afghan Empire. More importantly, it stressed that these moving communities introduced an element of fluidity in Empire building. Their itinerant and roving lifestyles, as they straddled the worlds of India, Central Asia and Iran, made the Empire expansive. Its boundaries stretched outwards to embrace the frontiers of Central Asia and Iran. The importance of the warhorse in the Indo-Islamic armies added that much needed stimulant to Empire building. It was always in the process of mending and bending. The cavalry based armies to a large extent remained the raison d’être for this agile state model.

In the book under review Gommans uses the same idea of an ‘itinerant Empire’ based on the cavalry might of the army to construct a model of Mughal state formation. He argues that the reliance on the cavalry provided the initiative to build a state that derived both from the revenue-bearing agricultural tracts and relied on the resources of the pasture lands of nomadic communities. Such considerations made the ecological zones of India a defining factor in Mughal state planning.

Gommans argues that the ecological divide in India between the arid zones in the western parts and the agriculturally productive Eastern zones is basic to understand the Mughal political culture. The Empire was located at the confluence of these zones—the inner frontier. This was a strategic choice. The agricultural zones provided it the revenue and the arid areas the recruiting ground for soldiers and also pastures and moving space for the oxen, bullocks and other animals of the army. The Empire cashed in also on the mentalities of both the nomadic societies of the arid zones and the sedentary population of the agricultural areas: the ghazi (itinerant warlord) and the mirza (respectable rooted gentry of the zamindari class) co-existed in the Mughal polity. Court
rituals like the incorporation into imperial court ceremonies (*khanzadgi*) or the embracive religion of Akbar, *din-I-Ilahi*, provided the cement that packed these diversities together. Even as centralization was achieved through such incorporative rituals and institutions, the inner frontier location of the Empire was vulnerable to centripetal forces. For instance, the process of Indianization of the foreign elements in the army through the mansabdari system gave them power and independence in far-flung regions of the empire. This was vulnerable to abuse. But more importantly Gommans argues that rural elites could replicate the inner frontier logic locally and carve out their independent niche. He calls this process zamindarisation.

These contradictions notwithstanding such a ‘frontier’ Empire had to be continuously on the move, straddling the two diverse worlds that it admirably combined. The moving imperial camp and the fort building activities of the Mughals were part of the process of integrating the Empire and building roads and providing surveillance.

Gommans links the regional centralization of the 18th century that led to the decline of the Empire to the process of zamindarisation. He sees the English East India Company that succeeded the Mughals as taking to the final stages the zamindarisation process. In other words it excels with super efficiency in controlling both the revenue producing areas and the peasant recruitment and pasture zones. Gommans argues that the Company’s drive to control both these spaces is triggered by the critical shift in the nature of military organization. It is the infantry made of peasant soldiers, rather than the cavalry with its troopers, that emerges as the hallmark of the Company army. This shift made obsolete the itinerant Empire model that cultivated both the pastoral nomadic areas as well as consolidated resources of sedentary societies for military requirements. The Company’s monopolistic drives and superior administrative efficiency tame the fluid frontier in such a way that the inner frontier ceases to exist. Vast pasturelands and their communities get ‘settled’ and revenue-bearing lands are neatly cordoned and monitored. An early modern state intolerant of mobile groups emerges and the Mughal model gets transformed.

Gommans’ reading of the Mughal secondary literature is refreshingly insightful. The study complements and reinforces Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyan’s notion of the Empire being a process rather than a final entity. Indeed the argument is more novel because it makes its case forcefully by highlighting the neglected military sphere of Mughal functioning. It lends a much-needed angle on military culture to Mughal studies. There are fascinating details about breeding, trade and military potential of the horse, the elephant, dromedaries, oxen and other animals important to the military commissariat. The details about forts and the discussions on siege strategies provide a window into a hitherto unknown world of Mughal warfare. But more importantly the account of war animals and strategies woven into his brilliant model of a ‘frontier Empire’ makes the details far more relevant and interesting.

However, one does wonder if the English Company’s success in taming the fluid frontier and heralding a new form of state formation that was rooted exclusively in the norms of settled societies of high caste peasants is somewhat
over stated. It is true that the shift to infantry regiments of high caste peasants in the Company armies did inaugurate different imperatives of rule. One important consequence was the tilt towards firmer control of and further expansion into sedentary revenue-bearing societies. However, the nomadic pastoral zones and their people could never be completely ‘tamed’ or made gentlemen soldiers until the 1850s. The large irregular cavalry regiments of the Company drawn from nomadic tribes of the Bhati etc. of the arid western areas, or the Hill Corps recruited from the tribals of the Jungle Tarai area were examples of the efforts to ‘settle’ these frontiers. But the continuance of the tribal rituals, dress and deportment in these regiments also indicated that very much like the Mughals the Company too was deriving from both the sedentary and the nomadic pastoral worlds. In this context it was very similar to the Mughal case where both the ghazi and the mirza co-existed.

But then this book is not about the Company’s military culture. On the Mughal case the argument is pioneering, intellectually stimulating and reflects an extremely intelligent reading of the Mughal literature.

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The history of oriental studies, as a discipline, has been overshadowed by the discourse about ‘orientalism’ as an ideological and political construction. Whatever work has been done in this field has revolved mostly around personalities, to the detriment of a more sociological approach, and has privileged studies of national developments rather than an exploration of transnational linkages. The present publication, although centered around a few prominent figures of French and Russian orientalism, does not shun an attempt at developing a sociological view, and is specifically focused on linkages across national borders. It is therefore doubly welcome, and should attract a measure of interest beyond the two scientific communities directly concerned. While its core consists of the correspondence between the famous French indologist and buddhologist Sylvain Lévy (1863–1935), and the less well-known, but no less remarkable, Russian orientalist scholar Sergej F. Ol’denburg (1863–1934), its chronological span and overall scope allow for a fascinating insight into the world of oriental scholarship in Europe during the 1880–1930 period.

The book, the result of a longstanding collaboration between the Russian Academy of Sciences (represented by Bongard-Levin and Vigasin) and the French CNRS (represented by Lardinois), draws on a variety of sources, mostly the Ol’denburg collection in the archives of the Russian Academy
in Saint Petersburg, and the Sylvain Lévy papers recently repatriated from Russia to France (they had been looted by the Nazis in 1940 and seized in 1945 by the Soviets). It is divided into two parts: a lengthy and erudite introduction, which paints a broad picture of the French and Russian orientalist milieux linked through this correspondence, with detailed biographical notices of the participants, and rich sociological insights thrown in, and a wide choice of letters, 130 in all, of which 55 exchanged between Lévy and Ol’denburg, the rest between the same and other correspondents in France and Russia.

The Lévy-Ol’denburg correspondence provides the collection with a focus, for these were two dominant personalities, each in his own country, who had an enormous influence over the course of scholarship. It should be noted at the outset that the correspondence is characterized by an unbalance: of the 55 letters, 54 are addressed by Lévy to Ol’denburg, which means that the Russian scholar remains a fairly shadowy figure, perceived mostly through the lenses of his French friend’s view of him. The letters are rich in fascinating details about Lévy’s professional and personal life, which would facilitate the work of a biographer (an international conference was recently held on Lévy in Paris), and give revealing insights into his work as a scholar as well as his engagement in civic life as a committed French republican. They also allow us a rare view of a professional acquaintance which very quickly blossomed into a deep friendship sustained during the entire life span of the two protagonists. While they project the interests shared between the two men, which revolved around buddhism and its Central Asian offshoot, they do not, however, allow us to derive very definite conclusions as to the pattern of intellectual affinity between them, which remains largely in the background as an underlying theme. An interesting aside is how little oriental scholarship in Russia appears to have been affected by the Bolshevik Revolution before the purges of the 1930s, which took their toll of Russian orientalists, although Ol’denburg himself died before the onslaught.

Other correspondences bring in important figures of French orientalism, such as Alfred Foucher or Paul Pelliot, as well as Russian orientalists Fedor I. Scerbatskoj and Vasili M. Alekseev, and they help broaden the overall picture of exchanges within the European orientalist academy, which, in this case, do not appear to have suffered too much from the impact of the First World War. French and Russian scholars maintained a pattern of interaction, which was not limited to epistolary exchanges, but, as the correspondence itself shows, was also kept alive by visits, participation in conferences and encounters on the ‘field’. This correspondence, in spite of its fragmentary character, opens the possibility of looking at the role of affects and sociability in the emergence of an international community of oriental scholars, a still largely unresearched area, and could therefore be a significant contribution to a global history of oriental scholarship, which is a task for the future.

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