The Company’s Sword

In the late eighteenth century, it was a cliché that the East India Company ruled India “by the sword.” Christina Welsch shows how Indian and European soldiers shaped and challenged the Company’s political expansion and how elite officers turned those dynamics into a bid for “stratocracy” – a state dominated by its army. Combining colonial records with Mughal Persian sources from Indian states, The Company’s Sword offers new insight into India’s eighteenth-century military landscape, showing how elite officers positioned themselves as the sole actors who could navigate, understand, and control those networks. Focusing on South India, rather than the Company’s better-studied territories in Bengal, the analysis provides a new approach, chronology, and geography through which to understand the Company Raj. It offers a fresh perspective of the Company’s collapse after the rebellions of 1857, tracing the deep roots of that conflict to the Company’s eighteenth-century development.

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The Company’s Sword

The East India Company and the Politics of Militarism, 1644–1858

Christina Welsch

The College of Wooster, Ohio
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“Why did the East India Company have its own army?”

The question arises frequently in my undergraduate seminars on the British Empire in India. Our efforts to answer it push students to challenge their own conceptions about empire, military power, and corporations themselves, especially as they emerged in the seventeenth century. In my first semester at The College of Wooster, though, I was brought up short by a follow-up question from one student:

“Why did the Company still have its own army in the nineteenth century?”

How had the Company’s autonomous military structures survived more than two centuries of political and social change and of fundamental transformations in the nature of the British Empire? Why did they collapse so precipitously after the rebellions of 1857, when no earlier crisis had managed to displace them? This book is in part an effort to answer those questions. My gratitude thus goes out to that student of mine, who pushed me to reframe my approach to this history. I apologize that you had to wait so long for your answer!

Of course, the text that follows would not have been possible without a truly global network of support. My thanks go first to the History Department at Princeton University, where the seeds of this project were first conceived of as a dissertation. The insights of Linda Colley, David A. Bell, and Bhavani Raman were irreplaceable, and I count myself as deeply fortunate to have had such mentors. Robert Travers’s comments and encouragement in the final stages of the dissertation were similarly invaluable. Thanks are also due to the broader faculty, especially Michael Laffan and Gyan Prakash, for their help in developing the project. The Princeton Institute of International and Regional Studies provided much-needed material and intellectual support both for researching and writing the dissertation. Finally, I owe a special debt of gratitude to Amineh Mahallati in the Near Eastern Studies Department, whose generosity with her time and energy made it possible to pursue Mughal Persian as a research language.
x Acknowledgments

I am similarly thankful for the institutional and collegial support that I have found at The College of Wooster. The Isabel and Elizabeth Ralston Presidential Endowment for Faculty Development allowed me to undertake international research as a junior faculty member. Conversations in the Cultural Studies Colloquium helped to sharpen and develop early versions of some of the chapters in this book. I am especially grateful to Georgina Tierney and to Cat Long, for their enthusiastic work as my undergraduate research assistants, and without whom the argumentation and evidence in Chapters 1 and 7 (respectively) would be badly incomplete. Thanks also to Lucy Barnhouse, Julia Bernier, Jordan Biro Walters, and Ng Wee Siang Margaret – without our writing group, this book would not exist.

Further, thanks are due to the American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS), funding from which was critical to every stage of this project. The AIIS Junior Research Fellowship cohort for 2013–2014 provided energizing encouragement, and I am grateful for the continued discussions I have had with members of this group. Your research is inspiring! Similarly, the participants in the 2017 session of the AIIS “dissertation-to-book” workshop provided much-needed advice on how to revise and transform the scope of this project. Finally, I thank the tutors at the AIIS summer language program in Mughal Persian at Lucknow, especially Dr. S. A. Zafar, for their constant patience, unflagging enthusiasm, and extensive knowledge, without which my use of records from the court of Arcot would have been impossible.

This project involved research in archives around the globe. I owe much to the staff at the British Library, the Tamil Nadu State Archives (Chennai), the British National Archives, the National Army Museum (London), the National Library of Scotland, the National Archives of Scotland, the Andhra Pradesh State Archives (Hyderabad), and the Yale Center for British Art. Thanks especially to Neelavan at the Tamil Nadu State Archives, for working with me to find Arcot’s ruznāmah (court diaries), and to Marie at the British Library, who was always willing to help me to locate and transfer materials. Dr. Margaret Makepeace at the British Library was also generous with her time in helping me to frame my research and to navigate the Company’s vast records.

I presented early versions of the chapters in this book at several conferences, including the Association of Asian Studies, Britain and the World, and the Society for Military History. I am grateful to the discussants, fellow panelists, and audience members for their feedback, especially Megan Thomas and Hannah Archambault, who helped me conceptualize sepoys as historical actors in broader global networks. Material in Chapter 2 of this book was previously published in Past & Present.
Acknowledgments

(“Military Mobility, Authority, and Negotiation in Early Colonial India” [November 2020]), and sections from Chapter 5 appeared in Redcoats to Tommies: The Experience of the British Soldier from the Eighteenth Century (“Our Brother Officers in India: The Military Lobby in Imperial Politics of the 1780s”), published by Boydell & Brewer and edited by Kevin Linch and Matthew Lord. I thank the publishers for their permission to include this material in this book.

The editorial team at Cambridge University Press has been a delight. I am grateful for Michael Watson’s insights and support in navigating the publishing process and to the reviewers for the excellent comments on earlier versions of this manuscript. The series editors of Critical Perspectives on Empire – Catherine Hall, Mrinalini Sinha, and Kathleen Wilson – have long been inspirational to me as scholars, and I am immensely grateful to have developed this project with their support. Outside of CUP, Margaret Puskar-Pascewicz did brilliant work producing the index for this manuscript.

To Nick and Alex, you have been unfailing sources of encouragement throughout my life. To Jocelyn, your constant enthusiasm has earned you a lifetime of biscotti, and I am so grateful for our friendship. To my mother, your confidence in me has pushed me through countless challenges – and your English-teacher eyes saved me from a host of typos! Finally, to Jason, I can only express my deepest gratitude. My life is bright because of you.
A Note on Spelling and Place Names

The names of locations, people, and ranks have always been a source of difficulty for historians engaging with colonial India. Spelling and transliteration practices were hardly standardized in the records of the East India Company during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and even widely agreed upon conventions for transliteration differed strikingly from modern practices. (For instance, the Indo-Persian term for a Mughal provincial administrator was rendered nabob in Company documents but is more accurately transliterated as nawāb or navāb.) Throughout this book, I employ modern spelling conventions for most people and places – with two exceptions. First, I refer to cities of Madras (Chennai), Calcutta (Kolkata), and Bombay (Mumbai) by their former names to reflect that these were colonial settlements and the seats of a colonial administration. Second, in a few cases, Indian individuals adopted their own preferred transliterations (e.g., Sake Dean Mahomet), and so I have accordingly made use of those names. I also include the most widely used “colonial era” spelling parenthetically with the first mention of each major location to aid readers.

Spelling and grammar from quoted texts is preserved. Persian texts are transliterated using the Library of Congress’s romanization guide. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.
India in the early seventeenth century
2 India c. 1750
India c. 1805
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5 Key locations in South India
6 Key locations in North India