

Introduction

Britain, Empire, and 'Openness' to the East

In 1761 Richard Owen Cambridge published *An Account of the War in India*, telling the story of a decade of conflict between British and French forces in the south of the subcontinent. While this work says nothing about the 1757 battle of Plassey and the subsequent revolution that led to the East India Company (hereafter EIC) gaining sovereign power in Bengal, it testifies to 'the great reputation which the nation, and so many individuals have acquired in the East-Indies'.¹ Cambridge suggested that those, like him, without first-hand experience of India might already be primed to receive news of Britons' fantastic exploits there because of the 'Eastern' fictions to which they were accustomed: 'It will not appear strange that the generality of the world, through the habits of reading novels, and works of the imagination, should expect from an history of the East (. . . the scene of most of their ideal stories) a tale of adventures full of wonder and novelty, and nearly bordering upon romance.'² Even as he recorded the improbable story of how 'a handful of Europeans' had been able to dominate 'a multitude of Asiatics', however, Cambridge emphasized that his own narrative was soberly factual.³ He also sought to mediate what he presented as – for himself and his audience – a hitherto unknown reality, prefacing his text with a 'Glossary of Persic and Indian Names', from 'Arzee' ('a request, or petition') to 'Vakeel' ('an agent or minister for the Moors').⁴ Cambridge therefore identified two different and apparently opposing registers of representation in and through which 'the East' might be apprehended by Britons – the fictional extravagance of 'ideal stories' and a new lexicon of more precise and detailed reference that was the product of an ongoing global conflict.

The relationship between a generic 'Orientalism' and more specific understandings of historical, geographical, and/or cultural difference provides a key point of focus for this book, and I return throughout my introduction to the suggestive though unstable distinction between the

'ideal' and the real which Cambridge drew in his history of the present. Before outlining my larger concerns, however, it is first of all necessary to consider some recent developments in the critical analysis of 'British Orientalisms' which also demonstrate the capaciousness of the much disputed term 'Orientalism' itself. (I do not rehearse the now familiar debates surrounding Edward Said's justly famous work; my own reference to 'Orientalism' follows the inclusive usage of the period under discussion.) Two stimulating studies have explored the production and reception of what might be regarded, following Cambridge, as the 'old' domain of Eastern fictions, in circulation before the imperial turn that his work anticipates. Ros Ballaster's *Fabulous Orient*s addresses the eighteenth-century sense of 'the East' as 'a (sometimes *the*) source of story', paying particular attention to sequences of tales associated with Persia, Turkey, China, and India.⁵ Ballaster argues that the 'transport' of audiences captivated by these fictions should not be seen as a momentarily pleasurable escapism, but rather as a transformative experience of 'imaginary projection into the psyche and culture of an other', where the reading subject's 'sovereignty' is abandoned.⁶ Srinivas Aravamudan's *Enlightenment Orientalism* examines instead a miscellany of 'pseudoethnographies, sexual fantasies, and political utopias', but it likewise accentuates the broadly liberatory possibilities offered by Easts of the imagination, 'nine parts invented and one part referential'.⁷ Aravamudan recovers an 'archive' of playfully reflexive works that is the product of 'a transcultural, cosmopolitan . . . Orientalism', which rejects the emergent novel's 'monoculture' by aspiring to 'mutual understanding across cultural differences'.⁸

Aravamudan defines 'Enlightenment Orientalism' as 'a fictional mode for dreaming with the Orient', reworking Said's terminology but accepting his claim that the turn to empire was a watershed with enduring consequences: 'Imperial conquest turned Orientalism malefic.'⁹ Recently, however, it has been suggested that Britain's Eastern empire, in the EIC's late eighteenth-century 'Orientalist' phase, may have inspired in agents of colonial authority something akin to the openness to the other that Ballaster and Aravamudan regard as characteristic of an earlier period. In broad terms, as Cambridge recognized, empire confronted Britons with the unfamiliar, and as is evident in the influential work of the polymath Sir William Jones, it could provide an impetus to projects of cultural translation too. In his inaugural address to the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784, for example, Jones described how exposure both to 'eventful histories' and to 'agreeable fictions' sparked his interest in 'the eastern world', making him particularly receptive to his auspicious situation en

route to Bengal, as ‘*India* lay before us, and *Persia* on our left, while a breeze from *Arabia* blew nearly on our stern.’¹⁰

The collective endeavour inaugurated by Jones represents an intellectual engagement with an ‘infinitely diversified’ Asia rather than an amorphous ‘East’, but the idiom of wonder – which Cambridge had associated with the ‘ideal’ – nonetheless endures in Jones’s palpable exhilaration at the scale of this undertaking.¹¹ His ‘Discourse’ anticipates the extraction of scholarly treasure from an ‘immense mine in which we might labour with equal delight and advantage’, and it memorably defines the purview of the Asiatic Society as ‘MAN and NATURE: whatever is performed by the one, or produced by the other’.¹² Although knowledge is clearly in the service of power here, Jones conceives of colonial encounter as a process that appears as horizon-expanding as the private readerly transport discussed by Ballaster and Aravamudan. Jones may be seen as ‘provincializing’ Europe, because even as he assumes a privileged way of seeing, he invites his audience to take ‘*Hindustan* as a centre’ and, from the vantage point of Bengal, to survey the diversity of a vast continent that makes Europe, still more so Britain itself, insignificant in comparison.¹³ Jones’s scholarly project commonly appealed to human universals and shared pasts – for example by suggesting that different systems of mythology were versions of one another, or by identifying a ‘familial’ affinity between Sanskrit and European languages – and Jones played a key part in a larger European ‘rediscovery’ of India and the East which Raymond Schwab would call ‘the Oriental Renaissance’.

While Schwab’s main focus is the belated ‘reconciliation’ of hemispheres that this ‘second’ renaissance afforded, however, he also sometimes presented cultural contact as potentially more problematic in its implications, noting that it was ‘logically inevitable that a civilization believing itself unique would find itself drowned in the sum total of civilizations’.¹⁴ David Simpson has recently pursued this claim while also stressing that if the world seemed ‘much bigger in 1800 than it had in 1750’, that was the result both of successive global conflicts beginning with the Seven Years’ War and of the second age of exploration associated in Britain with figures such as Captain Cook. For Simpson, this sense of connection to a ‘bigger world’ provided metropolitan Britons with a new apprehension of ‘significant otherness’ that was too multifarious to be immediately assimilable, and it in turn generated an ethical and imaginative challenge to which diverse literary works of the period responded. I go on in what follows to say more about Robert Southey’s long poem *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801), which Simpson regards as a paradigmatic text in this respect, but here I just want

to emphasize the contrast between *Thalaba*'s dense apparatus of footnotes and Cambridge's straightforwardly functional glossary.¹⁵ Where the latter explains an unfamiliar nomenclature in order to help its audience follow a narrative of British military success, the 'thick field of historical and anthropological material' attached to *Thalaba*'s main text is as likely to produce a kind of vertigo on the part of readers as to enhance comprehension of the poem.¹⁶

So far, then, I have outlined some twenty-first-century critical approaches to diverse eighteenth-century British Orientalisms, from tale cycle and experimental fiction to scholarly essay and long poem. There are obvious and significant differences between the critics referred to, with regard to both their methodology and their coverage: whereas Simpson considers a dialectic of responses to the other-as-stranger that is traceable back to the Bible and the Classics but especially prominent in Romantic writing, Ballaster and Aravamudan primarily look at an earlier period and present the idea of textual and readerly openness to the other in for the most part benign and even utopian terms. It is broadly accurate to say, nonetheless, that in their analysis of cultural encounter these critics testify to how, at varying levels of theorization, the concept of 'hospitality' has percolated into literary studies from the philosophical writings of Derrida and Levinas. It is also fair to say that they offer an implicit reframing, if not contestation, of Nigel Leask's influential argument about Britons' 'anxieties of empire'. For Leask, even as Romantic-period culture testified to a '*demand* for orientalism' a residually authoritative civic discourse of nationhood equated openness to the other with a susceptibility to contamination, so that (for example) Byron in his Turkish tales (1813–16) depicted the 'allure of the East' as a 'fatal attraction', corrosive of order and virtue.¹⁷ In criticism of the past decade or so, generally speaking, more attention is given instead to a rather different history of contemporary imaginative and/or intellectual engagement with the East. Alternatively, as in Simpson's work, an anxious relation to otherness is understood as an enduringly disabling predicament that is in need of remedying in the present too.

It goes without saying that this attention to the ramifications of cultural encounter has been determined by the pressures and imperatives of our current moment, 'after 9/11'. In a climate that has produced intensified imaginings of external threat, any analysis of the history of reckoning with others is inextricable from a process of reflection on our civic responsibilities. Simpson emphasizes elsewhere that 'the challenge of the other' in Romantic-period writing comes

from within as well as beyond the boundaries of ‘home’, and he argues powerfully for the political necessity of cultural translation, as an effort to combat the baneful suspicion of outsiders characteristic of our age.¹⁸ The identification of various kinds of seemingly ‘good’ Orientalisms by recent critics is potentially as important as this call for greater ‘translational effort’, because it recovers the productivity of what Suvir Kaul terms an ‘international, inter-cultural, inter-racial, colonial imagination’ – the antithesis of the irreducible antagonism between opposing camps presupposed by the rhetoric of a ‘clash of civilizations’.¹⁹ Contemporary criticism has yielded additional gains of a scholarly nature, whether by thus helping to rewrite literary-historical narratives such as that of the Anglocentric ‘rise of the novel’, or by making previously marginalized texts such as Southey’s epics much less easy to dismiss.

If this wide-ranging emphasis on encounter and its consequences has been extremely valuable, however, it has additionally generated some rather inflated claims about the nature and impact of past forms or instances of openness to the East. The argument that eighteenth-century audiences enthusiastically surrendered themselves to fictions of the East, for example, somewhat takes for granted that the pleasurable activity of reading these works brought about a significant confounding of cultural identities.²⁰ More problematic is a related argument that the Orientalism of Jones and others sparked a metropolitan fascination with India, and especially Hindu mythology, which resulted in not just a momentary loss of self-government on the part of Britons but also ‘a kind of colonization-in-reverse’.²¹ The idea that imperial powers end up themselves being metaphorically or even literally conquered would have been familiar to many eighteenth-century Britons, but critical analysis of the British taste for the exotic in this period nonetheless has to distinguish between the effects of cultural dissemination and political dominion. It is necessary too to situate Jones squarely within the messy complexities of his time rather than to present him as a straightforwardly ‘exemplary’ figure, possessed of positive attitudes or characteristics that are lacking today.²² Such celebration of enlightened precursors is evident not just in some recent work on Jones but also in accounts of Leigh Hunt and his circle as generously disposed authors whose writings ‘open out onto the world’ and thereby manifest a ‘Cockney cosmopolitanism’.²³ While the recovery of past cosmopolitanisms may help us now to reimagine ‘conditions of commensurability’ between Europe and its others, as David Porter suggests, the concept of ‘cosmopolitanism’ itself requires interrogation, and is perhaps

most helpfully understood in ‘prospective’ terms rather than as the description of a state from which we have fallen.²⁴

This book is indebted to scholarship on the expansion of intellectual and cultural horizons that accompanied the extension of British interests in the decades after the Seven Years’ War. It acknowledges that global history and the ‘new imperial history’ have enriched the study of cultures of empire by focusing on the movement of people, ideas, and things, and thus showing how the world transformed Britain even as Britain increasingly imposed itself on the world. While there is no space to cite all of the excellent work that has been done here, the critical reorientation afforded by this perspective is demonstrated by a book such as Wendy Louise Belcher’s *Abyssinia’s Samuel Johnson*, which explores how Johnson was ‘discursively possessed’ by his early encounter with Ethiopian thought.²⁵ Numerous scholars have considered the formative impact of global commerce on British subjectivity, at the level of everyday social and cultural practices, for example with reference to the widespread consumption of Chinese and Chinese-style goods.²⁶ Miles Ogborn and others have addressed the increasing interconnection between Britain and the rest of the world over the course of this period by tracing the geographical mobility of individuals leading ‘global lives’.²⁷ Literary critics such as Daniel White meanwhile have attended to how the transnational exchange between London and Calcutta, metropolitan ‘centre’ and colonial ‘periphery’, produced not only forms of intercultural dialogue but also a common print culture and even a ‘global culture of Romanticism’, marked by an inventively ‘citational’ creative practice.²⁸

If we can take as a given the reality of an increasingly ‘networked’ Britain in this period, however, it is also important to emphasize that contemporaries did not always see or describe the relationship between Britain and its others in such terms. The main objective of this study is to historicize the different and shifting modes through and ways in which Britons may have conceived of themselves and their nation as ‘open’ to the East across the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is useful again to refer to Cambridge’s work in this context, because for all its evident opportunism it provides a prescient sense of some of the larger implications of national extroversion, broaching a debate that was just beginning in British culture about the possibility or otherwise of being, as Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose put it, “‘at home’ with an empire and with the effects of imperial power’.²⁹ Cambridge’s ‘Glossary of Persic and Indian Names’ recognizes the new level of imaginative effort required to comprehend Britain’s recently attained position of global pre-eminence. Even as Cambridge’s

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work encourages its readers to celebrate the ‘great reputation’ accruing to the nation from its feats in distant lands, this glossary confronts its audience with an obtrusively alien lexicon, thereby hinting at the potential difficulty of reckoning with the new kinds of entanglement with the wider world that followed in the wake of military victory overseas.

By examining the period from the 1759 ‘year of victories’ through to the mid-1830s moment of Macaulay’s ‘Minute on Indian Education’, this study offers a long view of how, in an increasingly globalized and imperial nation, in fact if not always in self-image, primarily (but not exclusively) British metropolitan writers responded to and sought to negotiate the greater openness to the world and the plural and diverse encounters with otherness – sometimes already heavily mediated – that were a corollary of Eastern empire. Although extending this study’s chronological focus to encompass the First Afghan War and the First Opium War of 1839–42 would have allowed me to end as well as begin by thinking about the ramifications of military conflict, Macaulay serves as a fitting end point since the ethnocentrism of his ‘Minute’ ostensibly signals a decisive transformation in British self-understanding: rather than thinking of Britons as in any way disoriented by colonial contact, it instead calls for the nation to wield its civilizational authority so as to afford moral direction to its colonies.³⁰ Among recent critics Saree Makdisi places particular emphasis on the wider significance of Macaulay’s arguments, which he reads as instantiating an ‘Occidentalism’ that was as concerned to define the West as ‘Western’ as it was to modernize the East.³¹

While accepting the basic validity of this narrative of a cultural shift exemplified by Macaulay’s ‘Minute’, what I especially want to do here, however, is to restore a richer sense of conflict to critical discussion of Britain’s Eastern imaginary. Doing this makes it possible, for example, to appreciate Jones’s scholarly achievements, but additionally to recognize that his work resonated differently in different contexts, and that the meanings of the relativizing comparisons it pursued were subject to contest. Thinking about the contestation of the idea of ‘openness’ itself helps us to recognize too that if later writers including Byron and Southey disclosed ‘anxieties of empire’, other contemporaries – I develop this point with reference to Charles Lamb and his essay ‘The South-Sea House’ (1820) – sought to contain the civic humanist critique of empire as a conduit of corruption by disputing (or submerging) the mutually constitutive relationship of metropole and colony. It is an obvious point to make that from the time of the Seven Years’ War if not before, imaginative explorations of the impact of global affairs on domestic life also addressed

the metropolitan implications of overseas expansion and conquest. As I hope to show, a more historically grounded approach to the concept of openness helps to provide new perspectives on the vexed question of Britons' lived relation to empire, as well as on the shifting parameters of the collective imaginary of the East over the course of the period.

Needless to say this imaginary was formed in part at least by the way in which particular historical events, and moments of crisis or rupture, brought specific sites, episodes, and actors into Britons' consciousness. At the same time, however, it is necessary to reiterate that the British imaginary of the East was not simply a function of expansionism and empire, since – whatever they knew about India or anywhere else – Britons were, as Cambridge understood, already possessed of an established set of 'Eastern' reference points, 'through the habits of reading novels, and works of the imagination'. One argument of this book is that while levels of interest in the 'ideal stories' identified by Cambridge remained more or less constant, the history of 'British Orientalisms, 1759–1835' additionally involves the processes by which the familiar fictions of the past were adapted, reworked, and (sometimes) reacted against. As I now demonstrate in more detail, attention to the formal diversity and innovation of this field of literary production richly illuminates the larger cultural conflict which animated a nation debating with itself about its place in the world and relation to its others.

British Orientalisms in an Age of Empire and Revolution

The broad-based and predominantly literary history outlined earlier in this introduction may seem to run counter to the direction taken by some of the best recent scholarship in the area of Orientalism and empire (much of it referred to in this introduction), which has tended to explore more precisely delineated topics. For reasons of space this book cannot claim to provide the same kind of close contextualization and finely grained reading that these studies display, or to engage directly with their arguments; though wide-ranging in coverage, this book has its own omissions too, on which I comment in my chapter outline. Its focus on the – primarily – metropolitan imaginary of the East across a period of seventy-five years does bring several advantages, however. Moving from the late 1750s to the mid-1830s makes it possible to run together periods which are often discretely classified, with accompanying critical baggage, as 'eighteenth century' and 'Romantic'. This time span also forces familiar texts into contact with writings which have so far been little analysed but which

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are (I argue) of some importance – for example, the picaresque fictions after Thomas Hope’s *Anastasius, or Memoirs of a Greek* (1819), which adapted the older figure of the informant narrator and responded to the poetry of Byron, Thomas Moore, and others. Remapping the field of British Orientalisms in such a manner offers further ways of illuminating the dynamics of cultural contestation in the period too, helping to thicken accounts of the influence of scholars such as Jones, or of the reception of the *Arabian Nights* and other ‘tales of the East’. Whether in relation to Jones’s expression of a will-to-knowledge in his 1784 ‘Discourse’ or to the *Nights*’ frame tale of Sultan Schahriar and Princess Scheherazade, the historical range of this study facilitates scrutiny of significant but often neglected processes of rewriting and revision. The discussion that follows begins to develop a fuller sense of the diversity of broadly ‘Orientalist’ representation across the period, considering the emergence of new forms and styles of writing in the larger context of an age of empire and revolution.

Although at the start of this period numerous works with nominally Eastern settings addressed the domestic ramifications of imperial expansion, it was not until the early to mid-1770s that novels – whether by being set in India or by including Indian episodes – began to acknowledge the increasingly close connection between Britain and Bengal consequent upon the EIC’s new sovereignty, and the problems as well as possibilities which this entailed. It is instructive here to juxtapose Charles Johnstone’s *The Pilgrim: Or, A Picture of Life* (1775) and Phebe Gibbes’s *Hartly House, Calcutta* (1789), both written by authors without direct experience of the subcontinent: whereas *The Pilgrim* features a wandering Chinese narrator who makes a sea voyage to Britain via ‘Mogulstan’, *Hartly House*, comprising its heroine’s letters to a friend in England, closely renders the particulars of its Indian setting, appearing to align itself with a ‘Jonesian’ scholarly Orientalism. It would be misleading to suggest that fictions ‘about’ British India straightforwardly became more ethnographically specific, however, since many of these works are both formally uneven and intriguingly diverse in their range of reference, and the realization of India is not always their primary purpose. Two works published in 1782, Robert Bage’s sprawling *Mount Henneth* and Helenus Scott’s it-narrative *Adventures of a Rupee*, for example, demonstrate the way in which the necessity of responding to the ideological fallout of Britain’s disastrous war in America to some extent determined the content of literary Orientalism at this time, as generalizing constructions of ‘the East’ (which subsumed India) came to provide a means of stabilizing the idea of ‘British liberty’.

Even as works such as these manifestly reflected on Britons' sense of themselves more than on the domestic and colonial 'effects of imperial power' (in Hall and Rose's phrase), it remains fair to say that defeat in America helped to sharpen metropolitan scrutiny of the EIC; as Daniel O'Quinn shows so well, popular drama was central to this process of bringing empire home to Britons.³² The diverse 'Eastern' materials with which poets began to engage at this time – even as they could be understood as 'new' – were not always so directly the product of colonial encounter, however. While the 'discovery' of Hinduism in which Jones participated after arriving in India in 1784 was certainly a source of inspiration for subsequent writers, Jones outlined another extensive domain of literary possibility in the much-cited 'manifesto' calling for greater engagement with 'the principal writings of the Asiaticks' – the conclusion to his 'Essay on the Poetry of the Eastern Nations', appended to *Poems Consisting Chiefly of Translations from the Asiatick Languages* (1772).³³ Southey's *Thalaba* might be regarded as the exemplary Romantic long poem, as Simpson suggests, because the thick cultural reference of its main text and its footnotes at once provides a virtual encounter with 'significant otherness' and demonstrates a response to Jones which at least matches his omnivorous intellectual curiosity.

Described by Marilyn Butler as 'an eclectic historical pastiche', *Thalaba* was partly inspired by a story in the 'pseudo-Oriental' collection of *Arabian Tales* (1792), but also responded to William Beckford's narrative of imperial decadence in an Arabian milieu, *Vathek* (1786).³⁴ While 'a tale of adventures full of wonder and novelty' in Cambridge's terms, then, *Thalaba* is also clearly rooted in the politics of the present, its verse narrative setting its Muslim hero, an agent of revolution, against forces of luxury, corruption, and superstition. The revolutionary decade of the 1790s constitutes another pivotal moment in the history of British Orientalisms, and *Thalaba* was one of numerous contemporary works which found in 'the East' – whether through the generic tropes of sultan and seraglio or, as Humberto Garcia argues, with more specific reference to Islam and the prophet Mohammed – a congenial medium for reflecting on the condition of Britain itself.³⁵ What Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud identifies as the 'radical Orientalism' flourishing between Waterloo and the 1832 Reform Act accentuated this alignment of Oriental despotism and Britain's old regime, likewise appealing to the 'function of Otherness . . . as a potent and ambivalent figure through which national publics rehearse and adjudicate their shared and excluded values'.³⁶