Chapter 4

Sir John Malcolm’s Memoir of
Central India: The Historic Case for
Indirect Rule

The close of the Third Anglo-Maratha War (1817–1818) heralded a new era of self-confidence for the British in India. It completed a process of British expansion through alliance building and annexation in Maratha-dominated central and western India that had been abandoned in 1806 at the end of Richard Wellesley’s governor generalship. The British were now the direct rulers of around one-third of the subcontinent. “The supremacy of British authority” over the remaining princes was confirmed by numerous treaties and the effective break-up or absorption of large independent military forces.

The final conquest of the Marathas realized the kind of grand strategic initiative Sir John Malcolm had advocated since the beginning of his diplomatic career in the 1790s, but paramount power brought problems of its own. As early as 1812, Malcolm had warned the Commons’ Select Committee on Indian Affairs that “the task of maintaining an empire will be more arduous than that of gaining one.” In 1821, in the aftermath of the Third Anglo-Maratha War, he confided to a friend “I have for many years been conscious that our progress towards supreme power is a progress towards the dissolution of our authority in India.” For Malcolm, British dominance in India depended on the continued existence of princely states. As he told the governor general, the Marquis of Hastings, in the same year, “there is, among other evils concomitant with our present state, a tendency to direct rule, alike arising out of the character and condition of the
remaining Native governments and our successes and established supremacy, which it will be difficult . . . to counteract.”

Difficult though it would be to prevent the expected collapse of India’s native governments, Malcolm was certain that the British had no choice: “We must try to march slow time if we cannot halt, and to support at least for a period, what is still left of rank and power.” In giving this advice to the governor general, Malcolm had something specific in mind: his recent experiences with the princes and chieftains of Malwa, overseeing the postwar reconstruction of the province. The book Malcolm eventually wrote about Malwa and its conquest by the British—the *Memoir of Central India* (1823)—used eighteenth-century history to argue for the continuation of native government. The *Memoir* is both a ground-breaking work of British orientalism and a landmark in the development of indirect rule in the years of imperial consolidation after 1818.

The depth of Malcolm’s insight into the history of the Marathas in Malwa was unprecedented. The *Memoir* set out an original and general analysis of the Maratha constitution that explained both their rising power in the sixteenth century and their decline into courtly plotting and internal rivalry from 1760s on. By looking at Malwa, the arena of Maratha expansion, rather than Poona, the scene of Maratha centralization, Malcolm attached less importance to Brahmin courtly intrigues than did the better-known British source, *The History of the Mahrattas* (1826), written by fellow political agent James Grant Duff. Grant Duff’s massive influence on Maratha historiography in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has invited the conclusion that his work was the authoritative expression of British imperial attitudes toward the vast and powerful Maratha states of eighteenth-century India. Although modern historians have relied heavily on the *Memoir* as a source of statistical and anecdotal information about eighteenth-century Malwa and the Marathas, it has not been fully acknowledged as a distinct and significant rival to Grant Duff’s work. Moreover, unlike Grant Duff, Malcolm incorporated his historical analysis of preconquest India into a larger treatise on British succession to Indiawide dominance.

This chapter begins by examining the ways in which the great wave of British treatises on Maratha government that appeared after 1818 attempted to understand how central India had developed historically and how it could be governed in the present. This is followed by an analysis of the account of Malwa history found in the first half of the *Memoir*, and an examination of the description of government and society with which the book concludes. The next chapter will place the *Memoir* into the wider policy discussions about the government of India that developed in the course of the 1820s.