

## **The East India Company and the Politics of Knowledge**

The East India Company is remembered as the world's most powerful, not to say notorious, corporation. But for many of its advocates from the 1770s to the 1850s, it was also the world's most enlightened one. Joshua Ehrlich reveals that a commitment to knowledge was integral to the Company's ideology. He shows how the Company cited this commitment in defense of its increasingly fraught union of commercial and political power. He moves beyond studies of orientalism, colonial knowledge, and information with a new approach: the history of ideas of knowledge. He recovers a world of debate among the Company's officials and interlocutors, Indian and European, on the political uses of knowledge. Not only were these historical actors highly articulate on the subject but their ideas continue to resonate in the present. Knowledge was a fixture in the politics of the Company – just as it seems to be becoming a fixture in today's politics.

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Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
978-1-009-36795-0 – The East India Company and the Politics of Knowledge  
Joshua Ehrlich  
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Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom  
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
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103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment, a department of the University of Cambridge.

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[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781009367950](http://www.cambridge.org/9781009367950)

DOI: 10.1017/9781009367967

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First published 2023

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data.*

Names: Ehrlich, Joshua, 1987– author.

Title: The East India Company and the politics of knowledge / Joshua Ehrlich, University of Macau.

Description: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2023. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022060967 (print) | LCCN 2022060968 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781009367950 (hardback) | ISBN 9781009367967 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: East India Company – History. | Elite (Social sciences) –

India | Learning and scholarship – Political aspects – History. |

Education – India – History – 19th century. | India – Colonization. |

India – History – British occupation, 1765–1947.

Classification: LCC DS465 .E176 2023 (print) | LCC DS465 (ebook) |

DDC 954.03/1–dc23/eng/20230131

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022060967>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022060968>

ISBN 978-1-009-36795-0 Hardback

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*For my family*

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## Acknowledgments

In the summer of 2013, I encountered the following statement in a prospectus for the London Literary Lyceum penned in 1783 by Jacques-Pierre Brissot:

Commerce may be rendered subservient to the promotion of Science, and the same ship that carries the East-India Company's orders to Calcutta, may likewise carry the new instruments or the new work, and may bring back the Indian book for the Student of Gottingen, or the professor of oriental Languages at Paris.<sup>1</sup>

These words intrigued me. Why, at a time when the East India Company was conquering and ruling vast swathes of India, did the expatriate *philosophe* Brissot describe it in stubbornly mercantile terms? Why, at a time when its actions were drawing criticism from numerous quarters, did he envision the Company as an enlightened benefactor? I soon discovered that Brissot's rhetoric was scarcely original: Advocates of the Company had employed it for some years and would do so for many more. To explain this rhetoric, I would need to revisit the Company's ideology, its political-commercial constitution, and its engagements with knowledge.

This project first took shape as a doctoral dissertation at Harvard University. All those who guided and supported me in that undertaking have, and will ever have, my sincerest gratitude. I must mention specifically my committee members Sugata Bose and Emma Rothschild, and my writing group mates Kit Heintzman and Joe La Hausse de Lalouvière. But I am indebted to a hundred others and I hope they will forgive me for not listing their names here.

<sup>1</sup> Jacques-Pierre Brissot, *London Literary Lyceum; or, an Assembly and Correspondence Established at London* [London, 1783], p. 9.

In 2018, after defending my dissertation, I began the process of developing it into a book. I received more help than I had any right to expect from more individuals than I can now hope to remember. Sujit Sivasundaram and Robert Travers were abiding sources of inspiration and models of generosity. Peter Marshall, as ever, was an attentive reader of my work and an indispensable cicerone to the world of the Company. Nick Abbott, Ben Gilding, Nick Groom, Jessica Patterson, and Callie Wilkinson offered astute comments on the manuscript. Nick Abbott, Daniel Morgan, and Chander Shekhar lent expert advice on, and assistance with, Persian texts. (Any errors in translation are my own.) Many friends and colleagues kindly invited me to present my research virtually or in person; I would like to thank in particular Thomas Ahnert, Divya Cherian, Barry Crosbie, Beth Harper, Parimala Rao, Paris Spies-Gans, and Hiroki Ueno. Special thanks go to Rosane Rocher, who provided wisdom and reassurance at a pivotal juncture. I am profoundly grateful for the aid I also received, in abundance, from the following individuals: Mario Cams, Rishad Choudhury, Scott Connors, Richard Delacy, Rajeev Kinra, Nathan Kwan, Peter Mandler, Mohit Manohar, Dinyar Patel, Bhavani Raman, Holly Shaffer, Asheesh Siddique, and Ian Stewart.

I am deeply grateful too for the help rendered to me by archivists, librarians, and research assistants, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. While confined to Macau, I came to rely upon an international network stretching from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to Delhi to the Isle of Bute. I would like to thank above all Lynsey Nairn, Syed Shahid, Sadie Sunderland, Robbie Wilson, the Resource Sharing staff at Harvard Library, and the Asia, Pacific, and Africa Collections staff at the British Library. It is no exaggeration to say that without their contributions *The East India Company and the Politics of Knowledge* could not have been written.

My greatest debt is to David Armitage, who, more than anyone, has taught me what it means to be a historian. David's input over the past decade has sharpened and enriched this book immeasurably.

Finally, I would like to thank my family, especially my parents, Paul and Vicky, and my partner, Susan. I dedicate this book to them in small but heartfelt recompense for their steadfast love and encouragement.

## Note on the Text

Outside of direct quotations, Persian and other non-English names and terms have generally been rendered according to modern scholarly convention. But certain contemporary renderings have been preserved: The decision has been made to sacrifice some consistency for the sake of ease of reference. In lieu of a glossary, definitions of non-English words are provided throughout the text.



## Abbreviations

AJ	<i>Asiatic Journal</i>
BL	British Library
DMW	Marquess Wellesley, <i>The Despatches, Minutes, and Correspondence, of the Marquess Wellesley, K. G., During His Administration in India</i> , ed. [Robert] Montgomery Martin, 5 vols. (London, 1836–7)
GCPI	General Committee of Public Instruction
GIED	Lynn Zastoupil and Martin Moir, eds., <i>The Great Indian Education Debate: Documents Relating to the Orientalist-Anglicist Controversy, 1781–1843</i> (Richmond, UK, 1999)
HC Deb	House of Commons Debate, in <i>Parliamentary Debates from the Year 1803</i> (London, 1803–) unless otherwise stated
HL Deb	House of Lords Debate, in <i>Parliamentary Debates from the Year 1803</i> (London, 1803–) unless otherwise stated
JRAS	<i>Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland</i>
LWJ	Sir William Jones, <i>The Letters of Sir William Jones</i> , ed. Garland Cannon, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1970)
MAS	<i>Modern Asian Studies</i>
MWH	G. R. Gleig, <i>Memoirs of the Life of The Right Hon. Warren Hastings</i> , 3 vols. (London, 1841)
NAI	National Archives of India
NLS	National Library of Scotland
PCFW	Proceedings of the College of Fort William, National Archives of India, Home Miscellaneous
PP	Parliamentary Papers
TNA	The National Archives (UK)