

The Origins of the British Empire in Asia, 1600–1750

This is an important, revisionist account of the origins of the British Empire in Asia in the early modern period. David Veevers uncovers a hidden world of transcultural interactions between servants of the English East India Company and the Asian communities and states they came into contact with, revealing how it was this integration of Europeans into non-European economies, states and societies that was central to British imperial and commercial success, rather than national or mercantilist enterprise. As their servants skilfully adapted to this rich and complex environment, the East India Company became enfranchised by the eighteenth century with a breadth of privileges and rights – from governing sprawling metropolises to trading customs-free. In emphasising the Asian genesis of the British Empire, this book sheds new light on the foreign frameworks of power which fuelled the expansion of Global Britain in the early modern world.

DAVID VEEVERS is a Leverhulme Early Career fellow at Queen Mary, University of London. He has published articles in the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* and the *Journal of Global History*, and won the Royal Historical Society's Alexander Prize in 2014. He is co-editor of *The Corporation as a Protagonist in Global History, c.1550 to 1750* (2018).

The Origins of the British Empire in Asia, 1600–1750

David Veevers
Queen Mary, University of London



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-70564-6 — The Origins of the British Empire in Asia, 1600–1750
David Veevers
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi - 110025, India
103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108705646

DOI: 10.1017/9781108669344

© David Veevers 2020

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2020

First paperback edition 2022

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

ISBN 978-1-108-48395-7 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-108-70564-6 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-70564-6 — The Origins of the British Empire in Asia, 1600–1750
David Veevers
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

For MJ

Contents

<i>List of Maps</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
Introduction ‘A Hundred Gates Open for Entrance’	1
Part I Weakness and Adaptation	
1 ‘A Boddy without a Head’ <i>The Failure of an English Enterprise</i>	27
2 ‘Soe Fayre an Opportunitie’ <i>Madras and the Reconstitution of the Company</i>	57
3 ‘Not as Absolute Lords and Kings of the Place’ <i>The Success of an Anglo-Asian Enterprise</i>	79
Part II Subordination and Expansion	
4 ‘To Be Determined by the Moor’s Justice’ <i>Searching for Legitimacy in Mughal Bengal</i>	111
5 ‘A Firm Settlement in This Place’ <i>War, Negotiation and Imperial Integration</i>	135
Part III Limitations and Devastation	
6 ‘The Malays Will Not Preserve ye Countrey Themselves’ <i>Sumatra and the Failure of Suzerainty</i>	177
7 ‘The Company as Their Lords and the Deputy as a Great Rajah’ <i>The Making and Unmaking of an Imperial Power</i>	211
	vii

viii Contents

Part IV Empire

8 ‘The End of These Things Will Not Be Good’ <i>Legacies of Empire in Mid-Eighteenth Century India</i>	245
Conclusion Rethinking the Origins of the British Empire in Asia	270
<i>Bibliography</i>	274
<i>Index</i>	286

Maps

1 India	<i>page</i> xiii
2 Coromandel Coast	xiv
3 Bengal	xv
4 Sumatra	xvi

Acknowledgements

The writing of a first book is both an end and a beginning. It is the end of a personal journey from student to academic but also the beginning of a new professional journey. For both achieving the end and in starting a new beginning, I have many people to thank. I had the immense satisfaction to pursue all three of my degrees in the School of History at the University of Kent, where I benefitted from a generous community of students and scholars. In particular, I'd like to thank Oliver Carpenter, Neil Calver and Don Leggett for providing a lively postgraduate community over the years, and Kenneth Fincham, Emily Manktelow, Pratik Chakrabarti and William Pettigrew for their time and support in developing my research interests. Kent provided full funding throughout the postgraduate period which allowed me to pursue my research even whilst raising a young family, for which I will be forever grateful.

However, I owe a special debt of gratitude to Pratik Chakrabarti and William Pettigrew. Pratik not only supervised my MA and PhD dissertations but also taught me what it means to be a historian and the importance of academic integrity. I am forever in his debt and I hope that the book I have produced here is in some way a vindication of his willingness to mentor and supervise me over the years. One of the highlights of my career so far was the opportunity to have a beer and an authentic curry with him in Old Delhi itself. Similarly, William provided me with the opportunity to pursue postdoctoral research and has guided me through the post-PhD scholarly world not just as a boss but as a friend. His generosity has allowed me to travel the world and present and pursue my research from Japan to the Caribbean, and everywhere in between. Any professional success that I have achieved I owe in large part to him. But in many respects he taught me the most important lesson of all: family-life is instrumental to becoming a well-rounded academic. An especial thanks to my viva examiner, Margot Finn, who, despite her many enormous responsibilities, has always made time to offer advice, guidance and endless reference requests to an ambitious young academic such as myself.

As a postdoctoral researcher at Kent, I was part of a tight-knit team of like-minded people, whom I am happy to say became not just inspiring colleagues

but inspiring friends. To Edmond Smith, Aske Brock, Liam Haydon, Emily Mann, Misha Ewan and Peter Good, thank you for widening my intellectual curiosity, but more importantly for indulging my Malbec habit, accommodating my fascination with monkeys, entertaining my bad puns, listening to endless stories about my children and sweating with me through various tropical conferences and speaking engagements. Their own research has left its mark on various parts of this book, and it is undoubtedly much richer for it. The Leverhulme Trust has been an amazing source of funding throughout my postdoctoral research, first as part of a £1m project on the role of England's overseas trading companies in shaping the English constitution, and then in awarding me an Early Career Fellowship at Queen Mary, University of London. Needless to say, this book would not have been possible without such generous grants. At Queen Mary, I have been fortunate enough to settle in amongst a welcoming community of scholars, and I must thank Andrew Mandelson, Miri Rubin and Simon Layton in particular for their support. Finally, I would also like to acknowledge the patience and professionalism of my editor at Cambridge University Press, Michael Watson, as well as Emily Sharp, and of the anonymous reviewers whose insightful feedback made this a much better book.

Of course, no book like this can be written without the love and kindness of family and friends, whose utter disinterestedness in the origins of the British Empire has always kept me grounded and provided a desperately needed work-life balance. To Richard and Vanessa for their ceaseless support; my sisters Simone and Michelle and their wonderful families who it has been a joy to watch grow; my parents Shirley and David who put up with a son who took his time before discovering what it was he wanted to do in life; to the best of friends Ben and Lucy who I have known since childhood and have allowed me to enjoy years of their friendship and unfailing positivity in the face of academia's ups-and-downs. As I sought desperately to finish my PhD thesis, my daughter Florence was born. The meaning she has brought to my life and the joy I find in every moment with her cannot be committed to words, but I hope that when she grows up she will read this and be proud of her father. Your love is imprinted in every word. And naturally, as I sought desperately to finish this book my son Henry, the grand finale, was born. His arrival gave me a renewed sense of purpose, and the innocence only a baby can possess allowed me to put the entire book into perspective.

The last words must go to MJ, however. Not only this book, but my entire academic career would have been inconceivable without the love and blind faith (or in retrospect, utter naivety) of my wife, Jessica. Ever since I committed to becoming a historian at a pay-phone on a sun-baked street in Tenerife fifteen years ago, she has never wavered in her support, even when she discovered that,

xii Acknowledgements

no, royalties on academic books will not make me rich. Despite pursuing her own challenging career in law and raising our family, she has kindly feigned interest in my obscure research findings and put up with my frequent globetrotting. She is not only an inspiration to our children but remains a constant inspiration to me every day. I dedicate this book entirely to her.