

Amita Das, Aditya Das. *Defending British India against Napoleon: The Foreign Policy of Governor-General Lord Minto, 1807-13.* Rochester: Boydell Press, 2016. 288 pp. \$120.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78327-129-0.

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Napoleon made his name through decisive battles, from Marengo and Ulm to Austerlitz and Jena. It was his diplomacy, however, that most frightened officials in the British East India Company (BEIC). With the conclusion of the 1807 Treaties of Tilsit and Finkenstein, which guaranteed peace with Russia and Persia respectively, Napoleon secured a corridor from which to strike at British interests on the subcontinent. The European battlefield became threateningly global. Standing in his way was a newly appointed—and, until now, understudied—civil servant: Lord Minto, the governor-general of India from 1807 to 1813. His career is the central focus of *Defending British India against Napoleon*. Based on Amita Das's unpublished dissertation—which has been updated and edited by her son, Aditya—the book explores the drastic steps undertaken by Minto to counter the growing French threat in Asia. The result is a panoramic retelling of how Britain frustrated Napoleonic ambitions while simultaneously turning the Indian Ocean into a “British Lake.”

The authors focus on three phrases of Minto's foreign policy: the creation of a series of buffer states along India's northwestern frontier; the conquest of the Mascarene Islands, which served as a staging ground for French privateers; and the occupation of the Dutch East Indies (France an-

nexed Holland in 1810). In doing so, they connect two stories often told in isolation: Britain's fight against Napoleon and the evolution of the British East India Company (BEIC) into a government agency. As an acolyte of Edmund Burke, Minto opposed the aggressive policies of more heralded Company leaders such as Warren Hastings and Arthur Wellesley. His response to the growing French menace in Asia struck a middle ground between Burkean moderation and the more muscular diplomacy of his predecessors. Such policy-making, the authors maintain, redefined the working dynamic between Parliament and the BEIC. It helped transform the Company from a subsidiary of the British government to an advisory partner in Asia.

The authors are at their best when discussing the specific phases of Minto's tenure. Their exhaustive study of his private papers allows them to challenge common misconceptions about his policy goals. In combatting Napoleonic ambitions in the Middle East, for instance, Minto negotiated with a range of players, from the Persian shah and the Sikhs to Sind and the cis-Sutlej states. Historians have generally cast these entreaties as a failure, pointing to his inability to mold such disparate alliances into a “multilateral entente” (p. 53). Yet, as the authors show, the governor-general

never intended such far-reaching diplomatic goals. Instead, he played up existing rivalries in order to entice these powers into individual pacts with the BEIC, creating a loose string of buffer states whose usefulness long outlived any potential French threat.

Minto's conquest of Java, meanwhile, reveals his longer-term goals for the region. The governor-general hoped to absorb the Dutch East Indies into the BEIC, solidifying its influence across the expanse of the Indian Ocean. To do so, he embarked upon a string of short-lived land reforms designed to modernize the Javanese economy. Minto's metropolitan handlers proved wary of such ambitions, however, and the Company was forced to return Java to the Dutch in 1814. Abortive as his efforts sometimes proved, the authors maintain, Minto nonetheless succeeded in putting a new face to British policy in Asia. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the Company moved away from a model of centralized control toward a policy of regional specialization, with each area of its commercial empire linked to a specific London trading house. Minto's fight against France, the book argues, facilitated this process by clearing the contested sea lanes of the Indian Ocean, turning the waterway into a springboard for British ambitions throughout Asia.

Defending British India against Napoleon is striking in its erudition. The writers meticulously reconstruct Minto's policies and goals, challenging long-held assumptions about his governorship, which is often depicted as a period of "non-interference and withdrawal" (p. 228). Nonetheless, it is sometimes difficult to see the forest for the trees. The book provides striking details about Minto's life, the challenges he faced during his governorship, and the immediate impact of his policy decisions. But the authors do not consistently situate their claims within the broader historiography, especially recent research on the Company, colonial India, and the British Empire. The argument, in turn, remains mostly hidden be-

neath the surface of the text—and only receives dedicated treatment in the final chapter of the book. This narrative strategy leaves ample space to describe the life and achievements of Minto. Yet it also means that the book's larger claims, such as the governor-general's role in anticipating a new era of Company politics, remain underdeveloped.

While these concerns limit the wideness of the book's potential audience, *Defending British India against Napoleon* should nonetheless prove a welcome addition to the library of any Minto scholar, as well as those interested in the history of nineteenth-century British India more generally.

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