Introduction

The British East India Company is credited with great and terrible things. It is said to have had a direct hand in creating global capitalism, while at the same time contributing to modern forms of state.[1] "The corporation that changed the world" built an infrastructure of armies, ships, fortified port cities and a global financial network that moved vast resources between Britain and Asia.[2] The "original evil corporation" also forged a modern world economy in which imperialism and free markets went hand in hand.[3] The Company transformed the political and economic landscape of huge portions of South and Southeast Asia, brought the Chinese Empire into war and left some formerly affluent regions of the Indian subcontinent utterly impoverished. It gave shape to the modern sense of "Britishness" and was instrumental in the creation of the largest, most densely inhabited and possibly dirtiest city the world had yet seen: London c. 1830.

The Company also left its fingerprints all over the making of modern science. This book is about how, as an inextricable part of all the above, the Company shaped the global scientific order, and with lasting consequences. It focuses on the period between the Company's emergence as a territorial power in 1757 and the dissolution of the Company in 1858. This was a period in which the Company's empire expanded dramatically, and one in which its 150-year-old monopoly on trade with Asia would also slowly fall apart. This period is sometimes referred to as Britain's "second scientific revolution," in which scientific practices, professions, disciplines and theories also underwent radical change. The historical relationship between these two developments has been the subject of many studies. But the role of the East India Company in

[1] Stern, Philip J. *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
[2] Robins, Nick. *The Corporation That Changed the World: How the East India Company Shaped the Modern Multinational*. Pluto Press, 2012.
[3] Dalrymple, William. "Opinion: The Original Evil Corporation." *The New York Times*, September 4, 2019. See also Dalrymple, William. *The Anarchy: The East India Company, Corporate Violence, and the Pillage of an Empire*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019.

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Figure I.1 The Company's headquarters: East India House, Leadenhall Street, from a drawing by T. Malton, c. 1800. Copyright British Library Board (asset WD 2460).

this history remains poorly understood. One aim of this book is to bring new clarity to that subject.

The Company's monopoly privileges – and its peculiar form of monopoly-based colonial capitalism – are key to understanding the particular dynamic connecting the growth of British science and the growth of the British Empire. From 1600 until 1813 (with some key gaps), the Company held a Crown-granted legal monopoly – one laid out in charter agreements between the Crown and the Company – on all British trade east of the Cape of Good Hope. The Company's monopoly deeply shaped British access to, and knowledge of, Asia's nature. In practice, the Company's control over access and movement and information was far from complete. But it was formidable and would, as we will see, play a significant role in shaping the cultures and practices of science in both Britain and the colonies. Especially in the period covered here, colonial and capitalist expansion coincided with an unprecedented information boom back in Europe.[4] Many new libraries, museums, botanical gardens and similar institutions for the management of knowledge resources were established in this period, and the expansion of data-intensive empirical practices is often taken as a hallmark of the so-called second scientific revolution.[5]

Another aim of this book is therefore to situate the history of Britain's second scientific revolution within a longer history of the global regulation of trade in knowledge resources. In order to do so, I have focused in particular on the history of the Company's practices of accumulation, management and production of what might today be called scientific information: manuscripts, books, specimens of natural history, technologies, antiquities, works of art and craft and so on.[6] As we will see, the Company's decision to establish a library and museum at its

[4] For example, in Peter Burke's *Social History of Knowledge*, he concludes that "The amount of new knowledge gathered or collected in . . . 1750–1850, was staggering, especially the knowledge collected by Europeans about the fauna, flora, geography and history of other parts of the world." Burke, Peter. *A Social History of Knowledge II: From the Encyclopaedia to Wikipedia*. Polity Press, 2012, p. 12. The classic work on this is Cannon, Susan Faye. *Science in Culture: The Early Victorian Period*. Science History Publications, 1978. I address this historiography in Ratcliff, Jessica. "The Great (Data) Divergence: Global History of Science within Global Economic History." In *Global Scientific Practice in an Age of Revolutions, 1750–1850*, edited by Patrick Manning and Daniel Rood. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016.

[5] See, for example, Sheets-Pyenson, Susan. *Cathedrals of Science: The Development of Colonial Natural History Museums during the Late Nineteenth Century*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988; Bennett, Tony. *Pasts beyond Memory: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2004; MacKenzie, John M. *Museums and Empire: Natural History, Human Cultures and Colonial Identities*. Manchester University Press, 2009.

[6] Lissa Roberts has argued that global or transnational histories of science need to renew analytical focus on the "concept, processes and management of accumulation." The

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headquarters in London, as well as the founding of two Company colleges in Britain, would mark a major change to the way the Company managed information, and it was both tied to wider changes in British science and a consequence of very particular political and economic changes affecting the accessibility and cost of accumulation. The Company's collections were accumulated with the monopoly advantage, and its library, museum and colleges were supported by the Company's tax revenues from the people of India. Those collections are now the property of the people of Britain, divided primarily among the British Museum, Kew Gardens, the British Library, the UK Natural History Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum (see Figures I.2 and I.3).

A third overall aim of this project has been to provide a view of how scientific practices and cultures are defined and limited by political economic change. This book aims, in other words, to situate a key period in the history of science in Britain within economic history in such a way that we gain a better understanding of how the growth of science has occurred internal to, as part of, wider political economic change.[7] The essence of



Figure I.2 Syntypes of *Paludina lecythoides*, once in the East India Company's museum, now owned by the Natural History Museum, London. Copyright Trustees of the Natural History Museum, London (1842.9.30.47–48, SYNTYPES, Paludina lecythoides Benson, 1842).

current problem, according to Roberts, is that accumulation still tends to be "investigated separately within the fields of political economy and history of science" when in fact accumulation is a key point of coextension across information, capital and many other sources of value. Roberts, Lissa. "Accumulation and Management in Global Historical Perspective: An Introduction." *History of Science* 52, no. 3 (September 1, 2014): 227–246, p. 228.

[7] Elsewhere, I have argued that both the history of science and economic history would benefit from closer engagement: Ratcliff, Jessica. "The Great (Data) Divergence"; Ratcliff, Jessica. "Travancore's Magnetic Crusade: Geomagnetism and the Geography of Scientific Production in a Princely State." *British Journal for the History of Science; Norwich* 49, no. 3 (September 2016): 325–352.

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Figure I.3 A circa first-century CE reliquary casket excavated from a Buddhist *stupa* in Bimaran, Afghanistan by the East India Company agent Charles Masson in c. 1833–1838. Now in the British Museum (1900,0209.1). Copyright Trustees of the British Museum.

that perspective was captured by contemporary observers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in an 1845 digression on the relationship between science and commerce: "But where would natural science be without industry and commerce? Even 'pure' natural science is provided with an aim, as with its material, only through trade and industry, through the sensuous [i.e. physical] activity of men."[8]

At just around the time that Marx and Engels wrote their now-famous early draft of their materialist philosophy of history, the Company was busy installing new museum galleries within its headquarters at India House (see Figures I.1 and I.4). Where a vast pay office had once been, curators were now busy at work on crateloads of fossils extracted from northern India, carefully cleaning and making plaster casts of the finds

[8] Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. *The German Ideology* (written 1845–1846, published 1935). Reprinted in Tucker, Robert C. *The Marx–Engels Reader*, W. W. Norton, 1978, p. 171.

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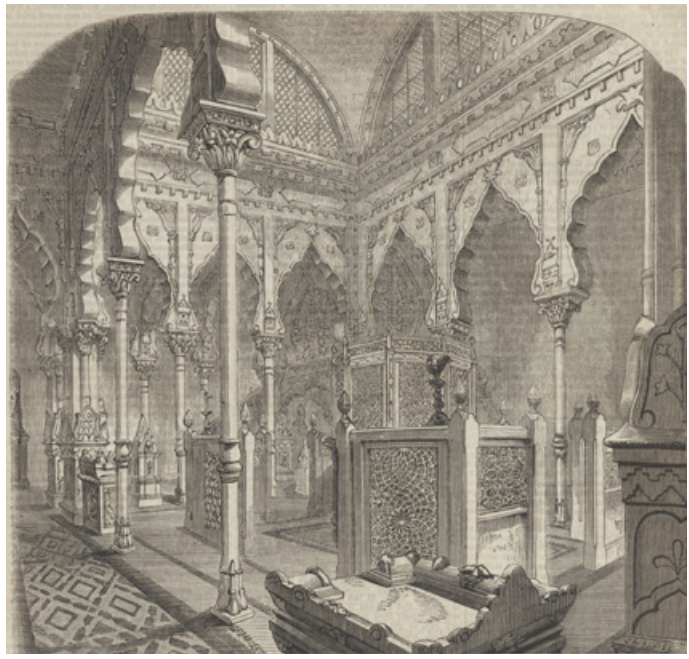


Figure I.4 A view of a new gallery of the East India Company's museum at India House, 1858. From the *London Journal*. Courtesy of the New York Public Library Digital Collections (1858–03-06. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/045309c0-041 f-0134-b03 f-00505686a51c).

before mounting them for public display. A few floors up, another set of offices had been emptied of desks and papers and replaced with glazed cases that would be filled with stuffed birds from Java. An adjacent room was where the Company's naturalist worked to mount insect collections, pinning beetles to felt boards.

But a corporate-imperial museum is not what Marx and Engels had in their sights. Their comment had a very specific target: a rival materialist talking about "secrets of nature" being revealed only to the eye of the chemist and the physicist, through their specialist instrumentation and experience. Marx and Engels found this type of materialism entirely misguided. They asserted that the real "material basis" of those chemists' knowledge did not begin and end with the ability to perceive, or even with the specially trained eye and a carefully constructed experiment. One must also, they claimed, take equal account of the laboratory, the building it is housed in, the source of oil and candles for lighting, the sewers, the streets,

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in fact the entire town in which the laboratory sat, not to mention the food that sustained the scientist, the clothing that kept them warm and so on. The material basis of science, Marx and Engels argued, must be recognized as the entire human/natural world within which those scientists were working, the whole mode of production. To bring the point home, their thought experiment continued, imagine if all the "unceasing . . . labor and creation . . . were interrupted only for a year." What, then, would the chemist be able to perceive? They would find "not only an enormous change in the natural world . . . the whole world of men and his own perceptive faculty, nay his own existence, [would be] missing."[9]

For the purposes of this Introduction, what is important about this extremely broad view of the material basis of science is how it describes science as coextensive with and fundamentally shaped by economic activity, but *not* in a way that suggests that *therefore* science is shaped or determined by the strategies of economically powerful actors or of economic self- (or corporate) interest. Instead, economic change and scientific change are coextensive because they are the material culture of science writ large, or the "matter at hand," as Gideon Freudenthal and Peter McLaughlin have described it (paraphrasing Boris Hessen and Henryk Grossman), that determines the conditions of possibility or the horizons of enquiry within which scientific change unfolds.[10] We thus may similarly ask, what would have happened to British science if its imperial connections had been cut off? Would London, Oxford and Cambridge still have emerged as world centers of scientific production by the start of the twentieth century?

Despite (or maybe because of) the fact that the Company was one of the largest and most important employers in nineteenth-century London, its social and cultural impact in Britain has, until recently, remained "strangely invisible," as John McAleer puts it.[11] This could be said for our understanding of the Company's place in the history of science in Britain as well. Several decades ago, David Arnold highlighted the fact that, because of the peculiarities of the Company-state model, "on the subcontinent the Company and its servants enjoyed a near monopoly

[9] Marx and Engels. *The German Ideology*, p. 17.

[10] Freudenthal, Gideon and Peter McLaughlin. "Classical Marxist Historiography of Science: The Hessen-Grossmann-Thesis." In *The Social and Economic Roots of the Scientific Revolution: Texts by Boris Hessen and Henryk Grossmann*, edited by Gideon Freudenthal and Peter McLaughlin. Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science. Springer, 2009, pp. 1–40.

[11] McAleer, John. "Exhibiting 'The Strangest of All Empires': The East India Company, East India House, and Britain's Asian Empire." In *The MacKenzie Moment and Imperial History: Essays in Honour of John M. MacKenzie*, edited by Stephanie Barczewski and Martin Farr. Springer International Publishing, 2019, p. 26.

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over Western scientific activity."[12] But this critical topic of the interaction between scientific practice and the Company's monopoly has not yet been examined in any detail.[13] McAleer suggests the invisibility of the Company as a cultural force is due to the oversized role it plays as a political economic force. Likewise, for the case of the absence of the Company within the history of science, there seems to have been an inclination among historians to assume that, at the institutional level within the Company, science could only have ever played a very minor role. For example, for Arnold, the Company's "scientific monopoly" translated into a "laissez-faire" approach that led to only very minor support for science, education or improvement schemes.[14] Naturalists and orientalists working under the Company in Asia are thus often depicted as having succeeded *despite* the lack of support or encouragement offered by the Court of Directors. Even histories dealing with the Company's library and museum in London have largely followed the same line of argument. For example, in his major new study of collecting and the Company, Arthur MacGregor downplays the significance of the political, economic and institutional context for science under the Company by focusing on the personal drive and passion of the individuals associated with the Company and those who built up the collections.[15] Theodore Binnema, too, takes a similar perspective in his history of science at the Hudson Bay Company, arguing that, while certain aspects of the Hudson Bay Company's institutional structure were undoubtedly important, the real driver of scientific culture at the Company was down to

[12] David Arnold also suggests that the Company may have denied requests by Charles Lyell and Charles Darwin, both of whom had expressed interest in traveling to India. Arnold, David. *New Cambridge History of India: Science, Technology and Medicine in Colonial India*. Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 20.

[13] For example, in two major new works, one on "science and the state" and the other on "science and empire," the Company only appears in passing. Gascoigne, John. *Science and the State: From the Scientific Revolution to World War II*. Cambridge University Press, 2019. What is here called "Company science" also only appears in passing in Goss, Andrew. *The Routledge Handbook of Science and Empire*. Routledge, 2023.

[14] Similarly, Gascoigne concludes that the Company, as a whole, was largely "unresponsive" to the various proposals for scientific or technological projects put before the Court of Directors. Gascoigne, John. *Science in the Service of Empire: Joseph Banks, the British State and the Uses of Science in the Age of Revolution*. Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 144.

[15] One of his central arguments is that the science and collecting done by employees under the Company were driven by a very different set of interests and values from that of the Company, and as a whole it functioned largely independent from (and despite) the vast political economic machinery within which it was embedded. MacGregor, Arthur. *Company Curiosities: Nature, Culture and the East India Company, 1600–1874*. Reaktion Books, 2018, pp. 8–9.

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individual officers' motivations and interests.[16] Although Bernard Cohn famously argues that "the establishment of British hegemony in India was also a conquest of knowledge," he doesn't relate much of that process to the institutional or regulatory powers of the Company, whose patronage of science he describes as "haphazard," "filled with false starts" and generally "halted when the bookkeepers in Leadenhall Street became aware of the potential costs, and their ill effects on the balance sheet."[17] From this perspective, the Company's library and museum have generally been interpreted as, most fundamentally, an exercise in imperial image-making or, as Maya Jasanoff put it, "self-advertisement."[18]

To be sure, all of these perspectives capture elements of a complex picture of the Company's situation with respect to science in Britain and British India. The point is, however, that since the Court of Directors sat at the head of a company-state that monopolized all trade (including information) and travel (including scholars and scientists) between Britain and Asia, whatever the Court of Directors' forms of engagement with science (or not) will have had a significant impact on cultures of science in both Britain and British India. I hope to show that not only was there a much richer and more consequential engagement with science within the Company but also that its imprint upon the shape of scientific culture in Britain was much more significant than we have so far assumed.

Recent work has begun to uncover how, even beyond its impact on Britain's political economy, the Company was deeply intertwined in British culture and society.[19] Its employees included specialized

[16] Binnema, Theodore. *Enlightened Zeal: The Hudson's Bay Company and Scientific Networks, 1670–1870*. University of Toronto Press, 2014, p. 11.

[17] Cohn refers to the library and museum at India House as a collection of "what would become the popular relics of British conquest of India." Cohn, Bernard S. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton University Press, 1996, pp. 87, 104.

[18] Jasanoff, Maya. *Edge of Empire: Lives, Culture, and Conquest in the East, 1750–1850*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2007, p. 104. It's worth noting that similar perspectives have sometimes been taken on the Company's colleges and botanical gardens in British India. For example, Adrian Thomas argues that the scientific interests of the early directors of the Botanical Gardens in Calcutta had to disguise their research in language of "public utility" to appease the Directors. Thomas, Adrian P. "The Establishment of Calcutta Botanic Garden: Plant Transfer, Science and the East India Company, 1786–1806." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 16, no. 2 (2006): 165–177, p. 174.

[19] See especially Finn, Margot and Kate Smith. *The East India Company at Home, 1757–1857*. UCL Press, 2018; Makepeace, Margaret. *The East India Company's London Workers: Management of the Warehouse Labourers, 1800–1858*. Boydell Press, 2010; Saville-Smith, Kay J. *Provincial Society and Empire: The Cumbrian Counties and the East Indies, 1680–1829*. Boydell Press, 2018; Quilley, Geoffrey. *British Art and the East India Company*. Boydell Press, 2020. Also see Ehrlich, Joshua. *The East India Company and the Politics of Knowledge*. Cambridge University Press, 2023.

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knowledge workers – librarians, curators, naturalists, surgeons, hydrographers, professors – who worked for the Company but whose professional worlds also intersected with other societies and institutions of science and education around Britain. The sheer size of the Company ensured that, even within the civic, amateur culture of science in nineteenth-century Britain, it was an important source not only of knowledge resources but also of labor and infrastructural support, and an uncountable number of other matters at hand.[20] And the Company's internal practices of information management and knowledge production have a complex, varied history, as Huw Bowen, Christopher Bayly and others have shown. This study is indebted to this scholarship and grapples with the British side, and the science dimension, of what Christopher Bayly called the colonial information order.[21]

In what follows, I use the term "knowledge resources" to describe the huge variety of materials being accumulated in the private, corporate and public collections that were growing at this time. The term reflects the fact that such collections were most often presented as aiming to produce useful knowledge, very broadly defined. In fact, the materials being accumulated were put into all kinds of different uses, such as being sold for cash or being given as gifts or bribes. And significant amounts were apparently never used for anything while in the Company's possession, remaining unpacked in warehouses or cellars for decades.

This book also uses the term "Company science" to capture several distinctions. First, I use it to indicate the narrower focus of this book on natural, philosophical and historical sciences at India House. This study has not attempted to encompass the accumulation and management of resources related to accounting, finances, governance and corporate management; that is, what T. R. Malthus, in his lectures at the Company's college, called "the branch of the science of a statesman or legislator."[22] Importantly, "Company science" at India House was connected to, and embedded within, the rest of the Company administration, and in this book I have tried to follow many of the connections between

[20] Equally important, as Geoffrey Quilley has argued for a different cultural setting, given the sheer size of the Company as a political and economic force in Britain and British India, even the ways in which the Company did *not* engage, or declined to support, or remained silent, or was inconsistent and impulsive would ultimately have an impact on the cultures and practices of science. See Quilley. *British Art and the East India Company*.

[21] It is not a global history of science, for all the reasons laid out in Sivasundaram, Sujit. "Sciences and the Global: On Methods, Questions, and Theory." *Isis* 101, no. 1 (March 2010): 146–158; Bayly, *Empire and Information*; Watt, James. *British Orientalisms, 1759–1835*. Cambridge University Press, 2019; Finn and Smith. *The East India Company at Home, 1757–1857*; Makepeace. *The East India Company's London Workers*; Quilley. *British Art and the East India Company*.

[22] Quoted in Gascoigne. *Science and the State*. p. 90.

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the library-museum and the "science of a statesman" that occupied the Court of Directors and many other committees. But this work does not come close to dealing with the many places beyond the library-museum and colleges in which "science," understood in its broad premodern forms, can be found at work within India House.[23]

I also use "Company science" to refer to this study's focus on a subset of the much broader domain of colonial science. Many important recent studies have examined the rich, multicultural context within which colonial science was practiced in the Asian territories under Company influence or control.[24] The term "colonial science" has been defined in different ways: in terms of methods (i.e. "field science," "data collection"); in terms of use or aims (i.e. information produced and deployed as part of the ideological fabric of imperialism); or simply as shorthand for the complex world of scientific production and consumption within colonized territories.[25] Here, "Company science" refers to a particular colonial relationship of knowledge ownership and management: projects directly funded by the Company and material considered to be directly owned by the Company, and therefore

[23] The most in-depth study of the administrative practices at India House is Bowen. *The Business of Empire*. For the case of British India, see Bayly. *Empire and Information*. For two excellent examples of following natural knowledge through administrative practices, see Colpitts, George. "Knowing Nature in the Business Records of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1670–1840." *Business History* 59, no. 7 (October 3, 2017): 1054–1080; Bellenoit, Hayden J. *The Formation of the Colonial State in India: Scribes, Paper and Taxes, 1760–1860*. Routledge, 2017, chapter 4.

[24] For scholarship on science under the Company, I am especially indebted to Arnold, David. *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India*. University of California Press, 1993; Damodaran, Vinita, Anna Winterbottom and Alan Lester, eds. *The East India Company and the Natural World*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; Edney, Matthew H. *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765–1843*. University of Chicago Press, 1997; Grove, Richard H. *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1860*. Cambridge University Press, 1996; Ogborn, Miles. *Indian Ink Script and Print in the Making of the English East India Company*. University of Chicago Press, 2007; Winterbottom, Anna. *Hybrid Knowledge in the Early East India Company World*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. For the case of science and colonial corporations, an excellent summary is in Winterbottom, Anna. "Science." In *The Corporation as a Protagonist in Global History, c. 1550–1750*, edited by William A. Pettigrew and David Veever. Brill, 2019, pp. 232–254. Also see Harris, Steven J. "Long-Distance Corporations, Big Sciences, and the Geography of Knowledge." *Configurations* 6, no. 2 (1998): 269–304. For the Dutch case, see Cook, Harold J. *Matters of Exchange: Commerce, Medicine, and Science in the Dutch Golden Age*. Yale University Press, 2007. For science at the Hudson's Bay Company, see Binnema. *Enlightened Zeal*. A classic study of science as part of the political and economic apparatus of colonial pre-revolutionary France is McClellan (III), James Edward and François Regourd. *The Colonial Machine: French Science and Overseas Expansion in the Old Regime*. Brepols, 2011.

[25] A useful discussion on the definitions of colonial science is in Binnema. *Enlightened Zeal*, pp. 17–18. Also see Menon, Minakshi. "Indigenous Knowledges and Colonial Sciences in South Asia." *South Asian History and Culture* 13, no. 1 (January 2, 2022): 1–18.

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institutionally part of the colonial state. Company science at India House is connected to, and dependent upon, Company science in the colonial governments in British India, the district offices and the moving military frontier at the edge of the Company's territory. It was constructed between Asia and the home country, but, as part of the colonial political economy, accumulation and management became concentrated back in Britain.

In Part I, I show that the Company's forms of engagement with scientific knowledge production changed significantly in response to wider political economic changes. The Company moved, over the course of 150 years, from largely outsourcing scientific and orientalist expertise needs to, by around 1800, attempting to centralize control over the accumulation and management, within its London headquarters, of a wide range of this kind of knowledge and expertise. Part II follows the expansion and impact of the Company's institutions of science in Britain up to the Rebellion of 1857 and the abrupt abolition of the Company. I argue that the Company's monopoly privileges, and their decay over this period, would leave a distinct impression on the shape of the Company's science. Company resources would feed directly into the growth of Britain's second scientific revolution in several key ways. Perhaps most importantly, as the Company itself became nationalized, and as its library and museum collections became Crown property, Company science fed directly and materially into Britain's growing public museum movement. As we will see, in this period in which the basic categories of "science" and "empire" began to take on distinctly modern terms, part of those developments involved the absorption of "Company science" into "public science."[26]

By clarifying the place of the East India Company in the history of science in Britain in this period, I hope to have opened up a new perspective on the long, varied and critically important historical connections between markets, states and modes of knowledge production. The Company played a specific and peculiar role in how and why, by the end of the nineteenth century, Britain and a few other regions of Europe had obtained a firm grip on much of the global business of knowledge production and management.

[26] Mark Harrison unpacks the "science/empire" issue in Harrison, Mark. "Science and the British Empire." *Isis* 96, no. 1 (March 2005): 56–63, p. 56. As Caroline Cornish and Felix Driver have recently argued with respect to the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew, state science itself was changed as the Company was abolished and absorbed into the state. Cornish, Caroline and Felix Driver. "'Specimens Distributed': The Circulation of Objects from Kew's Museum of Economic Botany, 1847–1914." *Journal of the History of Collections* 32, no. 2 (August 8, 2020): 327–340. For two sustained arguments about the interdependence of states and corporations in the making of modern science, see Beckert, Sven. *Empire of Cotton: A Global History*. Vintage Books, 2015; Mazzucato, Mariana. *The Entrepreneurial State: Debunking Public vs. Private Sector Myths*. Public Affairs, 2015.

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