Chapter 2

The Political History of India and the Creation of an Historiography of Imperial Conquest

Sir John Malcolm’s first major work, the *Sketch of the Political History of India* (1811), is a path-setting book in the historiography of the British conquest of South Asia. It was the first British narrative history of the period from 1784 to 1805. As such, it charted the final transformation of the East India Company from a body of merchants into the custodians of the British Empire in India. Put another way, it presented the history of British India in the late eighteenth century in terms of the futile resistance of Company’s directors to the growth of a British imperial state in South Asia. The *Sketch* is the first major historical work of this period to apply British theories about the unsuitability of the law of nations or the concept of a balance of power to British relations with the Indian princes. Written by a major actor in the diplomatic events it described, the *Sketch* expressed the historical consciousness of the Company officials who had pushed for imperial expansion in the generation after Warren Hastings.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Political History of India would remain a major source for this topic. Malcolm’s politicized narrative of the events described in the book long remained largely unchallenged even by critics of Malcolm’s overall interpretation. Its more famous near contemporary, James Mill’s *History of British India* (1817), often described as the paragon of British imperial self-perception in this era, relied heavily on Malcolm’s work for facts, its narrative structure, and its critique of the East India Company. Malcolm appears so frequently as a source in *The History of British India* that much of Mill’s vision of
British war and diplomacy in this period can be read as a commentary on Malcolm’s *Sketch*.

Acting in History: “Send Malcolm!”

Malcolm’s *Sketch of the Political History of India* was an apologia for recent British policy in India. It aimed to justify the aggressive diplomacy and ambitious wars of his mentor, Richard Wellesley, governor general of Bengal from 1798 to 1805, and to condemn the attempts by the directors of the Company to impose a policy of noninterference in the affairs of the native princes. In doing so, the *Sketch* also attempted to defend Malcolm’s own actions as a leading diplomatic agent. To understand why the *Sketch* was published when it was, it is necessary to examine the period immediately after Wellesley’s governor generalship, when a reversal of British policy in India left Malcolm feeling politically isolated. But to understand the historical vision of British India that the book articulates, one needs to go back further still to Malcolm’s early military career in Madras in the 1780s.

The *Sketch of the Political History of India*’s anxious vision of British India was a product of Malcolm’s very first experiences as a cadet in the Company army in Madras. As the previous chapter argued, Madras may have been the capital of a vast presidency, but when Malcolm arrived in 1783 it was not a bastion of a secure and self-confident British imperial administration. With thousands of miles of coastline and a very jagged internal border to protect, Madras was strategically weak and always undermanned. One of the earliest surviving anecdotes of Malcolm’s first years in the army perfectly illustrates the military vulnerability of Madras in these years. Returning to the Madras presidency from a diplomatic mission in Mysore, a certain Major Dallas was met at the border by a young boy in a cadet’s uniform (the fourteen-year-old Malcolm). He asked the boy to take him to the commander of the sepoys on this stretch of the border. “I am their commander,” was the boy’s reply. It is significant and unsurprising that Malcolm’s first published work was an anonymous article on army reform. The proposed reform of the East India Company in the 1790s prompted groups of soldiers on furlough, including Malcolm, to hold meetings and publish pamphlets defending their privileges. At that time as now, attention was focused on the Bengal army, which, by strength of numbers, had the largest voice in this debate. Malcolm’s article stressed that the Company army varied from presidency to presidency and that the privileges of the Bengal army were often as resented by the Company