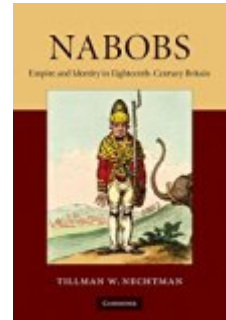


Tillman W. Nechtman. *Nabobs: Empire and Identity in Eighteenth-Century Britain.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. xiii + 266 pp. \$104.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-76353-0.



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Commissioned by Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth (Red Deer College)

In his *Nabobs: Empire and Identity in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Tillman Nechtman offers a lucid, thoughtful, and often provocative study of the politically charged and socially contested situation of the nabob in eighteenth-century Britain. The nabob, broadly understood here to be those English, Scots, Welsh, and Irish individuals who had rejoined metropolitan society after having secured their fortunes in India, became a common figure of abuse in the latter half of the eighteenth century. As is so often the case with many parvenus, their pretensions were easily mocked and their ostentatious ways became the subject of ridicule. Nabobs were savaged in print and on stage and the nabob became a stock figure in eighteenth-century satire. Such humorous treatments, however, belied much more serious conversations that were taking place in Britain. The nabob may come down to us today as the butt of many jokes, but to his contemporaries he (and occasionally she) was a threatening liminal figure, someone who was feared as a possible vector through which dangerous moral, material, and

political influences would infect domestic society. In Nechtman's words, "nabobs were cultural threats because they brought empire home and threatened to naturalize it as part of the national landscape" (p. 238). The author argues that the potent symbolism of the nabob resonates even to this day as he illustrates with a quote from Spiro Agnew. Perhaps. But for someone growing up in Canada, we are less likely to associate the nabob with bigger-than-life figures who threaten to subvert the body politic and more inclined to remember it as the name of a mass-marketed and relatively cheap brand of coffee that many of our parents drank. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the nabob weighed heavily on eighteenth-century minds, and in this thoughtful analysis of the reasons behind these anxieties, *Nabobs* offers fresh and often entertaining insights on the interplay between domestic and imperial politics.

The close scrutiny of the nabob offered here, one that involves looking at him from many angles, including intellectual, rhetorical and visual perspectives, is an important addition to what has

come to be labeled as the new imperial history. The new imperial history has become an extremely broad tent, though its constituents do share one important belief in common, namely that imperial and domestic histories are so densely entangled that any attempt to understand eighteenth-century Britain without due acknowledgement of what was happening “out there” will not only be incomplete but will arguably be fundamentally flawed because Britain and its empire are in the end mutually constitutive. While one might quibble over how much longer we can refer to this as the “new” imperial history (many of the historians most closely associated with it are tenured middle-aged full professors), the insistence that we bring the empire home has triggered important reassessments of key historical developments and characteristics of Britain. It has also led to vigorous debates over just how broadly and deeply empire’s imprint was felt. In the case of eighteenth-century Britain, this work extends and in many important ways aligns with the reconceptualization of eighteenth-century imperial politics that was earlier initiated in the works of Kathleen Wilson and Catherine Hall, and it more directly builds upon Nicholas Dirks’s *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (2006).

Nabobs offers a genealogy of the term “nabob,” finding references to it as early as 1759 when it emerged as a corruption of the Persian term *nawab* which referred to high-ranking officials in the Mughal court. The term soon morphed into one of derision aimed at those Britons whose ostentatious lifestyles most offended domestic sensibilities. Hence, Horace Walpole in 1784 attacked the East India Company as the “spawn of nabobs” (p. 11). This however was not the first time that Walpole had launched an attack on nabobs: as early as 1761 it featured as a term of abuse. Nabobs became in effect a form of “fallen Briton[s]” (p. 91); individuals who had succumbed to the seductive yet ultimately degenerating effects of the East, and in seeking the intellectual

foundations for such sweeping characterizations, Nechtman exposes the many cultural currents that came into play, including contemporary assessments of the effects of tropical climates on the physical condition and emotional sensibilities of Europeans and Scottish Enlightenment models of civilizational development. The convergence of these various discourses led contemporaries to conclude that “South Asian luxury, therefore, undermined the very fabric of civic humanity and mired India in a perpetual stagnation” (p. 55). Yet by the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the figure of the nabob had lost much of its political potency. Not only were more and more Britons traveling through the empire, but India and Britain were becoming more closely yoked together economically and politically. British expatriates came to be seen in a more positive light. Furthermore, the boundaries between British and Indian society came to be more clearly demarcated. Consequently, Anglo-Indians, in the nineteenth-century sense of Britons domiciled in India, were slowly recast into imperial servants. Sacrifice came to replace avarice as the defining characteristic and the nabob came to be replaced as a stock figure in the cultural repertoire by missionaries and military heroes.

Though this is at times a familiar story, it is told remarkably well and makes imaginative use of a wide range of sources. The scandals with which nabobs were associated, and the ambivalence felt about India, were manifested not only in the rhetoric of the flourishing pamphlet trade, but can also be glimpsed in the material expressions of imperial rule: shawls, engravings, paintings, and even teapots. Cambridge University Press deserves praise for reproducing many of them here. Moreover, the author has a good eye for some intriguing interconnections as well as a gift for the telling turn of phrase—for example, “If South Asia was imagined as the new Eden, luxury was its forbidden fruit, and, so it seemed, one taste of it wrought destruction in the forms of indolence, despotism, self-interest, corruption, su-

perstition, and degeneration" (p. 90). Nechtman also deserves credit for bringing gender into the equation, correcting a long-standing impression that the debates over nabobs were between and about men. The author observes that while there were relatively few "nabobinas," several of those who can be identified became exceptionally potent symbols of the nabob genus. Marian Hastings, for example, was frequently caricatured as fickle, avaricious, and consumed by consumerism. Moreover, Nechtman expands the discussion by acknowledging the important material dimensions to anxieties over nabobs, for it was not only fears of their political influence corrupting domestic society that whipped up the attacks on nabobs. Popular awareness of the nabobs was also driven by observations of their material wealth and concerns over how this could infiltrate British society. Here, *Nabobs* offers some thoughtful observations on why the West Indian plantocracy appears to have been subject to less denigration. One of the more intriguing is that the wealth of the planters was tied up in land, a condition with which the ruling aristocracy could identify. Investing in land, making it more productive, was familiar, even laudable: nabobs were engaged in activities that could be readily dismissed as parasitic. And at least on the surface the planters were seemingly more committed to making their positions more permanent and their territories more British. In contrast, the nabobs came across as rootless.

The often obsessive preoccupations with nabobs which are documented here rightly remind us that an important consequence of imperial expansion was that it ruptured the insularity that had hitherto marked Britain's elites. This is evocatively captured in the references here to *Robinson Crusoe*. Yet it would be a mistake to assume that the ruptures were wholly the consequence of imperial expansion into India and other regions in the tropics. As Jeremy Black, Linda Colley, and others have noted, Britain's ruling classes were also increasingly becoming exposed

to Europe through trade, travel, and warfare. Hence, the kinds of juxtapositions that informed British assessments of themselves and their society did not always turn upon the empire. Moreover, the sense of superiority that Nechtman identifies in contemporary writings was not always as totalizing as suggested here. His statement that "The imagined India that filled the minds of eighteenth-century observers was an India that could be conquered and, more importantly, one that should be conquered" assumes a degree of consensus and purposefulness that starts to fracture upon closer scrutiny (p. 59). In fact, Robert Orme, whom the author cites in support of this position, became increasingly alarmed at what he saw as a lamentable shift from commerce to territory in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

Moreover, there lurks a danger of conflating the metaphorical with the material, and of assuming that London and England and England and Britain were synonymous pairings. The attacks on curries and "pillow" (*pillau*) he cites on page 175, while tellingly suggestive of the power of anything associated with India to be rendered into a symbol of foreignness, were largely metaphorical as the actual impact of India upon domestic food consumption was still quite limited. He overstates the case when arguing that "Hookah pipes, turbans, and curry powder increasingly seemed to be as much a part of the national landscape as were traditional European clothing and roast-beef dinners of old England" (p. 175). Such exotic commodities may have been spotted where returning Anglo-Indians congregated, but not only were their numbers very small in the eighteenth century, but they were largely confined to London and a few towns, mainly in the home counties. The Anglo-Indian imprint on Britain is one that begs much more work, particularly in its highly uneven distribution.

These observations notwithstanding, *Nabobs* offers a refreshingly original and entertainingly written analysis of one of the most powerful cari-

catures in eighteenth-century Britain political culture, and as such anyone interested in the intersection of British and imperial politics stands to gain from reading it.

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