

Ethical Empire?

This study centers upon the abolitionists, Quakers, free traders, disenchanted colonial agents, and Parsi intellectuals who participated in the British India Society, India Reform Society, and East India Association. Beginning in the 1830s, these agitators increasingly recognized that British dominion in India was exploitative and destabilizing; moreover, it had given rise to a series of prejudicial anomalies. Reformers therefore denounced the “virtual” enslavement, infrastructural decay, violations of the law of nations, and economic impoverishment that had occurred under colonial rule, as well as the metropole’s inattention to Indian affairs. By reconstructing the transregional networks that extended from Boston to Bengal and sustained these organizations, Zak Leonard analyzes India reformism from ideological and structural perspectives. In so doing, he historicizes the practice of anti-colonial critique and offers new insight into the frustrated development of a British imperial public consciousness. This title is part of the Flip It Open Programme and may also be available Open Access. Check our website Cambridge Core for details.

DR ZAK LEONARD is a historian of the British Empire.

Ethical Empire?

*India Reformism and the Critique
of Colonial Misgovernment*

Zak Leonard

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Zak Leonard

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Preface and Acknowledgments

In December 2019, the *Washington Post* published a bombshell series of articles entitled “The Afghanistan Papers.” Based on over 400 interviews collected by the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) and a trove of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s memos, Craig Whitlock’s exposé enumerated the misguided policies behind a conflict that would result in nearly 2,500 American deaths and 21,000 casualties.¹ This tranche of documents – which had been uncovered through lawsuits and Freedom of Information requests – clearly indicated that vying factions within the American government had attempted to exploit the war to advance their own geopolitical agendas. Meanwhile, a massive influx of aid had allowed corruption to fester; the American military tolerated graft among its strategic Afghan allies, thus eroding the population’s faith in the newly installed administration. Throughout this trillion-dollar boondoggle, military authorities had altered data and statistics to deceive the American people into believing that key objectives were being met.

Modeled on the “Pentagon Papers,” which had played a central role in turning American public opinion against the Vietnam War, the *Washington Post*’s explosive revelations landed with more of a thud. One editorial in *The Nation* noted that “the series barely registered as news” amidst the drama of Donald Trump’s first impeachment.² The American public was relatively insulated from the Afghanistan imbroglio; the conflict had not necessitated a draft, nor had it been funded in a fashion that directly impacted citizens’ pocketbooks. Moreover, the format of the “Papers,” which largely excerpted unedited interviews, brought the *Post* its own share of bad press. One blogger noted that SIGAR’s inquiries were designed to furnish information that would enable policymakers to avoid similar pitfalls in future conflicts. By unreflectingly parroting officials who ruminated on the Americans’ “good intentions gone awry,” Whitlock’s articles seemed to accept the premise that the invasion

¹ Craig Whitlock, “At War with the Truth,” *Washington Post*, 9 December 2019.

² Jeet Heer, “Where Is the Outrage Over the War in Afghanistan?” *The Nation*, 13 December 2019.

was justifiable in the first place.³ The “Papers” thus offered “an excellent case study of contemporary colonial propaganda, and yet another example of corporate media criticizing US wars without opposing US imperialism.” The real scandal was not the American government’s “noble incompetence,” but the fact that the invasion was “a war crime in violation of international law.”

One hundred and seventy-seven years before the *Post* published the “Papers,” abolitionist and India reformer George Thompson appeared in the assembly rooms in the English spa town of Cheltenham to protest the First Anglo-Afghan War. This conflict was also the result of an invasion by a Western power that had been justified on dubious grounds. Claiming that Emir Dost Mohammad was facilitating a Russian incursion into India, a colonial army had invaded Afghanistan in late 1838 and instigated a regime change. Yet neither parliamentarians nor the East India Company’s own Court of Directors had been privy to these machinations. Instead, the president of the Board of Control and the governor-general of India had connived to commit a “scandalous infraction against the law of nations” and launch a war against an independent sovereign who was well regarded by his subjects.⁴ The British “political agents” who led this dunderheaded campaign on the ground did so to justify their lavish salaries and plundered the Afghan population to further augment this windfall. Lkening the Afghans’ plight to that of the Chinese, Mexicans, Greeks, and Haitians who felt “the conqueror’s heel upon their necks and his chains around their limbs,” Thompson proclaimed that his “sympathies are with the oppressed — with those have been invaded — with those who are agonizing for their rights.”⁵

Thompson’s performance raises questions similar to those that drive the debate over the efficacy of “The Afghanistan Papers.” How did British and Indian critics of colonial abuses in the Victorian period secure documentary evidence of wrongdoing? How did they contend with officials’ obfuscation? How did they amplify their grievances in a manner that elicited metropolitan attention? And did this ventilation of scandals produce the desired results? It is these concerns that animate the following study.

Research for this project has taken me to numerous archives in both Britain and America. I would like to express my gratitude to the librarians and staff at the Boston Public Library, Library of Congress, Ames Library, British Library, Bodleian Library, John Rylands Library, and the Cambridge University Library for their assistance. Luci Gosling and Tom Gillmor at the Mary Evans Picture Library kindly helped me with securing

³ Joshua Cho, “WaPo’s Afghan Papers Propagate Colonial Narrative of Noble Intentions Gone Awry,” *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting*, 26 December 2019.

⁴ George Thompson, *The Affghan War. A Lecture* (Cheltenham: George Rowe, 1842), 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

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Association Abbreviations and Key Membership

BIS	British India Society (est. 1839) <i>Key contributing members:</i> George Thompson, Francis Carnac Brown, John Briggs, Joseph Pease, William Howitt, William Adam, Elizabeth Pease, Rungo Bapojee, Daniel O’Connell <i>Additional reformers in Thompson’s orbit:</i> William Lloyd Garrison, John Chapman, Frederick Chesson, Richard Webb, Dwarkanath Tagore, Robert Montgomery Martin, Joseph Hume
EIA	East India Association (est. 1866) <i>Key contributing members:</i> Dadabhai Naoroji, Thomas Evans Bell, Arthur Cotton, David Wedderburn, Nowrozjee Furdoonjee, Robert Elliot, William Tayler, Frederick Tyrrell, E. B. Eastwick, Arthur Knatchbull Connell, W. C. Bonnerjee, Iltudus Prichard
IRS	India Reform Society (est. 1853) <i>Key contributing members:</i> John Dickinson, John Bright, Richard Cobden, John Sullivan, Henry Danby Seymour, John Blackett, John Bruce Norton, Malcolm Lewin, F. C. Brown, J. B. Smith <i>Additional reformers in Dickinson’s orbit:</i> Arthur Cotton, Jagannath Sunkersett, J. M. Ludlow, Thomas Evans Bell
ACLL	Anti-Corn Law League
APS	Aborigines’ Protection Society
ASL	Anti-Slavery League
BA	Bombay Association
BBEIA	Bombay Branch of the East India Association (est. 1868)
BCC	Bombay Chamber of Commerce
BFASS	British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society
BIA	British Indian Association
CSA	Cotton Supply Association
MCA	Manchester Commercial Association
MCC	Manchester Chamber of Commerce
MNA	Madras Native Association
PIL	Peoples’ International League
SDBIS	South Durham British India Society