

The Imperial Afterlife of Warren Hastings, 1818–1947

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the ‘afterlife’ or posthumous reputation of Warren Hastings, one of the most important and controversial figures in the foundation of British India. Exploring a wide range of sources, it argues that Hastings was a symbolic figure through which generations of imperial commentators vented the political and moral concerns of their own day. Accordingly, it uses his afterlife as a key indicator of the rise and fall of imperial sentiment and confidence in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Britain. Hastings’s afterlife can be divided into three distinct phases. In the first, between 1818 and 1890, the image of Hastings as a flawed hero – an empire-builder who committed crimes – was propelled into popular memory. In the second, between 1890 and 1915, Hastings was transformed into an untouchable imperial icon. Driven by contemporary concerns, a group of ex-Indian officials attempted to vindicate Hastings’s actions and exculpate his ‘crimes’. The third section explores the apotheosis of Hastings’s reputation amidst the growing uncertainty over the future of British India between 1915 and 1947. Following the elevation of a deeply controversial figure into an imperial hero, this

article explores the methods and motivations behind the propagation of heroic reputations, demonstrating that our understanding of imperial figures has been mediated through the vagaries of contemporary politics.

Introduction

KEYWORDS

Warren Hastings; British India; East India Company; imperialism; empire; heroes; statues; afterlives; imperial legacies

Warren Hastings (1732–1818) was one of the most important and controversial figures involved in the foundation of British India. Having joined the East India Company in 1750, he witnessed its transformation into a territorial power following Robert Clive’s success at the Battle of Plassey in 1757. A financial crisis forced the British Government to intervene and, as part of the 1773 Regulating Act, Hastings was appointed the first Governor-General of Bengal.¹ A profoundly controversial governor, he fought incessantly with his council,

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especially Philip Francis, and in 1788 was impeached by Edmund Burke in the House of Lords for 'high crimes and misdemeanours'.² Denounced by Burke as the 'common enemy and oppressor of all', and lampooned by satirists as the archetypal nabob (corrupt Company official), his reputation reached an alltime low.³ As Tillman Nechtman has argued, he was a scapegoat for Company corruption, and a symbolic figure through which contemporaries vented their imperial anxieties.⁴ But as a new wave of imperial confidence flooded Britain during the French Wars, the rhetorical prowess of Burke and Richard Sheridan failed to maintain public interest in the trial, and Hastings was acquitted after seven years.⁵ In the wake of his acquittal, his reputation steadily improved, and he was appointed a Privy Counsellor in 1814. His remaining years were spent at Daylesford – his family's ancestral estate, the repurchasing of which was a lifetime's ambition.⁶

The spectacular controversy of Hastings's career has attracted considerable scholarly attention.⁷ Indeed, his career provides key insights into the way in which Britain responded to the establishment of the East India Company's empire in Asia. In contrast, this article focuses on his 'afterlife', or posthumous reputation. This follows the work of John MacKenzie and others, who have drawn our attention towards the social constructions of 'heroic myths of empire'.⁸ It also builds upon recent scholarship on the emergent culture of celebrity.⁹ The prolonged and divisive nature of Hastings's trial gave him considerable fame within his own lifetime and secured for him a remarkably contentious and long-lasting posthumous reputation. Afterlives have attracted significant interest in recent years, with notable studies on Cecil Rhodes, David Livingstone, Clive and James Wolfe.¹⁰ More recently, the toppling of the slave-trader Edward Colston's statue in Bristol in June 2020 brought afterlives to the forefront of a highly publicised debate over the legacy of imperial figures. The debate eventually turned towards the East India Company, with historian William Dalrymple demanding the removal of Clive's statue from Whitehall.¹¹ This article complicates this discussion, highlighting that the foundation of British India involved numerous complex figures – of whom Hastings is perhaps the most important, and controversial, example. Although P. J. Marshall has briefly explored his reputation in several nineteenth-century histories, his primary focus – to provide a wider re-assessment of Hastings's career – inevitably left much of his afterlife unearthed.¹²

Accordingly, this article traces the trajectory of Hastings's reputation between his death in 1818 and the end of the British Raj in 1947, when interest in him swiftly declined. Such an approach illustrates the complexity of reputations, and the flaws in imposing a simple, moralising narrative onto the history of the Empire. Subsequently, it will use Hastings as a lens through which imperial

sentiment in Britain can be explored. As Max Jones has argued, heroes are 'sites within which we can find evidence of the cultural beliefs, social practices, political structures and economic systems of the past'.¹³ Commemoration was intimately linked to current imperial concerns and Hastings, widely viewed as a founder of the Raj, embodied its contemporary form. Moreover, reputation was 'fluid and could be harnessed to a range of causes', and thus afterlives provide a powerful lens through which to view contemporary political affairs.¹⁴ Through such an approach, this article illustrates that the creation of heroic reputations was fundamentally driven by the politics of the day. It also demonstrates that the Empire played some role in British society, whilst validating the argument that there was an upsurge in imperial sentiment following the 1880s.¹⁵ Exploring a wide range of sources, including histories, newspapers, statues, literary texts and exhibitions, this article sheds new light on Hastings's reputation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Hastings's afterlife can be divided into three distinct phases. In the first, between 1818 and 1890, relatively few sources were reproduced. Nevertheless, this period saw the publication of several historical texts that propelled the image of Hastings as a flawed hero – an empire-builder who committed crimes – into popular memory. The second section explores the efforts, between 1890 and 1915, to vindicate his actions. Driven by heightened imperial fervour and contemporary concerns, a

group of ex-Indian officials used a selection of Hastings's papers, published in 1890, to transform him into a spotless figure. The third section explores how Hastings's new reputation was celebrated in novel ways, amidst growing uncertainty over India's future during the years 1915–1947. The focus will be on establishing the dominant view of Hastings in each phase. However, Hastings's memory was flexible, and was used to serve a variety of causes in each period. Overall, this article proposes that Hastings was a symbolic figure through which generations of imperial commentators vented their contemporary concerns. Furthermore, it suggests that following 1890 Hastings was transformed from a flawed hero into an unblemished imperial icon.

A Flawed Hero, 1818–1890

Following Hastings's death in August 1818, several efforts were made by his former associates to commemorate his life. On 13 September 1819, Calcutta Town Hall bustled with prominent members of the British community. They had arrived to discuss 'the best mode of expressing' their respect for Hastings's 'character and memory'.¹⁶ John Larkins – elected Chairman, Company merchant,

and proprietor of the ship Warren Hastings – spoke of ‘doing justice to the many and invaluable qualities’ of that ‘excellent man and admired Statesmen’, who had been subjected to ‘the blackest accusations’ sent ‘to tarnish his fair and spotless reputation’.¹⁷ A statue was proposed by Company merchant Paul Wynch, ‘to preserve to posterity the reminiscence of so great and glorious a character’.¹⁸ Some objected to unrelenting praise, with Mr Young suggesting that although his ‘government was great and glorious in the gross’, it ‘was weak and faulty in many of the details’.¹⁹ He, like many others who reflected on Hastings’s legacy, found eulogising him an affront to the memory of Burke. Nonetheless, the statue was unanimously approved.²⁰

Five days later, Larkins asked the Governor-General Francis Rawdon-Hastings, the Marquess of Hastings, for his ‘patronage and support’, in order ‘to perpetuate the memory, the virtues and public services of this great and eminent Statesman’, whose ‘vigour and councils so essentially contributed to the protection and extension of our possessions in this country’. Lord Hastings agreed enthusiastically; he knew that India ‘strongly supported’ the acquittal that he himself had voted for.²¹ A total of 41,493 rupees was raised by 342 subscribers, almost 30% of whom were Indian. Contributions ranged from 10 rupees to the 5000 donated by the Rajah of Benares. The Governor-General led the British community with a 1000RS donation, whilst many of Hastings’s former associates, such as the Impey and Palmer families, made substantial contributions.²² Richard Westmacott was commissioned to execute the statue, which was displayed at the Royal Academy in 1828 before being unveiled at Calcutta Town Hall in 1830.²³ The Morning Post argued that the delay was because ‘many of those who were friendly to it in this country were unwilling at the same time to express, by their support of it, their disapprobation of the political principles of those who stood opposed’ to Hastings.²⁴ Reconciling one’s admiration for both Burke and Hastings was a challenge many faced. The statue depicts a classical-robed Hastings accompanied by a Hindu brahmin clutching a manuscript, and a seated Muslim scholar reading to his left.²⁵ Proclaiming Hastings a benevolent statesman and scholarly patron, it helped the Company present themselves as a magnanimous imperial power.²⁶

Simultaneously, the Company’s proprietors were organising a statue for East India House, their headquarters in London. On 12 January 1820, the General Court debated the Directors’ resolution that a statue should be raised ‘as the last testimony of approbation of the long, zealous, and successful services of the late Right Hon. Warren Hastings, in maintaining, without diminution, the British possessions in India, against the combined efforts of Hindoo, Mahomedan, and Mahratta enemies’.²⁷ The Chairman, Campbell Marjoribanks, referred to Hastings as ‘a most eminent and faithful servant’, who ‘established the empire

of the Company', and 'performed the most inestimable services, by his enterprise and his genius'. He argued that the impeachment was 'contrary to the practice and spirit of the laws of this happy nation' and that Hastings's acquittal represented 'the acquittal of the East-India Company'.²⁸ A heated debate ensued, with the Company's parliamentary legal counsel, Randle Jackson, arguing that statues should only be given to 'heroes of unblemished reputation', so 'their characters might be handed down to posterity, not merely as objects of admiration, but of example'.²⁹ Although Hastings was the 'saviour of India', he fell short of this rule, having acquired 'wealth and territory' in 'defiance of all moral obligation'.³⁰ Jackson's primary concern was to avoid offending Parliament, 'on whose good-will they continued so mainly to depend'.³¹ With the Company's autonomy dissolving rapidly, this debate encapsulated concerns about its future role.

Coming to Hastings's defence was Archibald Impey – legal counsel to his father Sir Elijah during his impeachment in 1788 over the Nandakumar trial.³² He countered that 'in that hour of peril and difficulty he, by his vigour, his sagacity, his promptitude, saved India'.³³ Reiterating the Chairman's argument, he contended that Hastings's reputation was 'inseparably connected with the honour and character of the East-India Company, and that they must go down together, glorious or infamous, to the latest posterity'.³⁴ Hastings was symbolic of the Company, and his commemoration represented an attempt to defend its legacy amidst parliamentary incursion. Subsequently, the original motion was passed, with only four opposing.³⁵ The Company paid John Flaxman £1,000 for a statue that depicted Hastings as a 'statesman and scholar', with a rolled up map of India, and a book of 'Hindu laws' beside him.³⁶ Placed in the 'Victory Wall' of the General Court in 1823, it aimed to 'inspire confidence and impress the shareholders', whilst developing the Company's 'public image'.³⁷ These two well-researched statues declared the Company's importance, justifying its existence against growing opposition.³⁸ A further tablet and bust were erected in Westminster Abbey by his wife.³⁹ Thus, Hastings was initially commemorated by his family and friends, all of whom denied his 'crimes' entirely.

Hastings's initial reception amongst historians was less encouraging. James Mill first published his *History of British India* in 1817. Despite having never visited India, he deemed himself qualified to write a history demonstrating its barbarism.⁴⁰ As Javed Majeed has argued, he saw British India as 'a sorry saga of stupidity and greed'.⁴¹ Accordingly, he censured the 'atrocious' Rohilla War, and the 'injustice' of Nandakumar's execution.⁴² But Mill recognised that in 'point of ability', Hastings was 'beyond all question the most eminent of the chief rulers whom the Company have ever employed'.⁴³ He sympathised that 'Hastings

was placed in difficulties' that 'few public men have been called upon to overcome', and that no man 'who ever had a great share in the government of the world, had his public conduct so completely explored, and laid open to view'.⁴⁴ Widely reproduced and profoundly influential, it became a textbook for generations of utilitarian Indian reformers – not least the literary giant Thomas Babington Macaulay.⁴⁵ It was the accusation that Mill had misled Macaulay that ensured his vilification by Hastings's later biographers.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, beyond Hastings's immediate circle of family and friends, the prevailing notion was that he was a flawed hero. The *Sunday Times* argued that despite his 'genius', his 'oppressions could not be excused'.⁴⁷ Similarly, The *Times* thought his acquittal was due to a 'charitable consideration' of 'his difficult situation, and the real benefit which was the fruit of his policy', rather than his innocence.⁴⁸ G. R. Gleig's *Memoirs of Warren Hastings*, published in 1841, went against the tide. He thought Hastings 'had no faults', and his administration a 'blessing' for Indians, who proclaimed him 'the greatest benefactor to their race'.⁴⁹ In fact, 'neither his own nor any other age has produced a man more entitled to a nation's gratitude, more deserving of the love and reverence of all'.⁵⁰ Such hagiography triggered Macaulay's famous 1841 review essay, something much regretted by Hastings's later defenders.

The resulting essay was a literary masterpiece. The pages crackled with the sparkling phrases and elegant prose typical of the eminently quotable Macaulay. Its resounding success and lasting popularity would cause generations of imperialists sleepless nights. But Hastings's later biographers have distorted Macaulay's view.⁵¹ In fact, he considered

Hastings, though far from faultless, one of the greatest men that England ever produced. He had pre-eminent talents for government, and great literary talents too, – fine taste, a princely spirit, and heroic equanimity in the midst of adversity and danger.⁵²

He later referred to him as the 'ablest man who ever governed India'.⁵³ But his admiration was not uncritical. Reacting against Gleig's *Memoirs*, 'the worst book that I ever saw', he aimed to reinvigorate the true yet exaggerated charges of Burke, and to transform the 'very able' but 'dry' verdict of Mill into the popular realm.⁵⁴ As Catherine Hall has demonstrated, his narrative was one of progression; that an empire of conquest had been swept away by a 'liberal and reforming' one that aimed to 'spread the benefits of civilisation to subject peoples'.⁵⁵ This was reflected in his 1835 *Minute on Education*, which declared the superiority of British culture and language.⁵⁶ Accordingly, he used Hastings as a symbol through which progression could be shown, declaring that 'at first English power came among them unaccompanied by English morality'.⁵⁷ His

statement that 'I reflect with pride that to the doubtful splendor which surrounds the memory of Hastings and of Clive, we can oppose the spotless glory of Elphinstone and Monro' typifies his approach.⁵⁸ Consequently, he censured Hastings's 'great crimes' such as the Rohilla War, which 'left a lasting stain on the fame of Hastings and of England'.⁵⁹ But overall, he believed that his 'administration, with all its blemishes, gives him a title to be considered as one of the most remarkable men in our history'.⁶⁰ Therefore, as Hall has argued, Hastings emerged as a 'flawed hero'.⁶¹

Some were more critical, with *Blackwood's Magazine* arguing that 'the acquittal of Hastings leaves a stain on the justice of his country'.⁶² But Macaulay also had his critics, with the *Morning Post* condemning him for 'reviving the diatribes of Burke' and having an 'utter disregard of the truth'.⁶³ Elijah Impey published his father's memoirs in reaction to Macaulay, accusing him of reviving the 'slander and falsehood' dreamt up by the 'personal malignity and party rancour' of Francis.⁶⁴ At any rate, most responses to Hastings were now increasingly positive. In 1845, Hastings was included in a list of potential statues for the new Houses of Parliament.⁶⁵ Similarly, Lord Palmerston spoke admiringly of Hastings and Clive founding 'that vast and magnificent empire which now crowns its connexion and subjection to English rule'.⁶⁶ Lamenting the sale of Daylesford in 1853, *The Times* argued that the 'mists of passion and indignation have long since disappeared', and that as a 'founder of an empire' Hastings 'did not deserve' impeachment.⁶⁷ But this hero status rested on a favourable opinion of the empire which he founded, and his 'crimes' would resurface in dramatic fashion when imperial sentiment turned sour during the 1857 Indian Mutiny.

As initial reports of the Mutiny filtered back to Britain at the end of June 1857, Hastings's position was not severely threatened, as many blamed the Mutiny on anglicisation.⁶⁸ In July, Lord Russell contrasted Company men in Hastings's day, who 'became completely Indian in their feelings and habits', with the current group, who 'remain English' and fail to comprehend 'the feelings of the Natives'.⁶⁹ But the devastating news from India had turned shock into despair by the Autumn.⁷⁰ One report painted a vivid picture of 'children' being 'cut to pieces before their parents' eyes', and called for 'every Englishman to demand retribution'.⁷¹ In this climate, Hastings's 'crimes' – including, for evangelicals, his opposition to missionaries – were re-invoked with a new fervent zeal. The *Aberdeen Journal* argued that the Rohilla War 'butchery' was a 'black [...] spot on Hastings' memory'.⁷² Calcutta clergyman Alexander Duff also censured this 'disgraceful incident', whilst arguing that the Mutiny was caused by a lack of 'salvation' amongst Indians.⁷³ Another clergyman declared that 'nothing but the

promulgation of the Gospel would tame the savage Mahomedan, or change the heart of the fanatic Hindoo'.⁷⁴ With increased zeal, evangelicals sought to defend themselves from the charge that missionary activity had caused the Mutiny.⁷⁵

This sentiment reached its climax on 7 October, when the country stood still for a 'Day of National Humiliation and Prayer'.⁷⁶ This was called by Queen Victoria to 'humble ourselves before Almighty God' and 'obtain pardon for our sins'.⁷⁷ Sermons across the country debated the sins responsible for this divine punishment, and many blamed the founders of the Empire. At Trinity Church, Marylebone, Reverend Richard Chaffer declared that 'we in India are suffering for our fathers' iniquities'. He spoke of the 'atrocities perpetuated by Warren Hastings', and blamed him for denying missionaries the chance to save the 'naturally cruel' 'heathen'.⁷⁸ Similarly, a Bristol clergyman argued that the only way the 'annexation of Indian territory' could 'be justified' was by 'imparting to the conquered' the 'blessings of Christian civilisation'.⁷⁹ Another declared that Hastings had 'put to death more Indians than Nana Sahib slew Europeans', and 'now God had called' Britain's 'sins to remembrance'.⁸⁰

Similar sentiments were expressed in the press, with the Leeds Mercury arguing that Hastings had 'acquired large territories in a manner which no one can justify'.⁸¹ Likewise, one commentator in *The Sunday Times* believed that 'there is no spot half so dark and repulsive as' the Rohilla War in the annals of British India.⁸² Moreover, Hastings was 'morally diseased', especially for rejecting missionaries and instead patronising 'antiquated and effete orientalism' that gave Indians no 'hope of their enlightenment'.⁸³ Similarly, the *Illustrated London News* argued that 'wherever, in fact, the Governor General had a claim, "or could invent one," the most wholesale plundering took place'.⁸⁴ For *Reynold's Newspaper*, Hastings was 'guilty of the most atrocious cruelties' and 'the most abominable extortion'.⁸⁵ Overall, the Mutiny revealed the fragility of Hastings's reputation. His status rested on his position as an empirebuilder and was open to censure during downturns of imperial confidence. However, the criticism he faced during the Mutiny was short lived, and a more long-lasting legacy was a growing imperial fervour in Britain.⁸⁶

Indeed, the period following the Mutiny saw the rise of juvenile literature. In 1862 *Every Boy's Magazine* praised Hastings as 'the bold, brave, scandalized Governor-General'.⁸⁷ In contrast, the *Monthly Packet*, a magazine for Anglican girls, argued that he deserved 'the gratitude both of India and England' for founding the Empire, but nonetheless there was 'no more foul page in the history of British India' than the Begums incident.⁸⁸ More positively, *Boys of England* featured him in their series 'How to become Great Men'. The source of his greatness was clear: he 'had lived to retrieve the fallen fortunes of his name', and

'had founded an empire'.⁸⁹ Hastings was idealised as an 'exemplary life', with qualities and achievements that the magazine's young audience could aspire to.⁹⁰ A similar approach was adopted by Samuel Smiles – who, in his popular book *Self-Help*, lauded Hastings as an example of 'Energy and Courage'.⁹¹ Hastings's personal ambition was heavily stressed as the driver of his achievements. Through 'dauntless will and indefatigable industry', he had pursued his 'romantic vision' of restoring his family's wealth and had 'became one of the most powerful men of his time'.⁹² His life had all the trappings of a great adventure story: rags to riches; foreign lands; and most importantly, empire-building. These elements were pounced upon by imperialists and transformed into juvenile adventure stories.

Another result of the rising imperial fervour in Britain was the growing desire to vindicate Hastings amongst historians. In the 1858 edition of Mill's work, the editor Horace Wilson tried to balance the scales. He noted that

We look now with wonder, not unmixed with contempt, upon the almost insane virulence with which he was assailed, and think of him in no other character than that of the ablest of the able men who have given to Great Britain her Indian empire.⁹³

Thus, 'his administration has infinite claims upon the gratitude of the Company, and if India be worth the having, of Great Britain'.⁹⁴ John Marshman's 1868 *History of India* continued this narrative. He argued that Hastings had the 'greatest talent for government', and that his 'renown has not been eclipsed by the most illustrious of his successors'.⁹⁵ His view that the Rohilla War was 'one of the few stains on the bright and honourable career of Hastings' typifies his argument.⁹⁶ A more favourable view is found in Captain Trotter's 1878 biography. He lamented that 'the glamour of Macaulay's rhetoric still dazzles the minds of the many readers who learn from his lively pages the little they care to know about the history of British India'.⁹⁷ Moreover, Hastings had 'One of the greatest names, if not the very greatest, in the annals of British India', and it was his 'genius' that 'had saved from ruin the empire founded by Clive'.⁹⁸ His position had markedly improved and in 1867 a new statue by Theodore Phyllers joined Flaxman's one in the new India Office Durbar Court.⁹⁹ Although still a flawed hero, the green shoots of his later vindication were beginning to emerge.

The rising tide of imperial sentiment in the 1880s accelerated this process. The first major attempt at vindication was Sir James Stephen's 1885 work, which sought to deny Hastings's involvement in Nandakumar's execution.¹⁰⁰ He dismissed Macaulay's essay as a 'mere effort of journalism', and condemned Mill's 'excessive dryness' for producing a false 'impression of accuracy and labour'.¹⁰¹ Hastings, moreover, was pronounced 'the ablest Englishman of the eighteenth century'.¹⁰² The *Times* agreed, arguing that 'the magnitude of his

services and the nobility of his character have extenuated' his 'fault, even among those who, without inquiring into the details, were disposed to look upon his guilt as established'.¹⁰³ Implying, of course, that regardless of culpability, as an empire-builder he would be forgiven. However, Stephen faced an aggressive counterattack in 1886, when Henry Beveridge retorted that Hastings was 'the real prosecutor' behind Nandakumar's 'judicial murder'.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, the opinion of most was somewhere in between these two extreme positions. In his 1889 biography, the former Indian governor Alfred Lyall admitted that 'in manifold difficulties' Hastings had 'occasionally done things that are hard to justify'.¹⁰⁵ Nonetheless, he 'possessed some of the strongest inbred qualities and defects of an Englishman, developed and directed by very remarkable circumstances'.¹⁰⁶ His qualifications of Macaulay drew strong criticisms from the Pall Mall Gazette, which believed that Hastings had pursued a 'policy of plunder' and ignored 'the force of public morality in English politics'.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, initial attempts to vindicate Hastings met fierce criticism, proving that Hastings was still a profoundly controversial character. Far from having an 'uncontested' position in the imperial pantheon after 1850, as Marshall has suggested, Hastings's reputation remained fragile.¹⁰⁸ However, even Lyall's positive, if not uncritical, account of Hastings would soon be deemed inadequate for the growing tide of imperial fervour during the 1890s.

Vindication, 1890–1915

In 1890, George Forrest published a selection of Hastings's state papers. The 'chief aim' of these volumes 'was to prove' that 'Hastings was not guilty of the crimes laid to his charge by unscrupulous opponents and political partisans'.¹⁰⁹ Forrest believed that the 'exaggerated charges of Burke' had 'left a stain, not only on the character of the man who founded our Empire, but on the nation whose minister he was'.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, he contended that Hastings was a 'great ruler who, by his genius and courage, raised the Company from being a body of merchants and adventurers into the most powerful State in the politics of India'.¹¹¹ Drawing on these materials, several books were produced in rapid succession, each with the express purpose of exculpating Hastings. Firstly, Trotter produced an updated biography, praising Hastings for having 'preserved and strengthened our young Indian Empire'.¹¹² More importantly, in 1892 Sir John Strachey attempted to excuse Hastings from the Rohilla War charge. He had clear enemies in mind. Burke could be forgiven due to his 'pure and noble motives', but Strachey could 'hardly express in moderate language' his 'indignation at the misrepresentations, the suppression of truth, the garbling of documents of which [...] Mill had been guilty'.¹¹³ Macaulay had consumed these 'baseless stories' and given 'them fresh life in his glittering periods'.¹¹⁴

Encouraged by his uncle's work, Lytton Strachey later wrote a dissertation vindicating Hastings from his actions in relation to the Begums and Chait Singh.¹¹⁵

Similarly, in 1894 Colonel Malleon, a retired Indian army officer, attempted 'the vindication of the character and conduct of a man who rendered services to his country so striking that the results have been felt, and are felt still, in every corner of the Empire'.¹¹⁶ Contemporary relevance is clear: Hastings had founded an empire of 'unsurpassed glory, administered upon principles of toleration, [and] of justice'.¹¹⁷ Hastings's vindicators left no part of his life untouched; Sir Charles Lawson even attempted to vindicate his private life.¹¹⁸ Former Indian administrator Sir George Birdwood commended this effort, proving as it did 'that the brilliant success of Warren Hastings as a public servant was based' on 'his solid English worthiness in every relation of private life'.¹¹⁹ He reflected that 'his memory has for nearly a century been obscured by reckless misrepresentations, but men like Warren Hastings have always God on their side'.¹²⁰ Vindicating Hastings was, like the Empire, a divine mission, taken up with zealous enthusiasm by his biographers.

The campaign was continued in the newspapers. The Times led the way, concluding that Hastings was 'unquestionably the greatest Governor-General of British India'.¹²¹ Attempting to dispel the charges, they attacked Burke's 'malignant' speeches, Mill's 'deliberate misrepresentations', and Macaulay's 'misapplied genius'.¹²² But they feared their efforts were 'all in vain', as 'History has little chance against rhetoric, and Indian history has never been made interesting to English readers except by rhetoric'.¹²³ Far from dispassionate history, this campaign was an intense effort to reshape public opinion. There was clearly some success. The Morning Post detected Macaulay's recent 'degradation from the rank of history to that of romance', and argued that Mill's work was 'so dull that nobody could suspect it of being inaccurate'.¹²⁴ Nevertheless, they still feared that Macaulay had 'affixed to' Hastings 'a stigma which will never be quite effaced in popular opinion'.¹²⁵ Similarly, the Graphic lamented that it is 'one thing for the heavy artillery of fact and evidence to gain the completest of victories and another to get the victory admitted – such is the wellnigh invincible force of Style'.¹²⁶ Whilst Mill was attacked for inaccuracy, it was Macaulay who demanded the most attention. Hastings's vindicators despaired at the popularity of Macaulay's narrative and campaigned relentlessly to discredit it. The easiest method, they found, was to lambast his exuberant style, and to dismiss his essay as a work of fiction.

That these efforts served a contemporary imperial agenda is evident. Indeed, the Daily News praised Hastings for founding 'the marvellous India which we

know to-day', and for 'an Imperial rule which, for justice, humanity, sympathy, and scrupulous respect for the feelings, the habits, even for the mere prejudices, of the subject peoples, has not had its match in the world'.¹²⁷ Taking a more positive view, they declared the campaign had 'completely freed his memory from the stain left upon it by the brilliant but perfunctory essay of Lord Macaulay', and that Hastings 'will in future be recognised as one of the greatest men to whom England has given birth'.¹²⁸ A relentless and co-ordinated attack was waged on Hastings's detractors on all fronts. Organised predominantly by ex-Indian officials, and driven by motivations that went far beyond mere historical interest, these efforts sought to reshape popular opinion about the origins of the Indian Empire.

But it was not only British opinion that concerned these historians. An ex-Indian Civil Servant, Strachey wrote his book in direct response to unrest in India. He believed the charges against Hastings 'have caused and still are causing no little mischief both in England and in India'. He was deeply concerned that the 'false history' of Burke and Macaulay, 'systematically taught by ourselves, and believed by the educated natives of India to be true', was having a 'serious effect on their feelings towards their English rulers'.¹²⁹ These stories filled Indians with 'righteous indignation', causing them to suspect that contemporary 'charges of Indian misgovernment and oppression' were true.¹³⁰ His book was part of a wider effort to reverse this. The Times also feared that 'Mill's merciless and unjust criticisms of the makers of British India are still accepted by educated natives, and they have been useful weapons in the hands of the political agitator'.¹³¹ But it was Macaulay who faced the most severe censure. For Henry Maine, his Minute on Education had produced 'grave and unlooked-for results', because 'English classical literature is saturated with party politics', and its 'excessively inaccurate' statements were having a 'deep effect on the mind of the educated Indian'.¹³² The problem, another historian theorised, was that the works encouraged 'resistance to authority, the doctrine that Governments are always oppressive and unwise'. Thus,

Much of the hostile attitude we meet with in India is due to the books we have placed in the hands of schoolboys; we have fed them with the invectives of Milton and Burke, and they, with their great imitative faculty, have conceived that we stand to the people of India in the position of the Stuarts and the Georges towards the people of England.¹³³

The charges against Hastings were at the very heart of this. Indeed, Neville Chamberlain argued that:

Most mischievous of all perhaps in its effect on the students is the false and calumnious history of India by James Mill, which was adopted by Macaulay as the basis of his

well known essay on Warren Hastings. It is now known that the most shameful and horrible stories which Mill relates, especially those which he used to blacken the character of Warren Hastings, are devoid of foundation in fact, but it is hardly to be wondered at that natives of India who have been taught to believe these stories true should be seriously affected by them in their feelings of loyalty to the British rule.¹³⁴

For many, Macaulay's desire for 'a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect', had seriously backfired; a westernised but alienated elite were causing unrest in India.¹³⁵ His essay on Hastings was the most potent example of such damaging literature, and Indian officials channelled their energy into reversing the narrative. Such contemporary anxieties help explain the passion of Hastings's vindicators, proving that his memory was profoundly important for those seeking to justify the contemporary Raj both in Britain and India.

This coincided with a growth in imperial sentiment following the 1880s. William Lecky at the Imperial Institute observed that the recent understanding that Macaulay was 'seriously misleading' coincided with the realisation that empire was 'a matter of life and death to the nation'.¹³⁶ This is reflected in the use of Hastings as a parallel for contemporary empire-builders. Frederick Selous at the Royal Colonial Institute compared Rhodes's 'successfully carried out' Matabele War with the expeditions of Clive and Hastings.¹³⁷ Moreover, The Times declared Rhodes 'the Warren Hastings of South Africa'.¹³⁸ Rhodes's resignation after the botched 1895 Jameson Raid brought further comparisons.¹³⁹ A *Fun* magazine cartoon depicted the 'shade of Warren Hastings' standing behind Rhodes with a hand on his shoulder saying: 'I added India to the Empire, and was impeached by Burke; you must never turn aside, Africa's hope and Africa's pride, make the Empire greater yet. Let resignation wait'.¹⁴⁰ As the *Bristol Mercury* commented, imperialists had found 'Rhodes's prototype in Warren Hastings'.¹⁴¹ The most prominent of such imperialists was the Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain, who, whilst defending Rhodes in Parliament on 26 July 1897, declared that 'We are not going to have another Warren Hastings trial, which would be a farce where the other was almost a tragedy'.¹⁴² In this sense, Hastings became an imperial martyr – the persecuted proconsul – that imperialists used as a symbolic warning of subjecting contemporary empirebuilders to parliamentary scrutiny.

Juvenile literature also boomed after the 1880s, although there was little concern with vindicating Hastings for the purpose of adventure stories.¹⁴³ Boys of England depicted him as a ruthless, brave and ingenious leader, who stopped at nothing to secure British dominion and Daylesford: in short 'the greatest man who ever ruled India'.¹⁴⁴ Similarly, *Boy's Own Paper* spoke of his 'measureless ambition', and focused heavily on his dream of becoming 'Hastings of

Daylesford'.¹⁴⁵ This classic rags-to-riches tale was a powerful incentive for young boys to dream of the wealth and glory of imperial careers.¹⁴⁶

Hastings's imperial afterlife reached spectacular heights in 1895, when the impresario Imre Kiralfy ran his Empire of India Exhibition at Earl's Court.¹⁴⁷ The 'crowning triumph' of this was the 'Grand Historical Spectacle', a history of India staged at the 6,000-seat Empress Theatre, and something Brendan Gregory has called a 'tendentious justification for the British Raj'.¹⁴⁸ Combining imperial propaganda with commercial ingenuity, it was remarkably successful – with an estimated 1.5 million viewers.¹⁴⁹ The Spectacle oozed imperial confidence; the Standard proclaiming it a 'feast for the eyes, a lesson in history, an appeal to patriotism'.¹⁵⁰ Kiralfy hoped it would show the 'barbaric splendour' of India's history, 'leading up to the grand climax, which for ever brought peace and prosperity within her borders – the establishment of an Empire under our Most Gracious Sovereign'.¹⁵¹ The final scene, the 'Glorification of Victoria, The Empress Queen', recreated the celebrations that followed Queen Victoria's coronation as Empress of India in 1877. Clive and Hastings, the 'makers of British India', led a procession culminating in the crowning of Victoria by Britannia, as 'Love, Mercy, and Wisdom' sat at her feet, and 'Art, Science, Commerce, Peace, Prosperity, and Happiness' surrounded her.¹⁵² In less spectacular form, Hastings, 'the first and greatest of the GovernorsGeneral', was well represented with portraits in the East India Company section of the Exhibition – organised by, amongst others, Birdwood and Forrest.¹⁵³ Repeated in 1896, the Exhibition indicates that Hastings's position in the imperial pantheon was secured, and his spotless reputation could now be used to justify the contemporary Raj.

His reputation amongst political elites also soared. In 1896, Joseph Chamberlain spoke of Britain's imperial 'destiny', which owed its 'existence to the energy, the courage, and the resolution' of Clive and Hastings, who carved 'out in India a huge dependency for the British Crown'.¹⁵⁴ In 1910, the Duke of Westminster placed a bronze tablet marking Hastings's Park Lane residence.¹⁵⁵ For Lord Curzon, Hastings's most ardent supporter, vindication was intimately connected to his own experience as Viceroy of India, 1898–1905. A fervent imperialist, he believed that 'As long as we rule India we are the greatest power in the world'.¹⁵⁶ Moreover, as David Gilmour has argued, Curzon was 'obsessively aware of the past and of the imprint he would leave on it'.¹⁵⁷ He constantly reflected on his predecessors, of whom he believed Hastings 'the greatest' and 'most deeply injured'.¹⁵⁸ Indeed, he considered that 'great and ill-used man' to be 'one of the most eminent although the most suffering public servants that we have ever known'.¹⁵⁹ Subjected to the 'unjust invective of Burke'

and the 'unfair and partisan censure of Macaulay', he 'was a man greatly to be pitied'.¹⁶⁰ Reflecting on his vindication, he later observed that 'Hastings now stands forth, not indeed as a perfect or saintly figure', but 'as a man greatly suffering and sorely ill-used' – 'boldly daring, supremely competent, and greatly achieving'.¹⁶¹ Curzon's admiration for Hastings was evidently linked to his belief that he had also been unappreciated on his return to Britain.¹⁶²

As Viceroy he was deeply interested in 'the commemoration of the houses in which great or famous men had lived', and subsequently purchased Hastings House in Alipore as a State Guest-House for Indian Princes in 1901.¹⁶³ In 1912 he wrote in *The Times* 'appealing to the public conscience' to prevent the sale of the House, Calcutta's 'most interesting possession' and 'the residence of the greatest man whom England ever sent out to govern India'.¹⁶⁴ Forrest agreed: it 'was the favourite residence of the man whose far sight first saw, and whose brave and confident patience realized, the romantic idea of his country founding an Empire in the East'. Indeed, he argued that:

The city of Calcutta is a splendid monument of the patience, courage, and genius of the Anglo-Saxon race. The history of British Dominion in India – the most marvellous romance of our country – may be traced in its buildings statues, and inscriptions. These memorials of the brave and wise men who have bequeathed to England an Empire are sacred trusts and they must be carefully preserved by the State. No greater respect could be shown to Warren Hastings, the founder of the Empire, than preserving the mansion he built and loved.¹⁶⁵

This effort was intrinsically linked to opposing the transfer of power to Delhi. Former Indian Civil Servant Sir John Rees took up the task in the House of Commons, enquiring whether the House could be preserved as a 'memorial to one of our greatest national heroes', in the 'real capital of the Empire of which he was the chief founder'.¹⁶⁶ Meanwhile, Curzon asked in the House of Lords whether they could preserve 'so interesting and unique a historical memorial'. The Secretary of State for India Lord Crewe, who oversaw the transfer of power to Delhi, reassured him of the House's preservation, adding that 'so important a historical monument, connected with the great ruler of India to whom both Englishmen and the natives of India owe so much, is worthy not merely of preservation but of being treated with all respect'.¹⁶⁷ The preservation of Hastings House was not just a commemorative act, it was also a sentimental justification for the maintenance of Calcutta as the capital of India.

Having returned from India, Curzon worked tirelessly to ensure Clive and Hastings were justly remembered. For him, the commemoration of the 'great men' who created 'the foundations of an Empire more enduring than

Alexander's, more splendid than Caesar's', worked as 'an honourable incentive to others'. It was thus iniquitous that Clive and 'his even greater successor' Hastings should have faced the 'blackest political ingratitude'.¹⁶⁸ Regardless, he believed that 'no substantial case could be made out against' either: both 'had been men with clean hands and a high moral purpose'.¹⁶⁹ Accordingly, on 12 December 1912 he proposed 'adding to the commemorative tablets on the floor of Westminster Hall a tablet designating the spot on which Warren Hastings stood for his trial'. This would not only commemorate 'one of the most famous episodes in our history, although it is one that does not do us much honour', but would also act as 'a tardy reparation to a great and singularly ill-treated Englishman'.¹⁷⁰ On 4 March 1913, a bronze tablet was laid in the centre of Westminster Hall, with the inscription: 'On this spot Warren Hastings stood for his trial 1788–1795'.¹⁷¹ For Curzon, commemorating empire-builders was profoundly important, not least because it ensured imitation by future Indian officials.

Despite all this progress, Hastings's twentieth-century vindicators were no less zealous in their work. Hilda Gregg ('Sydney Grier') produced both a novel and a history attempting to vindicate 'the Great Proconsul'.¹⁷² By fictionalising Hastings's life, Grier hoped to show him 'as he revealed himself to his intimates', and thus correct those 'content to accept the libels of Macaulay as genuine history'.¹⁷³ In 1909, G. W. Hastings published his polemical *Vindication of Warren Hastings* – the 'simple object' of which was 'to exhibit as clearly as may be' that his remote ancestor, 'the man who made our Indian Empire and preserved it for the Crown, was wholly innocent of the crimes so often and so grievously laid to his charge'.¹⁷⁴ Similarly, Forrest's 1910 edition was closely linked to the contemporary Empire, arguing that 'Hastings laid the foundations of the present structure of order, peace, and security'.¹⁷⁵ The *Times* detected that it 'is much more than a defence; it is an exposition of the principles which governed the wise and just administration of Warren Hastings'.¹⁷⁶ Moreover, Forrest observed that 'opinion has changed': the 'load of obloquy resting on Hastings' memory has in a large degree been removed'.¹⁷⁷ Yet this newfound confidence had been infiltrated by doubt, reflected in James Cotton's remark that 'If the acquisition of the Indian empire can be supported on ethical grounds, Hastings needs no defence'. Nevertheless, he left no doubt as to his own conclusion, declaring that 'Natives and Anglo-Indians alike venerate his name, the former as their first beneficent administrator, the latter as the most able and the most enlightened of their own class. If Clive's sword conquered the Indian empire, it was the brain of Hastings' that 'saved the empire in its darkest hour'.¹⁷⁸ Hastings's untouchable status in the imperial pantheon was secured, but as the

Empire came increasingly under attack, imperial 'arrogance' was swiftly being replaced by 'anxiety'. Some responded with 'defiant jingoism'; others were 'assailed by doubts', and Hastings's memory was reinvented once more.¹⁷⁹

Apotheosis, 1915–1947

As uncertainty over the future of the Raj swept across Britain during the early twentieth century, Hastings was celebrated more enthusiastically than ever. Indeed, his twentieth-century biographers were no less eulogistic than their predecessors. For M. E. Monckton Jones, writing in 1918, Hastings had 'saved an empire for his country'.¹⁸⁰ Likewise, P. E. Roberts, writing in the 1929 Cambridge History of India, concluded that despite 'some ethical defects', Hastings was 'the greatest Englishman who ever ruled India'.¹⁸¹ The same year, Sophia Weitzman concluded in her monograph Warren Hastings and Philip Francis that Hastings's detractors had 'coloured the views of every student of British India and blinded Macaulay to the virtues of Hastings'.¹⁸² That these studies celebrated British imperialism is clear. In the introduction of Weitzman's work, Ramsay Muir, tutor to both Weitzman and Monckton Jones, commended their efforts to vindicate 'the greatest Englishman of the eighteenth century'.¹⁸³ He believed that the Indian Empire was 'the most amazing achievement in modern history', and thought Hastings the 'chief architect of its greatness; for he made it appear that British rule meant peace and justice'.¹⁸⁴ More detailed works were appearing, but they still praised Hastings as an imperial hero.

Some tried to dampen the mood, with Thompson and Garratt detecting an 'idolatrous' and 'ignorant apotheosis' of Hastings's memory.¹⁸⁵ But this was a marginal view, and faced a strong rebuttal in Mervyn Davies's 1935 biography. Davies argued that 'Britain and India should equally recognize the debt they owe to Hastings', who had 'laid the basis of an empire of which both [...] could be proud'.¹⁸⁶ Yet he concluded cautiously that 'Hastings's exact place in history cannot be finally settled until' the 'Empire that he founded has become' a 'thing of the past'.¹⁸⁷ Conclusions over Hastings's career had become plagued by doubt, as it dawned on imperialists that the Empire would not last forever. C. C. Davies's 1939 Warren Hastings and Oudh was similarly positive, arguing that Hastings's 'blemishes [...] do not impair the general effect' of a 'great statesman' who 'preserved the British Empire in India'.¹⁸⁸ By the 1930s uncertainty over India's future had swept across Britain, and although most commentators remained positive, concern lurked in the peripheries of their work.

For most, the growing imperial anxiety made the task of vindication more urgent than ever. One commentator in *The Sunday Times* welcomed these new

histories, as 'In days so critical for the fortunes of the Empire as the present, it is only fitting that its pioneers should have justice done to them'. By 'no mere accident', they concluded, 'it is just this business' that 'our biographers and historians are largely engaged'.¹⁸⁹ As the author was acutely aware, biography was an important form of commemoration, and was used to achieve political ends. Similarly, *The Times* argued that 'At a time when the principles on which the actual government of India is based are under examination' it was vital to understand how the Empire began, and to celebrate the man who had 'saved India, not only for England but also for herself'.¹⁹⁰ Stressing the benefits of the Empire to both India and Britain became a major concern for imperialists in the years to come.

Although Hastings never tantalised the literary sphere, he did appear in several plays. In 1927, the German playwright Lion Feuchtwanger produced *Calcutta, May 4*, a play centred around Hastings's battle with his council in May 1775. Proving the fears of imperialists correct, he consumed Macaulay uncritically and, as T. H. Bowyer has argued, viewed Hastings as a 'benevolent despot'.¹⁹¹ It was translated into English and performed at Cambridge Festival Theatre in October 1930.¹⁹² Howard Peacey's *Warren Hastings*, performed at Wyndham's Theatre on 23 April 1929, was more positive. According to *The Times*, the 'heroic' Hastings was contrasted with an 'unrelievedly villainous' Francis, whose 'enmity for Hastings is the mainspring of the play'.¹⁹³ Similarly, a play published in the *Saturday Review* declared Hastings 'the greatest Englishman who has ruled in India'.¹⁹⁴ Hastings also starred in R. J. Minney's novel *Governor-General*, which celebrated the man who the author believed gave India 'peace and security'.¹⁹⁵ Hastings's new reputation was secured, and was celebrated in a variety of new ways.

The crowning glory of Hastings's imperial afterlife was the bicentenary of his birth, 6 December 1932. These commemorative events, organised by the Royal Empire Society (RES), reflect not only the apogee of Hastings's status, but also the realisation that the British Raj was coming to an end. Following Viceroy Lord Irwin's promise of self-rule in 1929, a Round Table Conference was being held in London to negotiate its implementation with Indian leaders.¹⁹⁶ Against the backdrop of intense political debate over the Government's policy, the bicentenary was harnessed by both sides to justify their position. The events began on 4 December, with a special service at Westminster Abbey. It was attended by the Headmaster and pupils of Westminster School, who – commemorating the life of a former pupil – laid a wreath on Hastings's monument. A sermon was delivered by Canon Percy Dearmer, who declared Hastings one of the 'greatest Englishmen in the eighteenth century'.

Moreover, he

was the first man to administer an important conquered country for the benefit of its inhabitants. Full of kindness, loved by Indians, infinitely patient and sweet-tempered under persecution, he established the sense of trusteeship, and that deep feeling of responsibility had never failed the Empire.

Dearmer attributed to Hastings his own perception of the contemporary Raj, to make the political argument that Britain must 'not renounce our trusteeship till the social evils of India were removed'; evils caused by a 'terrible religious system deeply ingrained and tyrannically imposed'.¹⁹⁷ As a founder of the Empire, Hastings's memory was harnessed by those opposed to giving it away.

The celebrations on 6 December commenced at Westminster Abbey. A procession to Hastings's monument was led by the Dean of Westminster, who said they were 'gathered to do honour to one who would always hold a high place among the founders of our Empire'. A wreath from the Secretary of State for India was laid on the monument by the former Governor of Madras, Sir Arthur Knapp, and Mr Ottewill of the India Office. Further wreaths were laid by the Navy League, the Worcestershire Association, and Sir Reginald Craddock on behalf of the Retired Indian Civil Servants' Association.¹⁹⁸ The bicentenary was thus celebrated by those intimately concerned with British India.

The main event was a lecture meeting held at Westminster School. The Dean of Westminster presided and Prince Arthur represented the Duke of Connaught, the President of the RES. Invitations had been sent to all members of the ongoing Round Table Conference, and the hall was packed with colonial officials, including the Secretary of State for India, Samuel Hoare, and three ex-Viceroy – Lords Irwin, Reading and Hardinge.¹⁹⁹ In his opening address, Reading declared Hastings 'the greatest Governor-General who ever ruled over India'. Reflecting on the Conference, he hoped those present would agree 'that if we now can bring this federation scheme into existence, we shall have perfected the work [...] embarked upon by Warren Hastings'. This was because Hastings's policy 'was not that of annexation or of conquest, but of friendly alliance with the Princes, and of bringing them into direct relation with the Sovereign', which matched the demand by Indian Princes at the Conference 'to retain their direct relationship with His Majesty as Sovereign of India'. Reading thus commemorated Hastings in order to defend the Government's policy of granting India Dominion Status, whilst opposing complete independence. Accordingly, he celebrated Hastings as the man who 'built the foundation' of an empire which had 'gained so much honour and glory throughout the world'.²⁰⁰ Hastings's memory was flexible and could be fashioned to serve a variety of causes, including that of Indian self-rule.

In the following address, Professor John Marriott declared that Hastings's 'mistakes [...] dwindled into insignificance when they are placed against the background of his superb achievement'. But concern crept into his conclusion that:

The final verdict on the life work of Warren Hastings must depend upon the ultimate judgement which history shall pronounce upon British Dominion in India. If British rule is condemned as a crime or even a blunder, then the lives of Warren Hastings and of all the other great men who have given their lives to India, must be said to have been spent in vain. But if on the other hand history should decide that British rule in India represents one of the most brilliant achievements of our race, that it has conferred great blessings upon India and has contributed to the well-being and the progress of civilization itself, then you will account Warren Hastings one of the greatest men of all time.

This was not merely a statement of uncertainty, but a justification of British rule against growing opposition. Nawab Sir Muhammad Akbar Hydari, the representative of the Nizam of Hyderabad at the Conference, added that

We, who hold that the British alliance is the very basis of our State, an alliance which we freely admit has been of advantage both to India and Great Britain, must therefore look to the founder of that alliance with reverence and affection.²⁰¹

Hastings's memory was fashioned by upholders of the Raj to justify the continuance of British rule against calls for independence.

Later that evening, a further meeting was held at the Society's headquarters in Northumberland Avenue. Despite his absence, former Secretary of State for India, Austen Chamberlain, sent a message declaring that

Warren Hastings must rank with Clive as the twin founder of our Indian Empire, and stands forth as the greatest of our Indian administrators. It is hard to find another example of a man who achieved so much in the face of tremendous difficulties, or was so ill-treated by his countrymen.²⁰²

The main lecture was delivered by Professor H. H. Dodwell, who argued that 'we must proudly regard Hastings as perhaps the greatest man of his century, as certainly the greatest and most ill-used man who was ever sent to govern British India'.²⁰³ Lord Lothian, former Under-Secretary of State for India and supporter of the Government's promise of self-rule, added that 'Hastings was not only a great figure in the history of India and of the British Empire, but in the history of the world', because 'he laid the traditions of perhaps the greatest system of government the world has seen since the Roman Empire'.²⁰⁴ Hastings's reputation among political elites had been transformed, and he was now widely eulogised by those intimately connected to Indian affairs in order to justify British rule.

Material displays also provided an important form of commemoration. At Westminster School, an exhibition of Hastings's relics and portraits was organised by Arthur Knapp between 7 and 10 December.²⁰⁵ Simultaneously, the British Museum organised, in conjunction with the India Office, an exhibition of his relics, papers, and portraits, which opened in the Nimrud Gallery on 6 December.²⁰⁶ This aimed to illustrate 'the chief events in the life of Warren Hastings while bringing out at the same time the remarkable character and personality of the man'.²⁰⁷ Due to its popularity, it was extended for a further month until 29 January 1933.²⁰⁸ Another exhibition of relics and portraits was organised by the Trustees of Victoria Memorial, Calcutta, opening on 6 December in the Durbar Hall.²⁰⁹ Even Curzon's efforts no longer satisfied the RES's zealous members. Edward Campbell asked the First Commissioner of Works in the House of Commons whether, considering the 'widespread celebrations', the Westminster Hall tablet could be amended to record 'the fact of his acquittal'. William Ormsby-Gore consented, reflecting that the present inscription was 'inadequate in view of the fact that a large number of schools read the inscription'.²¹⁰ The tablet was financed by RES member Mrs Frewen Lord on behalf of her late husband, an historian and keen supporter of Hastings's vindication.²¹¹ Subsequently, the additional line 'He was acquitted on all the charges' was added to the tablet in May 1933.²¹² The tablet, and other forms of visual display, enabled Hastings's vindicators to reach a wider, and potentially younger, audience. The seemingly trivial editing of the inscription suggests that the educational value of such a display was not lost on the organisers. Material displays were thus an important form of commemoration, especially for its value as imperial propaganda.

The bicentenary was also celebrated in the media. On 2 December, P. E. Roberts gave a speech on National Radio, concluding that Hastings 'stands forth as perhaps the greatest' of 'all the great men who have represented England in the East'.²¹³ That the real cause for celebration was the contemporary Raj is clear. In *United Empire*, the RES's journal, former Indian administrator Sir Evan Cotton proclaimed Hastings the 'architect of the British Empire in India', and argued that 'when we praise the famous men of our race, the name of Warren Hastings should be among the first to leap to remembrance'.²¹⁴ Hastings's future biographer Keith Feiling agreed, writing in *The Times* that Hastings 'did great and splendid things far outweighing his mistakes', and that although he died 'without any national commemoration', 'elsewhere he had made one of his own: the British Empire in India'.²¹⁵ Others were keen to stress the benefits of British rule for India. In the *Daily Telegraph*, Marriott declared that 'India was rescued by the genius and courage of Warren Hastings'.²¹⁶ The contemporary political

climate pervaded these texts, and anxiety over India's future was ubiquitous. As the Manchester Guardian reflected, the 'maker of empire will be estimated ultimately by the issue of the Empire which he made'.²¹⁷ Therefore, these celebrations were primarily concerned with justifying the Raj against growing opposition.

Intriguingly, Hastings's commemorators came from both sides of the debate over Indian self-rule. The presence of Lord Irwin (later Lord Halifax) at Westminster School indicates the support for the bicentenary by those in government securing Dominion Status for India. Indeed, Halifax deemed Hastings 'one of the Greatest Governor-Generals Britain has ever sent to India'.²¹⁸ However, Reading's speech would have dismayed some of the audience, notably the ex-Indian officials and Indian Empire Society (IES) Executives Sir Michael O'Dwyer and Reginald Craddock.²¹⁹ They, along with around 60 'Diehard' Conservative rebels, backed Winston Churchill in his vehement opposition to Indian reform.²²⁰ A press campaign was launched in Lord Rothermere's Daily Mail, which featured articles stressing the civilising value of British rule to India.²²¹ Churchill harnessed the bicentenary for this political purpose. For him, it had 'added significance in these days when the well-being of the peoples of India and the maintenance of the Imperial power as guarantee of their peace and justice hang in the balance'. Accordingly, he proclaimed Hastings the 'greatest' Governor-General, who 'founded for us an Empire in the East which still assures a sixth part of the inhabitants of the globe the basic elements of civilisation'. In conclusion, he begged Britain not 'to let Indians fall back into the conditions from which they were rescued by Warren Hastings'.²²² Similarly, in 1933 the IES circulated letter templates for supporters to bombard MPs, urging them to oppose the Government's policy of 'giving away in India all that Clive and Warren Hastings' had 'won'.²²³ Hastings naturally found support amongst ex-Indian officials who despaired at the prospect of losing the India of their youth. These men fought back, not only through parliamentary agitation, but also through the celebration of the Empire and its founders. In the process, Hastings emerged as a man who embodied the British Empire in India as a benevolent force for good.

Conclusion

From the time that Burke unleashed his fury upon Hastings, and the full force of his rhetorical prowess thundered down upon the benches of Westminster Hall, Hastings's reputation has always ebbed and flowed with British imperial sentiment. It recovered in the aftermath of the impeachment, but the memory of Burke's brilliant invectives never wholly faded. Twenty-three years after his

death he caught the attention of another equally astonishing rhetorician, who viewed him as an opportunity to show progression in British India. Macaulay's masterpiece propelled his view of Hastings into popular memory; a view that would take a prolonged and intense effort to remove. The events of 1857–1858 revealed just how precarious his tainted reputation was. But the growing tide of imperial sentiment in the 1880s swept away his blemishes and transformed him into a source of pride as the founder of an empire increasingly under attack. The vindication of Hastings was an intense effort, and despite constant fears that Macaulay still controlled popular memories, it was largely successful. Hastings was transformed from a flawed hero, into an untouchable imperial icon.

By the twentieth century, Hastings enjoyed a position in the imperial pantheon perhaps even greater than Clive. It was widely believed that Hastings had founded British India as a benevolent force, making him a more palatable hero for contemporary imperialists. Furthermore, the infamous nature of his trial, and the belief that he had been so badly wronged in both life and death, gave imperialists an unparalleled opportunity to vent contemporary concerns through their vindication of him. Their zeal was boosted by the fear that the memory of his 'crimes' was undermining British authority in India. Hastings represented the foundations of the Empire, the damaging of which, it was believed, could topple the entire project. As these officials saw the Empire of their youth slipping away during the 1930s, the vindication of its founders seemed more urgent than ever. Hastings always had his detractors, but the broad trajectory of his reputation saw a marked improvement between 1818 and 1947. Moreover, the wider variety of ways in which Hastings was celebrated after the 1880s reflects the growing imperial fervour in Britain. As anxiety over the Empire's future grew, the celebration of its founders became increasingly important for imperialists. They despaired at the public's lack of enthusiasm for Indian affairs and deployed a diverse range of methods to stimulate interest in the Empire and its heroes. As Hastings's popularity grew during this period, he appeared in a wider variety of cultural forms as a result. Thus, afterlives provide a powerful lens through which to view British society. They reveal the flexibility of memory, and how the memory and commemoration of imperial heroes could be harnessed to serve opposing political arguments.

Following 1947, the need to vindicate the origins of the Raj was swept away. Reflecting on the new realities, Penderel Moon felt he was 'better qualified to understand' Hastings 'than those who lived in the heyday of the British Raj and attributed to him all their own confident assumptions'.²²⁴ By 1965, Marshall was able to declare that 'the incentive to pass judgement on British India by acquitting or condemning Hastings' had been 'much reduced'.²²⁵ But even today, albeit with considerably less zeal, historians debate intensely the virtue of

Hastings's administration. Imperial concerns have been replaced with contemporary ones, and multiculturalism provides the tendency to treat Hastings with a sympathetic eye; his patronage of Indian art, languages and culture sitting more comfortably with present concerns than the policies of his anglicising successors.²²⁶ Yet Hastings is still frequently swept up in broader denunciations of British rule, and is condemned for some of the Company's worst excesses.²²⁷ Moreover, the recent debates over the legacy of imperialism reveal just how intense the desire to provide a moral judgement over the Empire remains.

But the case of Warren Hastings profoundly complicates these discussions. He challenges any simple, moralistic narrative of the Empire; and the failure amongst historians to reach a consensus over him proves just how futile such an attempt is. Besides, it is surely more fruitful to explore how and why he was transformed into an imperial icon, rather than to praise or condemn him based on contemporary politics. Indeed, the insistence of generations of historians to pass judgement on Hastings using criteria 'appropriate to the British India' of their day has 'seriously distorted' our view of him.²²⁸ He thus remains an enigma in the East India Company's history. As a new generation seeks to re-examine Britain's imperial past, the exploration of the political and cultural power of reputation, memory, and afterlives has never been so important.

Notes

1. Marshall, "Hastings, Warren."
2. Ferguson, *Empire*, 49–50.
3. Ibid; Smylitopoulos, "Portrait of a Nabob," 17; Lawson and Phillips, "Our Execrable Banditti," 239; Nechtman, "Nabobs Revisited," 654; Nechtman, "Mr Hickey's Pictures," 188; Nechtman, "A Jewel in the Crown?," 79–80; Flood, "Correct Delineations," 47–78.
4. Nechtman, *Nabobs*, 21, 102, 138.
5. Marshall, "Cornwallis Triumphant," 69; Bayly, *Imperial Meridian*, 160.
6. Marshall, "Hastings, Warren."
7. See, for example: Travers, *Ideology and Empire*; Feiling, *Warren Hastings*; Marshall, *The Impeachment of Warren Hastings*; Sen, "Warren Hastings," 59–81.
8. MacKenzie, "Heroic Myths of Empire," 109–12; MacKenzie, "Afterword," 969–70; Jones et al., "Decolonising Imperial Heroes," 789; Livingstone, "Popular Imperialism," 81–2.
9. See, for example: Kennedy, *The Last Blank Spaces*, 233–60; Pettitt, *Dr Livingstone, I Presume?*.
10. See, for example: Maylam, *The Cult of Rhodes*; Sèbe, *Heroic Imperialists in Africa*; Livingstone, *Livingstone's 'Lives'*; Coutu and McAleer, "The Immortal Wolfe," 29–57; Goebelt, "The Memory of Lord Clive," 136–52; McAleer, "Exhibiting the 'Strangest of all Empires'," 25–45.

11. W. Dalrymple, "Robert Clive Was a Vicious Asset-Stripper. His Statue Has No Place on Whitehall," *Guardian*, June 11, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/11/robert-clive-statue-whitehall-british-imperial>.
12. Marshall, "The Making of an Imperial Icon," 1–16.
13. Jones, "What Should Historians do with Heroes?," 439–40.
14. *Ibid.*, 444.
15. Thompson, *The Empire Strikes Back?*, 4–5; MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire*, 97; Porter, "Empire, What Empire?," 258; Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists*, 182.
16. Larkins, "General Summary of News," 135; "The Late Warren Hastings," *Morning Post*, February 17, 1820, 4.
17. Sutton, *The East India Company's Maritime Service*, 163; Larkins, "General Summary of News," 135.
18. Larkins, "General Summary of News," 136.
19. *Ibid.*, 138. 20. *Ibid.*, 139.
21. Larkins, "Warren Hastings," 193.
22. *Selections from the Asiatic Journal*, 409–12.
23. "Statue of Warren Hastings," 128; "Royal Academy," *The Times*, May 20, 1828, 3.
24. "Monument to the Memory of the Right Hon. Warren Hastings," *Morning Post*, January 16, 1829, 3.
25. Coutu, *Persuasion and Propaganda*, 304.
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