

The native question

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P. J. Marshall

THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF
EMPIRES
Britain, India, and America c.1750–1783
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“Ministers in this country, where every part of the World affects us, in some way or another, should consider the *whole Globe*”, urged the Duke of Newcastle in 1758. He wrote at a low moment in a conflict that would be slugged out over seven years in arenas as far-flung as the Carnatic and the Philippines, West Africa and Quebec. The consequences of British victory and French defeat in that first world war were seismic in scale and global in scope. Among its political aftershocks were the American Revolution and, more distantly, the French. Just as momentous were the forces of state-formation and empire-building unleashed in North America and South Asia in the generation after 1763.

It has taken historians more than 200 years to return these events and their aftermath to their proper global context. P. J. Marshall stands pre-eminent among those who see this bigger picture. *The Making and Unmaking of Empires* is the fruit of a life’s work on eighteenth-century India combined with the author’s more recent interest in the history of British America. It triumphantly joins what less ambitious historians long contrived to keep asunder: Britain’s “Old” maritime Empire in the Atlantic world and its “New” territorial Empire in India. The result is a truly global comparison which reveals illuminating parallels between two

British empires that overlapped in time but differed widely in character and composition.

Marshall takes the global view in order to test the long-standing thesis that Britain undertook a great “swing to the East” to compensate for the loss of its Empire in the west. More than thirteen Atlantic colonies stayed British after 1776, among them the richest of all, Jamaica. Britain also remained the major trading partner of the United States after the American War ended. Moreover, the jewel in the crown would be only a twinkle in the Imperial eye so long as India’s huge military and political costs outweighed its public revenues: as Adam Ferguson lamented in 1780, “riches in that part of the world have wings”. Such an uneven Imperial balance-sheet gave little reason, at least in the short run, to believe Indian opulence would make up for American independence.

Marshall’s account focuses on politics rather

than economics. He examines the relationships between elites – British and Indian as well as British and American – as the key to understanding why the foundations of the Atlantic Empire crumbled at just the moment when the basis for British dominance was being laid in India. The answer, he argues, lay in differing strategies of negotiation and coercion after the Seven Years War. In North America, the British state sought to impose its authority ever more aggressively on colonists who had assumed themselves to be partners in a pan-British empire of equals, and reacted accordingly. In South Asia, the East India Company established bridgeheads with greater success when it could insinuate itself into an existing state (as in Bengal) than when it had to build anew (as in the Carnatic). In due course, Britain’s governors subordinated the Company to their Imperial needs more effectively than they had managed to control the American colonies. “The secession of the thirteen colonies, coinciding with the consolidation of empire in India, dramatically shifted the balance between British and non-British people within the empire.” This produced an empire more hierarchical, authoritarian, paternalist and heterogeneous, both religiously and ethnically, than anything Britons on either side of the Atlantic had envisaged before 1763.

The Making and Unmaking of Empires pro-

ceeds in paired chapters relating the American and the Indian stories in richly revealing detail. War emerges as the major motor of change, and the State as both the creator of Empire in India and its destroyer in America. Despite such overarching themes, the two narratives proceed mostly in parallel and rarely intersect, save when East India Company tea is dumped into Boston harbour, or the vanquished general of Yorktown, Lord Cornwallis, reappears as the Governor-General of India in 1786, for example. Marshall thus leaves many opportunities for others to trace the economic linkages, military exchanges and political presuppositions that rendered the two wings of Empire comparable, though not ultimately compatible.

The structure of *The Making and Unmaking of Empires* mirrors the political challenges of the late eighteenth-century British Empire itself. In 1777, Edmund Burke had confessed, “I never was wild enough to conceive, that one method would serve for the whole; I could never conceive that the natives of *Hindustan* and those of *Virginia* could be ordered in the same manner”. He warned that “visionary politicians” should not attempt to “furnish out a spectacle of unity” from such a “mighty and strangely diversified mass”. That task would be left to historians, but only for those with the courage to consider the whole globe.

A Little History of the World
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The King's Reformation
Henry VIII and the Remaking of the
European Church

THE KING'S
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The New Lion
of Damascus

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