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RIVISTA INTERDISCIPLINARE DELLA SOCIETÀ ITALIANA DI STORIA MILITARE

SUPPLEMENTO
2020

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Book Reviews



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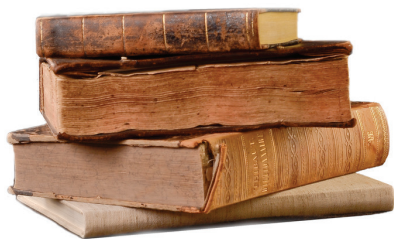
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III

Storia Militare Moderna

Modern Military History



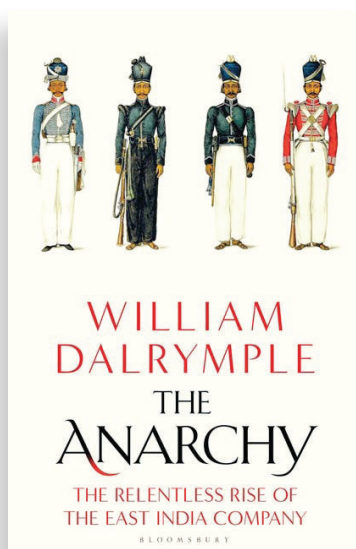


Hans Jacob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen,
 Frontispizio di *Abenteuerlicher Simplificissimus* 1669. (wikipedia commons).

WILLIAM DALRYMPLE,

The anarchy:
The Relentless Rise of the East India Company

Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019, 544 pp.



A timely cautionary tale of the first global corporate power, the apparent selling point of this much-reviewed book, raises the interesting question of what makes for a successful book these days. William Dalrymple's latest is published by Bloomsbury at a very reasonable price, which betokens the pricing economics of confidence, advertising, and a large print run. The book has been extensively and largely favourably reviewed, has been selected as a book of the year, and will clearly be much cited.

There are, of course, cautionary signs. The encomia offered on Dalrymple and his works are generally by writers who know nothing about the subject and have certainly read none of the relevant archival material, for example Max Hastings. But, it is appropriate to focus on the book, and not its packaging.

So what do we have? Dalrymple, who writes popular, accessible works on Indian history, cuts another slice from his cheese for this work, with his usual

mixture of gore and criticism of the British. The focus is on the East India Company and its rise to prominence and territorial position. The profits that arose and the disruption that resulted attract repeated attention. Woe for India.

There is an established scholarly debate to which Dalrymple makes no contribution

That, however, is an approach that tells us very little about the general tendency in eighteenth-century imperial activity, and particularly that of the British. Thus, the East India Company was one of a series of 'national' East India companies, including those of France, the Netherlands and Sweden. Moreover, for Britain, there was the Hudson Bay Company, the Royal African Company, and the chartered companies involved in North America, as well, for example, as the Bank of England. Delegated authority in this form or shared state/private activities were a major part of governance. To assume from the modern perspective of state authority that this was necessarily inadequate is misleading as well as teleological. Indeed, Dalrymple offers no real evidence for his view. Was Portuguese India, where the state had a larger role, 'better'?

Secondly, let us look at India as a whole. There is an established scholarly debate to which Dalrymple makes no contribution. This debate focuses on the question of whether, after the death in 1707 of the mighty Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707), the focus should be on decline and chaos or, instead, on the development of a tier of powers within the sub-continent, for example Hyderabad. In the latter perspective, the East India Company (EIC) emerges as one and, eventually, the most successful of the successor powers. That raises questions of comparative efficiency, a point discussed most perceptively by Randolph Cooper when commenting on how the EIC succeeded in the Indian military labour market, this helping in defeating the Marathas in the 1800s.

An Indian power, the EIC was also a 'foreign' one; although foreignness should not be understood in modern terms. As a 'foreign' one, the EIC was not alone among the successful players, and was not even particularly successful, other than against marginal players, until the 1760s. Compared to Nadir Shah of Persia in the late 1730s (on whom Michael Axworthy is well worth reading), or the Afghans from the late 1750s (on whom Jos Gommans is best), the EIC was limited on land. This was part of a longstanding pattern,

encompassing indeed, to a degree, the Mughals. Dalrymple fails to address this comparative context adequately.

So also for eighteenth-century Asia as a whole. Dalrymple has it in for the form of capitalism the EIC represents; but it was less destructive than the Manchu conquest of Xinjiang in the 1750s, or, indeed, the Afghan destruction of Safavid rule in Persia in the early 1720s. Such comparative points would have been offered Dalrymple the opportunity to deploy scholarship and judgment, and, indeed, raise interesting questions about the conceptualisation and methodologies of cross-cultural and diachronic comparison.

Focusing anew on India, the extent to which the Mughal achievement in subjugating the Deccan was itself transient might be underlined, and, alongside consideration, of the Maratha-Mughal struggle in the late seventeenth century, that provides another perspective on subsequent developments. The extent to which Bengal, for example, did not know much peace prior to the EIC is worthy of consideration. It also helps explain why so many local interests found it appropriate, as well as convenient, to ally with the EIC. It brought a degree of protection for the regional economy and offered defence against Maratha, Afghan, and other, attacks and/or exactions. The terms of entry into a British-led global economy were less unwelcome than later nationalist writers might suggest. Dalrymple himself cites Trotsky, who was no guide to the period. To turn to other specifics is only to underline these points. Robert Clive comes in for much criticism, without his leadership abilities receiving much attention. The role of British naval power deserves more attention.

On a more positive note, there is a good portrait of the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam, and Dalrymple uses Mughal sources with effectiveness.

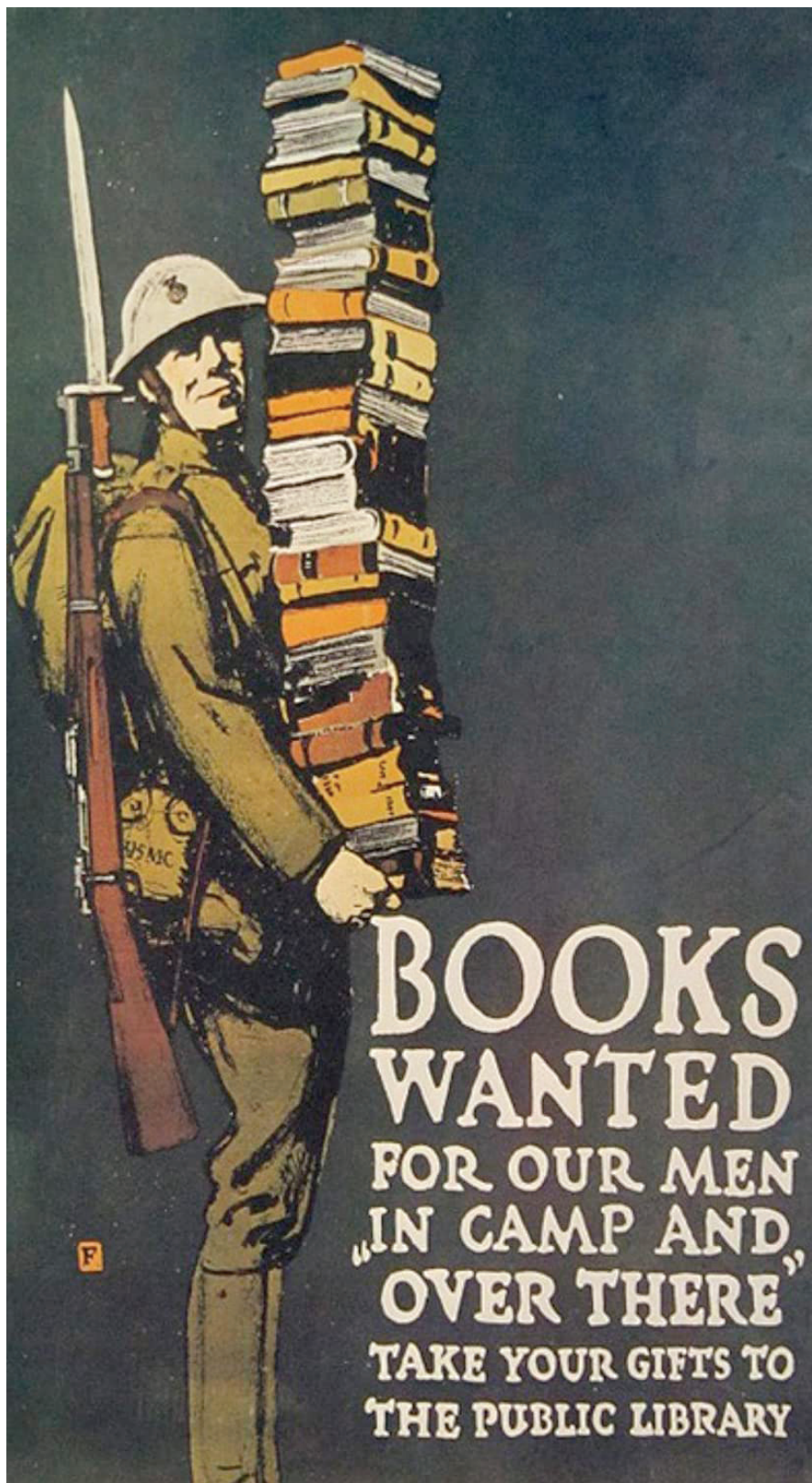
All to the good, but the contextualisation he offers is poor. Moreover, it is highly disappointing to see how few reviewers have pointed to this issue. For that reason, Dalrymple's book raises instructive questions about the character of a selling machine that is somewhat different to the EIC. It is entirely typical that a better and also recent book, Richard Eaton's *India in the Persianate Age: 1000-1765* (Allen Lane, 2019), has received far less attention.

JEREMY BLACK¹

¹ Re-published from *The Critic*, 'Artillery Row', 8 January, 2020 (courtesy of Jeremy Black).



H. Charles McBaron Jr. (1902-1992), Battaglia di Pensacola, 1781 (il Regimiento de Luisiana e la Compañía de Negros Libres de La Habana espugnano Fort George). [U. S. Army Center of Military History, Wikimedia Commons, No Commercial).



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