Conclusion

A Thames Mahal

A vacant plot near the new County Hall on the "Surrey bank" of the Thames suited perfectly. The building plan, commissioned by the East India Association, by the influential architect Robert S. Chisholm, former architect for the Government of Madras, called for 16,000 square feet of exhibition, education and storage space. It would rise on the bank of the Thames in an ambitious oriental style, complete with domes and turrets, announcing to London its purpose of being the center of knowledge of Asia. This was the 1910 proposal for a new India Museum, which would gather together once again all the now-dispersed East India Company collections and, more importantly, provide a dedicated space for the scientific specimens and works of art from India that continued to arrive at London's docks, since "at present India sends her geological and mineralogical products to Jermyn Street, her vegetable products to Kew, and her antiquities to the British Museum."[1]

Chisholm's design was the last, and unsuccessful, iteration of a push for a dedicated space in London to house the India Museum collections that had begun almost as soon as India House was demolished. The first proposal, for a new India Institute, was the work of Royle's successor, John Forbes Watson, in 1874.[2] Forbes Watson had joined the India Office as the Reporter on the Products of India in 1859. For fifteen years, Forbes Watson had managed the museum at Fife House, continued to organize the India sections of international exhibitions, published reports on the natural resources and industries of India, and

[1] Anon. "India in London: A New Scheme." *The Sphere: An Illustrated Newspaper for the Home* 41 (June 25, 1910): 358.

[2] The full title of Forbes Watson's circular proposing the Institute gives a sense of the scale of ambition: Watson, J. Forbes. *On the Establishment in Connection with the India Museum and Library of an Indian Institute for Lecture, Enquiry, and Teaching; Its Influence on the Promotion of Oriental Studies in England, on the Progress of Higher Education among the Natives of India and on the Training of Candidates for the Civil Service of India*. W. H. Allen & Co., 1875.

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developed a wide network of correspondence and specimen exchange. Now, in 1874, he and a range of "India interests" were mounting a campaign to make the next home of the Company's collections even grander than the first one at India House had been. Construction could begin as early as 1875. The budget of £50,000 was large but, so it was argued, more than reasonable given the importance of the object, and especially considering that the new India Museum Calcutta was expected to cost twice as much. This was the proposal for a new "India Institute," a combined library, museum, research center and civil service training institute. In a letter in *Nature*, the orientalist Hyde Clarke argued that such a plan was long overdue and admonished government for neglecting its duty to care for and make use of the old Company's collections.[3] In another letter in *Nature*, the naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace avidly supported the idea and tried to increase its appeal to Parliament by suggesting ways to achieve the same scientific and educational results, but with a cheaper price tag than that of Forbes Watson's palatial proposal.[4]

Wallace's instincts were right. In Parliament, the proposal ran aground on the question of who would supply the funds. Whereas the Company had used Indian tax revenue to fund the museum and library, as part of the Home Government, by this time the use of Indian tax revenue for such a project – perhaps because it was now clearly separate from the state administration, perhaps because the national museum movement in India was now going strong or perhaps because Bengal was again in the grips of a terrible famine – was not on the table. Forbes Watson thus had to argue for the use of British public funds to support the India Institute. As he argued, it was about time:[5]

> the whole of the collections has either been purchased by Indian money, or presented by people connected with India … the cost of maintenance of the Museum, as also that of the Department of the Reporter on the Products of India, from the action of which England derives a benefit fully equal to that of India, is entirely borne by India …. Under such circumstances, it may be held that England has sufficient interest in the undertaking to warrant her taking a share in the cost of erecting a suitable structure for the Museum and Library … in view of recent circumstances [i.e. the famines] fresh in the memory of everybody, such a course would be only a graceful act on the part of England.

In the end the grand plan would not succeed. No palatial Mughal-style building went up along the Thames, no institution for the literary, artistic

[3] Clarke, Hyde. "East India Museum." *Nature* 8, no. 183 (1873): 5–6.
[4] "It seems to me one of the greatest popular delusions, that specimens of natural history require lofty halls and spacious galleries for their preservation and exhibition in a useful manner." Wallace, Alfred R. "East India Museum." *Nature* 8, no. 183 (1873): 5.
[5] Forbes Watson. *On the Establishment.*

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and scientific study of Asia was opened to the British (and, as it was imagined, also Indian) public. This would not become a new center for commercial and cultural exchange between India and Britain to the supposed economic and social benefit of both. Instead, as had begun in the 1880s, the Company's collections would remain divided between the British Museum, Kew Gardens and the new South Kensington museums, including the Natural History Museum and the future Victoria and Albert Museum. Teaching and scholarship became the domain of new specialized university programs such as the Oxford India Institute and the School of Oriental Studies at London University. In this final step, the Company's imperial scientific and educational resources were transformed into a British public resource intended to, among other things, demonstrate the civility and liberality of the imperial project.[6]

In the later part of the Victorian era, state-funded museums and exhibitions were simultaneously places where a new ideal of inclusive public participation in politics and culture was nurtured that depended on using works of art and craft, natural history specimens and antiquities, and even exhibited peoples extracted from colonized regions. Via the institution of the public museum, British cultural and religious chauvinism was hardened into racialist and racist beliefs about who should and should not be granted political rights and economic sovereignty. Today, as the colonial foundations of Britain's public museums have become a subject of heated public discussion and critique, those institutions have become the site for a new round of debate over the tensions between liberalism and empire. The contradictions of liberal imperialism are woven deeply into the fabric of these institutions. That legacy is a huge dilemma for these institutions, which otherwise still carry an aura and a mission devoted to liberal, even progressive, cosmopolitan ideals.

The colonial origins of many of the world's most famous collections had long been largely ignored or irrelevant in the public eye. Clearly that is no longer the case, although natural history museums have so far faced less scrutiny over the provenance of their collections and fewer calls for repatriation. It may be that the only way for museums to begin to extract themselves from the hypocritical bind their colonial history places them in is to fully and openly acknowledge that history. In some areas of the professional museum world, moves are already being made in that direction: some museums have begun a new round of much more in-depth provenance research than ever. In grappling with the role of the Company and its monopoly in the history of public science, I hope to have added a useful new perspective on the debates surrounding postcolonial collections today.

[6] See, for example, Mehta. *Liberalism and Empire*.

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In addition, I hope to have made clear how the dilemmas posed by the colonial history of public museums are only one part of an even wider story that includes public university systems, the structure of public–private investment in scientific research and development, and the deep and ongoing structural inequalities in global scientific practice. Scientific research and innovation today involves a sprawling, transregional set of enterprises, many of which are as historically rooted in the "great data divergence" of the imperial era as Europe's national museums.[7] Compared to the postcolonial dilemmas of museums today, the global inequalities in access to scientific and cultural resources (i.e. data, education, instrumentation, expertise) that are maintained by these other institutions are arguably much more severe. It is therefore especially important to recognize the much broader imprint that colonialism has made upon science. The emergence of European museum cultures in the colonial era was a key moment in the history of the making of the modern global political economy of science.[8] In the last fifty years, knowledge resource management in the natural sciences has radically changed, and a new era of corporate collecting has expanded alongside government-funded programs. There has also been a gradual shift from collecting whole specimens to collecting (or buying or renting) genetic data.[9] These developments have been accompanied by a set of regulations and agreements that have both accelerated and restricted accumulation by European and American corporations and states, profoundly shaping the global political economy of science today.[10]

I have tried to give a longer historical view of the making of the global political economy of science, one in which museums, libraries, colleges and other institutions for the accumulation and management of information are key. Equally important is how the history of these institutions can help to clarify the complex interplay between public and private interest and the the fuzzy boundary between "state science" and "corporate science." It is now common to worry about the threat of the "corporatization" of science in, for example, the growing influence of industry upon

[7] See, for example, Krige, John, ed. *How Knowledge Moves: Writing the Transnational History of Science and Technology*. University of Chicago Press, 2019; Tyfield, David, Rebecca Lave, Samuel Randalls and Charles Thorpe. *The Routledge Handbook of the Political Economy of Science*. Routledge, 2017.

[8] See, for example, Strasser, Bruno J. "Collecting Nature: Practices, Styles, and Narratives." *Osiris* 27, no. 1 (2012): 303–340; Strasser, Bruno J. *Collecting Experiments: Making Big Data Biology*. University of Chicago Press, 2019.

[9] Parry, Bronwyn. *Trading the Genome: Investigating the Commodification of Bio-Information*. Columbia University Press, 2004.

[10] On "informationalization," see Schiller, Dan. *How to Think about Information*. University of Illinois Press, 2007. Also see Parry, Bronwyn and Beth Greenhough. *Bioinformation*. John Wiley & Sons, 2017.

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publicly funded universities or the corporate sponsorship of many of the biggest exhibitions in public museums. This book has explored both the very long history of corporate engagement with science and the very long history of our preoccupation with that connection. We have also seen the organization of science under a very different form of state, one in which the distinction between "public" and "private" became unsettled exactly when it was applied to science, revealing the historical contingency of our familiar forms of state or public science, and of their dependency on their supposed opposites, private or corporate science. However, if gaining a better understanding of the place of the Company in the making of Britain's "second scientific revolution" has in some ways naturalized ties between corporate and state interests within institutions of science and education, I hope that this case might also allow us to think more clearly about the likely future consequences of allowing those deepening connections to go unchecked.

Finally, in following the rise and decline of the Company and its museum, this book also traces the reorganization of British institutions of science across the nineteenth century through three interlinked arguments. First, it was stimulated by the expanding collections made by states and state-like bodies such as the Company; second, the acceleration of such accumulation was itself conditioned by the political economy of scientific practice under colonial capitalism; and third, it was through this reorganization that the institutional distinctions between "public" and "private" science began to crystalize into their modern forms. Taken together, this is how the sweeping changes across the sciences in nineteenth-century Britain depended upon the advance of colonial capitalism. That political debt was then partly obscured when, in the case of Britain, state science subsequently claimed a different form of monopoly on scientific knowledge.

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