DAVID VEEVERS. *The Origins of the British Empire in Asia, 1600–1750*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. 293. $99.99 (cloth).

The British East India Company's acquisition of territorial sovereignty over large swathes of the Indian subcontinent in the mid-eighteenth century has long been understood as an unexpected and jarring event that saw a business-minded trading company suddenly transformed into an imperial power. The growing strength of the British state, and the successful projection of its fiscal-military force against the declining might of the Mughal Empire, is often provided as an explanation for how the East India Company emerged as a major territorial power in Asia. Over the past decade, however, historians such as Philip J. Stern have increasingly explored the East India Company's commercial activity and governance in Asia in the seventeenth century, and in the process they have begun to revise this narrative.

With *The Origins of the British Empire in Asia*, David Veevers makes a significant contribution to this growing body of scholarship by advancing a powerful new interpretative framework for understanding the emergence of the British Empire in Asia. Veevers uses private papers and the factory records, a rich repository of source material that detail the day-to-day affairs of the company's employees living overseas, to trace the transcultural strategies that company servants employed to embed themselves within cosmopolitan trading communities in Asia. His key intervention is to stress how the inability of the English state to project its power overseas (via the company) during the seventeenth century meant that, to achieve commercial success, company servants needed not only to forge close personal links with Asian and Indo-Portuguese elites—through business partnerships, intermarriage, and religious conversion—but also subordinate themselves politically to powerful foreign rulers.

The transcultural approach adopted by company servants was mutually beneficial for Europeans and Asians. The Vijayanagaran, Golcondan, and Mughal states had a long history of empowering regional constituents to free up their own fiscal and military resources and actualize their political authority; accordingly, Asian elites welcomed company servants to India and actively sought to integrate Europeans into their own power structure. By allying with local rulers and participating directly in the operation of Asian states (through political officeholding), company servants helped to enfranchise their employer, the East India Company, with an array of grants and legal privileges. Over time, this enabled the company to expand its power and influence in India from within the framework of Asian states. Veevers argues persuasively that the transcultural strategies pursued by company servants living overseas, rather than imperial conquest planned by the court of directors in London, brought the British long-term success in Asia. By foregrounding the role of non-European actors in the company's expansion during the seventeenth century, Veevers encourages us to consider the "Asian genesis" of the British Empire (5).

One of the major strengths of this book is the comparative perspective that Veevers adopts throughout. This comparative viewpoint is established in the introduction, where Veevers deftly demonstrates how the transcultural strategies he is exploring were pursued by Englishmen not only in India during the seventeenth century, but also in Virginia, New England, Canada, the Levant, and Japan. Veevers has also structured the book in such a way as to encourage comparison among the three main case studies he uses to develop his argument: Madras (the Coromandel Coast), Calcutta (Bengal), and Bencoolen (the west coast of Sumatra).

Regional variation in the success of the East India Company's transcultural strategies of accommodation and subordination was, according to Veevers, largely dependent on the local political context. For instance, he argues, in vivid prose, that the shifting political

landscape on the Coromandel Coast due to the collapse of the Vijayanagara empire facilitated the efforts of company servants to subordinate themselves to local powers and secure the political and commercial privileges they needed to consolidate their presence in Madras. While in Bengal, the strength of the Mughal Empire meant that the strategy of political subordination to local rulers proved far less effective at first. Not until the late seventeenth century, when a major rebellion erupted in western Bengal, were company servants able to prove their military and commercial value to the Mughal state and acquire jurisdictional powers over Calcutta. On the west coast of Sumatra, by contrast, the receding power of Acehnese and Bantamese imperial frameworks meant that the region was in a period of transition during the late seventeenth century. The fractured political landscape and the lack of a single unitary framework of authority in Sumatra was not conducive to the success of a transcultural strategy, argues Veevers, meaning that the company was forced to resort to imperial conquest in the region. The fiscal-military weakness of the English state in the seventeenth century meant that the company's effort to coerce and conquer Malay states failed spectacularly.

Veevers provides richly detailed examples to reinforce his argument and convince the reader that the shifting political landscape in Asia during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was crucially important in determining the efficacy of the transcultural strategies pursued by company servants. Yet, I wondered whether greater emphasis could have been placed on environment and geography as explanatory factors for regional variation. The tropical disease environment of southeast Asia and the incredibly high mortality rate of the English, Indo-Portuguese, and enslaved Malagasy soldiers the company regularly dispatched to Bencoolen, who succumbed to malaria and smallpox, surely played a role equally as important as Malay political frameworks and the fiscal-military limitations of the English state in the failure of the company's imperial approach on the west coast of Sumatra.

Likewise, more detailed discussion of Bombay in western India, the island geography of which led the company's directors to try to develop it as a colony independent of Mughal authority, would have helped to clarify the extent to which regional variation in environment and geography was significant in determining the success, or failure, of the commercial and political strategies pursued by the company in this period.

These minor caveats aside, *The Origins of the British Empire in Asia* is a deeply researched and well-written monograph that makes an important contribution to the historiography of the British empire. Veevers argues convincingly that the company's acquisition of large Indian territories in the mid-eighteenth century was neither sudden nor unexpected, but the culmination of a 150-year process through which the company had become steadily enfranchised with political and commercial rights to govern Indian territories and peoples by working within the carapace of Asian states. When read alongside the other studies of the early East India Company published in recent years, this book provides an excellent platform for future research. It would be particularly exciting, for example, to learn more about the transcultural strategies used by the English in different regions of the globe from a comparative standpoint.

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