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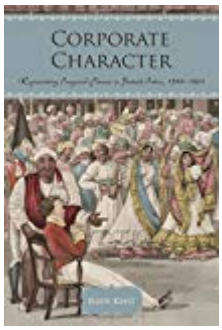

Eddy Kent. *Corporate Character: Representing Imperial Power in British India, 1786-1901.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014. 240 pp. $55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4426-4846-3.

Reviewed by Greg Mole

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

When writing about the colonial history of India, Thomas Babington Macauly once lamented that the growth of British power there was "unaccompanied" by any concurrent extension of "English morality." This opinion was not uncommon. Images of unscrupulous nabobs, invidious monopolies, and a corrupt Oriental culture dominated contemporary perceptions of Britain's colonial enterprise on the subcontinent—at least until the Crown's reform of its Indian empire in 1858. Yet, as Eddy Kent shows us in this ambitious reassessment of British imperialism, contemporary fixations on the perils of colonization tell only part of the story. Through a close analysis of various short stories, essays, parliamentary inquiries, administrative correspondence, and plays, Kent detects an alternative vision of empire that infused British thinking in the nineteenth century. Duty, honor, and "virtuous service," he argues, ultimately served as the organizing principles of Britain's imperial experience in India.

Kent's goals in *Corporate Character* are twofold. First, he explores the "moral authority" that Britons imputed to their empire. This cultural phenomenon, he argues, helps "to explain how and why Britain's imperial agents served, when it was so obviously against any rational calculation of their self-interest" (p. 4). Kent challenges longstanding divisions in the historiography of British India, particularly those separating the supposedly corrupt years of East India Company rule from the more dutiful tenure of the Indian Civil Service. In so doing, he complements the work of historians such as David Armitage, Peter Marshall, and Philip Stern—each of whom has questioned the dominant periodization used in studies of British imperial thought and practice.

Second, the book advances an institutional model for the study of British imperial life. Moving beyond the "conventional" lenses—race, nation—through which scholars approach colonial history, Kent instead examines the administrative cultures of both the East India Company and Indian Civil Service. His subject of inquiry is the imperial administrator rather than the colonial subject. In particular, the author explores how texts

espousing the virtues of loyalty and duty contributed to the "management" of colonial agents under British employ, creating a loyal cadre of administrators able to resist the worst temptations posed by foreign service. This narrative focus raises useful questions for not only literary theorists, but also for historians and sociologists interested in exploring the capacity of institutions to circumscribe, or even to determine, individual agency.

Kent's argument unfolds in thematic fashion, while also adhering to a loose chronology. The first chapter focuses on the circumstances surrounding Edmund Burke's impeachment campaign against Warren Hastings, the controversial governor-general of India. Hastings's trial serves as the key transformative moment in the book. According to Kent, the accusations leveled by Burke helped to establish conventions of dutiful employment and equitable governance among Company functionaries. Through this process, the commercially oriented East India Company was transformed definitively into a territorial administration, and "the question of whether Britain should govern India turned into one that asked what type of imperium Britain should exercise" (p. 41).

In emphasizing the role of the Hastings's trial in reframing British perspectives on empire, Kent builds on arguments made by Marshall and, more recently, Nicholas Dirks. What distinguishes his claims is the focus of his analysis: rather than study shifts in the high politics of the British Empire, Kent looks instead at transformations to its culture. As he shows in his third chapter, for instance, the ethos of honorable service laid out by Burke was gradually disseminated through the East India training college at Haileybury, which made dutiful employment the professional standard for Britain's colonial agents.

The following chapters explore the evolution of this corporate identity, which became a central feature of Anglo-Indian society and life. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Company employees had created a unique literary culture defined around their work. This collective ethos survived the dissolution of the Company and the transfer of colonial power to the Crown in 1858. Indeed, as Kent shows, the ethics of professional service continued to inflect Anglo-Indian literature for the next several decades, featuring heavily in the work of such notables as Rudyard Kipling. Corporate culture, in short, became a defining feature of Britain's colonial experience in India.

Kent's work raises intriguing questions about the motives and personalities that shaped British imperialism. It also pushes against the problematic tendency to analyze colonial life as an extension—or a poor imitation—of preexisting metropolitan histories, and instead offers a more contextually appropriate lens through which to understand the lived realities of Britain's empire. Nonetheless, questions remain about how representative the texts chosen for this book were of actual "imperial culture." Canonical or obscure, the sources explored by Kent reveal certain archetypes and anxieties that can be traced intertextually over the course of the nineteenth century. But whether these common themes can then in turn be used to explain the agency of colonial administrators, and indeed whether these same administrators actually bought into the oft-repeated ideals of duty and service reproduced in such works, remains open to debate. The theoretical insights provided by the book need to be further contextualized with empirical evidence to support these claims.

These concerns aside, ***Corporate Character*** offers a fresh perspective on imperial history. Kent's work forces us to rethink not just the reigning ideologies that defined Britain's colonial experience in India, but also how institutions impact the subjectivity of those who comprise them.