Corruption, despotism, and the Colonial Office, *c*. 1820–1850

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Trust in the British state was at a low ebb in the decades after the Napoleonic wars. Denunciations of Old Corruption, institutional sclerosis, and unpatriotic leadership became central to the landscape of public politics, at both elite and popular levels.[1] Historians have explored the overlapping critiques levelled against the management of domestic and foreign politics during this period, and offered various explanations for the establishment of a new faith in the disinterestedness, competence, and public spirit of government by the 1850s.[2] None of this work, however, has much to say about criticism of the imperial administration.[3]

Leaving out the empire is to miss a vital element in the renovation of the image of the state. Attacks on the stewardship of Britain's overseas possessions during this period were just as determined as attacks on other governmental practices and institutions. A series of reforming campaigns were directed at the Indian administration, which had been associated with dangerous forms of corruption and class interest since the mid-eighteenth century, as Ben Gilding's contribution to this volume underlines.[4] But much of the most vicious invective during the early nineteenth century was reserved for the Colonial Office: that 'Augean precinct' and poisonous 'pest-house', which incarnated and oversaw a 'corrupt colonial system', came to be widely understood as the most 'rotten and ruinous' department of all.[5] Founded in 1801, and lodged into a cramped building at the far end of Downing Street, 'the Office' (as it widely came to be known) had taken over responsibility for the central administration of the rest of Britain's forty-odd foreign dependencies, previously divided between a number of agencies. It fell under the parliamentary authority of a newly-created Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, not all of whom took a close interest in the second half of their brief, especially during what remained of the French conflict. By the second quarter of the century, the Office employed approximately twenty-five permanent officials (the majority being clerks whose main function was to copy correspondence) to oversee the business of the entire colonial empire.[6]

Britain's colonial system was reinvented in the early nineteenth century, as the centralized, protectionist, Anglican framework of 1815 gave way to free trade, religious pluralism, and ultimately the concession of responsible self-government to several settler colonies.[7] These moves were accompanied and in part driven by expansive domestic debates about how best to govern overseas possessions. Nearly all the participants in these debates were vigorously critical of the status quo, and many organised their arguments around the failings of the Colonial Office, as the lynchpin and clearing-house for the whole deficient system.[8] Pursued mainly by Radicals, humanitarians and abolitionists in the 1810s and 1820s, the assault on the Office made its way firmly into mainstream political discourse after the constitutional crisis of 1828–32, peaking in rhetorical significance at the turn of the 1850s.[9] Thereafter, a new equilibrium emerged with remarkable rapidity, and by the time of the Northcote-Trevelyan report in 1854, the Colonial Office was widely seen as a model of

administrative probity. For much of the 1850s and 1860s, moreover, the apparatus of government it oversaw became a subject of cross-party patriotic celebration.

The early nineteenth-century critique of the Colonial Office was a many-sided phenomenon. Among the most powerful charges urged against the department, however, was that it was uniquely corrupt, and that its corruption posed unique dangers to the British state and nation. This chapter deals with public political argument about Colonial Office corruption, mainly among Radicals, Whigs, and Liberals, between the 1820s and the 1850s. It suggests that, on a political level, dissatisfaction with the system of colonial administration was tied to wider shifts in attitudes towards the trustworthiness of the British state and aristocratic government, and that the imperial theme was in this sense integral to early nineteenth-century debates about Old Corruption and the reform of public life. The chapter also suggests, however, that exploring arguments about the colonial system affords more specific insights into the intellectual history of corruption in this period. In particular, the exercise casts light on ideas about the relations between corruption, parliamentary institutions, and public opinion; and, crucially, about how corruption underpinned hateful forms of despotic rule across the colonial empire.[10]

Critiques of colonial government, *c*. 1820–1850

There were a number of reasons – personal, political, and philosophical – why British politicians and writers adopted hostile stances toward the system of colonial government in the early nineteenth century. Among the strongest was the growth of political unrest across the colonies from the 1820s, brought to Britain's door by a rising tide of private lobbying, petitioning, and public protest.[11] Another was the possession of trading, business, financial, professional, or colonizing interests which the Office did not choose to further. Few decisions made by the colonial department could avoid antagonising someone, and the confusion of principled and personal motives in anti-Office discourse helps explain why sharp observers like the intellectual-in-politics, George Cornewall Lewis, considered the 'constant series of attacks on the Colonial Office' to be 'founded on no intelligible or consistent view'.[12] Different critics of the system denounced it for quite distinct, and in some cases diametrically opposed, reasons: the sheer diversity of the colonial empire, and the range of issues with which it could be connected, made the cherry-picking of examples eminently possible.

Corruption, however, was an issue which appeared in most if not all early nineteenth-century critiques. What made it such a prominent theme was, first, that nearly everyone could agree that it was a political evil; second, that it was a practice on which unwelcome decisions could easily be blamed; and third, that the eighteenth-century association between overseas empire, corrupt power, and the corruption of government at home, remained highly influential. Developed dissections of the effects of Colonial Office corruption strongly recalled Hanoverian arguments and anxieties.[13]

Though often mired in specificity and convolution, early nineteenth-century attacks on the management of colonial government can be separated analytically into two main strands. First were the narrowly 'political' or partisan critiques. These

became considerably more prominent after the Great Reform Act of 1832, one of the many consequences of which was the creation of heightened public expectations (and fears) of government activity. During the 1830s and 1840s, the colonies increasingly came to be understood not just as bastions of geopolitical and commercial power, but also as arenas for the performance of attractive governing values. Moreover, it began to be argued that the policies ministries pursued in their colonies – where their authority was, ostensibly, virtually unlimited – were an index of their most deeply-held principles. Attacks on responsible officeholders asserting their power over the empire in the wrong ways, as a result, coiled tightly around the major political debates of the era: Tories denounced Whigs for the premature conferral of constitutional liberties upon colonial populations not yet prepared for them, while Radicals dismissed the colonies as a paralysed, aristocratic fiefdom which demanded large infusions of popular rights. Corruption mattered here when it could be tied to ministerial behaviour: in the 1830s, for instance, Conservatives launched a vigorous assault on the Whig ministries' habit of 'ingenious Colonial jobbing'.[14]

More important for our purposes, however, were what might be called the 'systemic' critiques of the organisation and operation of British colonial government: arguments of a more structural, institutionally focused and carefully elaborated kind. These addressed a large range of issues, including the inherent difficulties of governing over distance; the prevalence of narrow oligarchic regimes across much of the empire; the nullification of the supposed natural rights of Englishmen (and, for some, the rights of native populations); and most fundamentally, the vast, centralized, inexpert, irresponsible, corrupt authority of the Colonial Office. Historians usually associate interest in these issues with Radical politicians and writers and, in the 1830s and 1840s, with a close-knit group of elite Radicals and Liberals known as the 'Colonial Reformers'.[15] Yet, although the systemic case against the colonial administration owed a considerable amount to Radicalism, large chunks of it came in time to be endorsed across party lines. In the end, only the most hidebound commentators on imperial policy proved unwilling to accept the idea that Britain's apparatus of colonial rule – both in Downing Street, and in its diverse local forms – had fallen short of institutional fitness for purpose. The rest of the chapter looks at how arguments about Colonial Office corruption fitted into this picture.

Corruption and the Colonial Office

Old Corruption, as it was understood in the first half of the nineteenth century, was a tissue of more or less institutionalised customs, conventions and practices. In government it was exhibited mainly in the interested distribution of appointments, pensions, fees, sinecures, and reversions to the creatures, connexions and co-religionists of ministers and officeholders.[16] These pursuits were perceived to run across the departments of state. It came to be widely argued, however, that no department was so disfigured by corrupt practice as the Colonial Office. It was further claimed that corruption in the administration of the colonial empire threatened British

governing values, and the nation's global standing. Corrupt power, under an irresponsible and despotic system of government, led inexorably to tyrannical rule.

Two basic points underpinned the Radical diagnosis of Colonial Office corruption as a problem of particular severity. The first was that the colonies constituted one of the British state's largest repositories of patronage. This vast resource covered gubernatorial, administrative, judicial and ecclesiastical roles, not to mention positions on the colonial commissions of inquiry which proliferated in these years.[17] In addition, the colonies offered a virtually limitless stock of land, exclusive concessions of various kinds, and in some cases healthy quantities of convict labour, all of which could be channelled in self-interested directions. The Radical argument that the imperial project was a cynical aristocratic plot rested in large part on these facts: as the celebrated *Extraordinary Black Book* of 1832 put it, the colonies were 'a tremendous burthen on the resources of the mother country, chiefly to provide governorships, secretaryships, registrarships, agencies, and sinecures for the Aristocracy and their connexions.'[18] For the young J. S. Mill and his coadjutor George Grote, the vices, prejudices, and negligence of Britain's colonial management were 'deducible chiefly from the corrupt use which our aristocracy has always proposed to make of the colonies for their own patronage and emolument.'[19] Mill insisted that, in propping up a venal ruling class, they were a 'grand cause of the oppression of the English people.'[20] Treating the colonies as props for oligarchic rule at home served to alienate their populations, and to promote ideas of separation and independence. The difficulty involved in calculating the cost of the colonial establishment, and of the extent of the stock of colonial patronage, meant that estimates of their size varied significantly.

So the Colonial Office occupied a privileged place within the apparatus of Old Corruption. The second reason Radicals offered as to why the colonial department was so dangerously corrupt, however, was that there was no informed public opinion to exercise an efficient restraint over the rulers of the empire. It was generally assumed among early nineteenth-century opponents of Old Corruption that the single most effective weapon which could be wielded against it was the systematic vigilance of an enlightened public. But this could not work in the colonies themselves, as public opinion could not function effectively in thinly peopled countries. For J. A. Roebuck, writing on the Canadas in 1835, it was obvious that 'close and systematic intercourse' was needed for a public opinion to form: its operation could only be 'effete' in a country 'thinly inhabited only, at dreary intervals … in many parts with no roads at all'.[21] And there was no substitute at home. It was an axiom of imperial critique that few in Britain knew or cared much about what went on in the colonies.[22] This alleged inattention created a cascade of harmful consequences.

Firm political leadership was the first casualty. Radicals argued that the low status of colonial affairs in domestic politics meant that the most able class of politicians treated the positions of Colonial Secretary and (parliamentary) Under-Secretary as stepping stones, rather than as objects of desire. So the best men passed through, and mediocrities stuck in place. In addition, the sheer complexity and convolution of colonial affairs defeated all but the most assiduous of the Office's political masters. The problem was that they lacked hinterland to draw on. While

ministers parachuted into the Home or Foreign Offices could reasonably be expected to have acquired some experience with those portfolios in the course of their wider participation in public affairs, colonial policy was, relatively speaking, a black box.

Parliament had similarly little to offer. While the prospect of a rough ride in the Commons or the Lords usually served to ginger up ministers, this was only occasionally a threat with colonial affairs. Parliamentarians might, in theory, have possessed the authority to stamp their will on the colonial empire in any way they chose: but, except at times of crisis, imperial debates tended to be poorly attended. It was generally agreed that the level of understanding displayed among MPs was depressingly low: Radicals argued that this condition was long-standing, while Tories attributed it specifically to the stripping out of informal colonial representation by the abolition of so many small and nomination boroughs in 1832.[23] Whatever the explanation, parliament was not in a position to compensate for inadequate political leadership, to communicate a tone to colonial policy, or to keep imperial administrators up to the mark. When it did interfere in the details of colonial government, it did so in an uninformed or partisan manner. All the checks and safeguards by which power was made responsible seemed to fail in the case of the colonial administration.

Here then was the crux: real power over the business of the colonies lay in the hands of the permanent staff at the Colonial Office. Given their hard-earned command of precedent, procedure and detail, their nominal superiors could do no more in reality than act as rubber stamps. This meant that unaccountable civil servants exercised irresponsible power over populations cumulatively far larger than that of Britain itself. Lacking sympathy with those they governed, they legislated with no understanding of local needs, conditions, and interests. They did so, moreover, in an intensely centralised fashion: every decision taken in or about a colony required the imprimatur of the Office, making governance achingly slow and rigidly authoritarian. On the basis of these arguments, employees of the Colonial Office became some of the highest-profile civil servants of the early nineteenth century. Most famously, the department's Permanent Under-Secretary during the period 1836–47, and previously its legal advisor, Sir James Stephen (father of Leslie), attracted a tide of Radical opprobrium for his allegedly dictatorial command of the colonial administration.[24] Responsible ministers, insisted the *Spectator* as part of a long-running campaign in favour of colonial reform, were mere instruments in the hands of 'King STEPHEN'.[25] Henry Taylor, who was responsible for the West Indian division of the Office, added to a growing storm with the publication of his treatise, *The Statesman,* in 1836. His description of the strategies by which officials could pursue a system of vacillation and delay was widely taken to refer to the Colonial Office, and his book was treated as insider evidence of the irresponsibility and corrupt attitudes with which the British colonial system was shot through.[26] The idea that colonial secretaries were puppets in the hand of designing officials became popular beyond Radical circles after the middle of the 1830s, and was taken up by the Whig diarists and Tory malcontents.[27]

In the absence of the checks usually afforded by public opinion and parliamentary scrutiny, the distribution of colonial patronage resources could also proceed with uncommon freedom. As the *Extraordinary Black Book* put it, nominations to posts in the colonies, 'being out of sight of the English public, were often made

without any regard to decency'.[28] Critics charged that appointments to colonial offices were arbitrary, self-interested, and made with reference less to the welfare of the colonies than to the claims of the applicants. So much was typical across government; but the unusually low status of most imperial offices, and the lack of attention paid to their occupants, meant that in many cases the individuals sent out to serve were egregiously underqualified and unsuitable. As George Cornewall Lewis put it in 1837, 'the scum of England is poured into the colonies: briefless barristers, broken down merchants, ruined debauchees, the offal of every calling and profession are crammed into colonial places'.[29] The broader argument was that this Colonial Office underclass, operating from positions of authority, spread appetites for peculation, bribery and venality, from the smallest military stations to the grandest settler colonies. In doing so, they helped to bolster the authority of the selfish, materialistic oligarchies which dominated local politics in many colonies.

For these structural reasons, then, the Colonial Office came to be understood as unusually susceptible to corruption, and as unusually forward in pursuing corrupt practices. In line with the wider programmes of economical reform pursued throughout this period, governments did make sporadic efforts to pare back the tangle of colonial corruption: as early as 1814 Lord Liverpool's government legislated against absenteeism in colonial offices, while supporters of the Whigs in the 1830s boasted about the ministry having resigned £400,000 worth of colonial patronage.[30] But this did not appease critics of the Colonial Office, who insisted that piecemeal reform would not do, but only fundamental changes to the system of colonial rule.

Despotism and the Colonial Office

Laments about the dictatorship of irresponsible administrators, and about the impediments placed in the way of public opinion exercising its salutary cleansing power, were everywhere at the centre of arguments against Old Corruption in early nineteenth-century Britain. Suitably adjusted, they could be made to fit the conditions in nearly any branch of government. What further distinguished the developing critique of the Colonial Office, however, was the claim that imperial corruption was a handmaiden to despotic and tyrannical rule. Here again there were echoes of the eighteenth century, when 'country' and 'commonwealth' opponents of ministerial corruption readily reached for languages of 'despotism' and tyranny'. But there were important differences between the possible impacts of occasional despotism in a highly advanced society like Britain's, and systematic despotism in younger states. More than that, authoritarian government under the umbrella of British authority overseas posed serious dangers to Britain's own political health.

It was easy to make the case that the responsibilities of the Colonial Office dwarfed those of any other branch of British government. The office of Colonial Secretary was widely understood in this period to be, in the words of the prominent Tory writer on colonial affairs Macleod Wylie, 'the most important, difficult, and responsible post under the Crown'.[31] The Colonial Office was responsible for the entire political and social frameworks of some forty British possessions, varying wildly in size,

sociology, products and character: from the vast expanses of the Canadas to the tiny military station of Malta; from the complex native culture of Ceylon to the frontier society of the Australian colonies. Most of the British dependencies, however, were understood to be at relatively early stages of political and civilizational development. While mature polities might be able to face down, or find ways of counteracting, the negative effects of corrupt practices in government, 'new' or underdeveloped countries lacked the same wherewithal. Corruption, moreover, had the power to distort the character of states still under construction. In poisoning the well at the source, it endangered the colonies' futures as robust political communities. In particular, it threatened to arrest the growth of the self-governing instincts and appetites which all sections of British opinion were so eager to see develop. Corruption, in this context, promised to set half the globe on the wrong course.

It was also closely allied to the way in which the Colonial Office exercised despotic power under the aegis of the British constitution. It was widely accepted in early nineteenth-century Britain that there was a place for absolute rule in the political education of less developed communities, and perhaps even for civilized countries in conditions of extremity: this was the basis of J.S. Mill's well-known dictum that despotism was 'a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement'.[32] Critics of the Colonial Office, however, did not tend to see it as being engaged in rational, considered, directive government in the interests of local populations. Radicals argued that it had, instead, used the tools of corruption to arrogate to itself a massive quantity of irresponsible power, which it was exercising oppressively, turning the colonies into 'strong holds and asylums of despotism and misrule'.[33] The long-serving Tory Colonial Secretary Lord Bathurst was tarred in the Radical press as a 'tutelary genius of colonial tyranny' in the 1820s, and foreign critics of British imperial rule (especially French ones) were keen to portray it as tyrannical throughout this period.[34] Over time, the designation of the colonial empire as a tyranny came to find support from across the political spectrum. By 1850 even the Conservative-aligned *Fraser's Magazine* was describing how systems of rule had been erected in the colonies 'more despotic in form, and more tyrannical in practice than any which were cherished in the days of the most arbitrary monarchs of England.'[35]

There were particular problems, moreover, with the conduct of despotism under English auspices. The autocratic states of the Continent, for all their defects, were at least populated by men trained from birth to administer and to sympathise with unfree institutions.[36] Englishmen, however, were not equipped to turn arbitrary government to the advantage of their subjects. The reformer Charles Buller, though opposed to despotism everywhere, explained that he despised 'above all things ... despotism in a colony of England', because English functionaries were temperamentally unfit 'to administer their power without the aid, as well as the control, of the people'. An English colonial despotism was, therefore, 'peculiarly inefficient and corrupt'. He argued, moreover, that rendering the government of a colony irresponsible to its people encouraged 'ignorant and factious intermeddling' in its administration by the British public and parliament, resulting in 'a very weak as well as a bad Government'.[37] It was widely asserted that these arrangements harmed Britain's global reputation and its ability to pronounce on international affairs with

clean hands: from the Radical Joseph Hume complaining in 1821 that they 'permitted the name of Great Britain to be coupled with … acts of tyranny and injustice', to an organisation of colonial reformers insisting thirty years later that the Colonial Office system was 'irreconcilable with the habits of the English people, and ... repugnant to the principles of our constitution'.[38]

Despotism under the aegis of England was bad enough on the level of principle, and its consequences for the colonies themselves were dismaying. Even worse, however, was the possibility that this imperial tyranny might threaten Britain's own integrity and freedom. Some of the most vigorous critiques of the Colonial Office argued that the department represented an incubus of corruption and despotism at the heart of government, which might extend its tendrils to blacken other parts of the administration if it was not speedily struck down. This point was pressed from the colonies themselves in the 1820s, as a means of arresting the attention of the British public, with pamphlets claiming that the unconstitutional, irresponsible, 'uncontroulable power' of the Colonial Office, 'new to the laws and Colonial Policy of these kingdoms', threatened 'to subvert the general liberty and the fundamental laws of the Empire'.[39] In other words, the authoritarian assumptions which a despotic system of government inevitably inculcated in its administrators and the habits of mind it promoted among the parliamentarians who had to oversee it were threats to the domestic constitutional order.[40] Men who thought it natural to rely on corruption as a tool of government overseas, or who saw it as an acceptable necessity, were liable to regard it as equally appropriate at home. Here, then, was a pressing domestic reason for reforming a corrupt and tyrannical system of imperial government, over and above the abstract issues and the global responsibilities involved.

The rehabilitation of the Colonial Office

Hostility to the Colonial Office peaked in intensity, public profile and party-political reach at the turn of the 1850s. Under the ambitious stewardship of the Whig Colonial Secretary Earl Grey (1846–52), the department came to be seen as encapsulating the failure to keep up with the wants of the age which hamstrung all branches of Lord John Russell's government. For the veteran colonial reformer, William Molesworth, it was guilty of 'injudicious appointments, ignorance, negligence, vacillation, breach of faith, and tyranny'.[41] For the historian and critic Thomas Carlyle, it span out 'blind obstructions, fatal indolences, pedantries, stupidities' into 'a world-wide jungle of red tape', combining the evils of despotism with the irritations of democracy.[42] For *Fraser's Magazine*, it was an institution that pursued only 'patronage and interference … spoiling every undertaking it meddles with'.[43] Shortly after all these claims were made, however, they fell rapidly out of circulation.[44]

This shift was in part a result of concrete institutional reforms. Herman Merivale, who had acquired a reputation as a serious thinker on colonial matters via a series of lectures to the University of Oxford on colonies and colonisation, was appointed Assistant Under-Secretary at the Colonial Office in 1847, and Permanent Under-Secretary in 1848.[45] He was a major player in the partial reorganisation of the

department after the budget of 1848, which resulted in the institution of examinations for new entrants. But these internal improvements did not make an immediate mark on the public consciousness which, while Grey remained in office, was focused on more spectacular political developments. His concession of Westminster-style 'responsible government' to certain settler colonies – by which local executives were made dependent on colonial legislatures – was clearly a landmark, but its details were criticised every step of the way. Many vestiges of the 'old' colonial system remained in force after 1852, and little was done to improve local government in the non-settler dependencies. The sting was drawn from debate about the colonial system less by a logical and sufficient series of practical changes, than by broader shifts in the tone and temper of domestic politics.[46] The ebbing of social tension, the fall of an exclusive and incapable Whig government, and rising economic prosperity at home and in the colonies, made further imperial institutional reform seem less pressing.[47] The waning of more general anxieties about the corruption and misdirection of state power helped to clear the political smoke around the colonial policy shifts of the 1840s and early 1850s, and made them look considerably more attractive after the fact.[48]

By the mid-1850s, as a result, a different vision of the colonial empire and Colonial Office had emerged. In 1855 the former Colonial Secretary W.E. Gladstone could describe a transition in British colonial policy 'from madness and from crime, back to the rules of justice, of reason, of nature, and of common sense'.[49] It was widely agreed that the grants of settler self-government had 'removed the chief causes of discontent', while the conservative Liberal W.R. Greg was arguing, as early as 1853, that the notion that colonial patronage was consciously and systematically distributed for the benefit of the government and the aristocracy was 'utterly inapplicable'.[50] Colonial Office corruption seemed to belong to the past, and commentators looked forward to a future free from jobbing, abuse, and oppression.

Having spent decades being charged with vacillation, inefficiency and incompetence, the Colonial Office suddenly seemed in advance of other departments in the effectiveness of its reformed, partially competitive mode of selecting civil servants.[51] The separation of the Colonial and War departments in 1854, and the establishment of a dedicated Secretary of State for the Colonies, further improved the perceived rationality of the imperial apparatus. When a movement for administrative reform blew up again during the Crimean War, resuscitating critiques of aristocratic government as effete, arrogant and narrow, it had virtually nothing to say about the colonial administration.[52] The same was true of the anti-centralization campaign of the 1850s.[53] Criticism of Downing Street 'red tape' and despotism did not disappear entirely from public discourse, and was pursued into the 1860s by the historian and 'anti-imperial' writer Goldwin Smith .[54] But even some of the Office's most vigorous critics – like Robert Lowe, who as a leader-writer for *The Times*, had earlier poured vials of invective over the colonial administration – were prepared to admit that its time as a 'muddling tyrant' was safely in the past.[55] When allegations of corruption re-emerged later on – most spectacularly at the turn of the twentieth century, in relation to the African colonies – they assumed a rather different form, and it was responsible ministers rather than permanent officials who faced the brunt of the assault.[56]

So the refurbished image of the British state as responsive, disinterested and liberal, which emerged in the 1850s and did so much to condition the character of mid-Victorian politics, applied as much to the institutions of colonial government as it did to those of government at home. At the same time as domestic politics had been (ostensibly) taken out of the hands of a narrow elite and opened up to popular influence, a corrupt, tyrannical, and dangerous system of ruling the colonial empire had been overthrown, and the settler colonies brought into line with proper British constitutional doctrines.[57] Some, like Disraeli, would come to look back on the colonial reforms of this period as a missed opportunity for imperial consolidation.[58] But for the most part, the 1850s narrative stuck: and through all the vicissitudes of later-nineteenth-century imperial politics, it continued to be argued that the early Victorians had re-founded the system of colonial government on a sounder basis.[59]

Conclusion

That there was a crusade against the Colonial Office at a time when so many domestic institutions were coming under scrutiny makes sense. Campaigns around the reform of public life in modern Britain have rarely been complete without some interrogation of the nation's international and/or imperial responsibilities – though it is still important to note that, in this case as in others, the colonies clearly mattered more in early nineteenth-century politics than the mainstream political historiography tends to suggest. Critiquing the Office was more than just a pastime for those with pre-existing imperial interests and anxieties. It fits, also, that contemporaries should have reached for the language of 'corruption' as part of their attempt to delegitimise the Colonial Office, given its strong contemporary purchase and eighteenth-century imperial associations. The department was a fountainhead of the same sorts of corrupt practices and administrative inadequacies found elsewhere in the state.

What is most striking and distinctive about this case, however, is how the discourses around corruption were modified in connection with more expansive visions of Britain's global duties. In most contexts, the fundamental objections to Old Corruption were that it made government expensive, unfair and inefficient. But when channelled through the Colonial Office – a department which was uniquely insulated from parliamentary checks and constitutional responsibility – the stakes were immeasurably higher. Critics argued that the peculation, cronyism, and malversation which flowed outward from the colonial department were poisoning the social and political life of the large portion of the globe under Britain's tutelage. In the colonial sphere, Old Corruption was portrayed as the handmaiden of a particularly onerous form of despotism. Opposing it was not just about bringing a sectional and self-interested aristocracy within bounds, but about moralising the global projection of British power, and even cleansing a national sin. This junction between arguments about Old Corruption and debates about authoritarian rule in the colonies helps to explain why the transition to settler colonial self-government was celebrated so enthusiastically in the 1850s. It represented not just an administrative convenience, but a disinfection of the British state.

Notes

[1] P. Harling, *The Waning of 'Old Corruption': The Politics of Economical Reform in Britain, 1779–1846* (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1996); P. Harling, 'Parliament, the State, and "Old Corruption": Conceptualizing Reform, c. 1790–1832', in Arthur Burns and Joanna Innes (eds), *Rethinking the Age of Reform: Britain, 1780–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 98–113; J. Parry, 'Patriotism', in David Craig and James Thompson (eds), *Languages of Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), pp. 69–92.

[2] J. Parry, 'The Decline of Institutional Reform in Nineteenth-Century Britain', in David Feldman and Jon Lawrence (eds), *Structures and Transformations in Modern British History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 164–86; M. Taylor, *The Decline of British Radicalism, 1847–1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); W. D. Rubinstein, 'The End of "Old Corruption" in Britain, 1780–1860', *Past and Present* 101 (1983), pp. 55–86; A. Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: 'Habits of Heart and Mind'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), chapters 2–3, 6; John Vincent, *The Formation of the Liberal Party, 1857–1868* (London: Constable, 1966).

[3] Philip Harling did note that the reform of the colonial system must have been an important part of the re-legitimisation of Britain's aristocratic regime: Harling, *Waning of 'Old Corruption'*, p. 5. See also R. Kroeze, P. Damau and F. Monier (eds), *Corruption, Empire and Colonialism: A Global Perspective* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

[4] Michael H. Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600–1857* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), chapters 7–10; M. Taylor, 'Joseph Hume and the Reformation of India, 1819–1833', in G. Burgess and M. Festenstein (eds), *English Radicalism, 1550–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 285–308; Z. Laidlaw, '"Justice to India – Prosperity to England – Freedom to the Slave!" Humanitarian and Moral Reform Campaigns on India, Aborigines and American Slavery', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 22:2 (2012), 299–324.

[5] [J. A. Roebuck], 'The Canadas and their Grievances', *London Review*, 1:2 (1835), 444–76, at p. 449; 'Roebuck on the Colonies', *Fraser's Magazine* 39:234 (1849), pp. 624–38, at p. 638; *The Times* (25 February 1828), p. 2; *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* (25 February 1849), p. 7.

[6] H. L. Hall, *The Colonial Office: A History* (London, 1937); D. M. Young, *The Colonial Office in the Early Nineteenth Century* (London, 1961).

[7] C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (Harlow: Longman, 1989); W. P. Morrell, *British Colonial Policy in the Age of Peel and Russell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930); P. Knaplund, *James Stephen and the British Colonial System, 1813–1847* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1953); J. M. Ward, *Colonial Self-Government: the British Experience, 1759–1856* (London: Macmillan, 1976); Zoë Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections, 1815–45: Patronage, the Information Revolution and Colonial Government* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

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[14] 'O.Y.', 'Notes Written on the Last Day of Thirty-Three', *Fraser's Magazine*, 9:49 (1834), 123.

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