

## 'The centre of the muniment': archival order and reverential historiography in the India Office, 1875

Article (Accepted Version)

Mitchell, Peter, Lester, Alan and Boehme, Kate (2019) 'The centre of the muniment': archival order and reverential historiography in the India Office, 1875. *Journal of Historical Geography*, 63. pp. 12-22. ISSN 0305-7488

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/78231/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

### **Copyright and reuse:**

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

**‘The centre of the muniment’: archival order and reverential historiography in the India Office, 1875**

**Authors:**

Peter Mitchell, University of Sussex – pdkmitchell@gmail.com

Alan Lester, University of Sussex – a.j.lester@sussex.ac.uk

Kate Boehme, University of Leicester – kmb42@leicester.ac.uk

**ABSTRACT**

In 1875, the civil servants and scholars George Birdwood and Clements Markham both submitted proposals to the India Office regarding the cataloguing and arrangement of its archive. These proposals had in common that they both involved the records of the early modern East India Company, and evinced an understanding of the archive as both a privileged repository of historical artefacts and a technology of imperial government. However, they articulated divergent ideologies of empire, ways of conceptualising the past and its materials, and understandings of the ways in which information and knowledge should be mobilised in an imperial context. This article analyses the two proposals in the light of their proposers’ biographies, their politics, and their institutional and disciplinary commitments; and it notes each proposal’s contribution to the production of a historiography which valorized early modern navigators, traders and mercantile communities as progenitors of the British imperial state. The proposals’ troubled bureaucratic history emerges as an expression of conflicts of practice, ideology and administrative cultures within the India Office, and more broadly within the imperialisms of the time.

**Keywords:**

History of Geography; Royal Geographical Society; India Office; East India Company; imperialism; information

**‘The centre of the muniment’: archival order and reverential historiography in the India Office, 1875**

The function of the archive looms large in any history of nineteenth-century governance and the imperial state. If empires were constituted in part through paper, the forms in which that paper was produced, stored, combined and retrieved were necessarily congruent with the forms of government itself.<sup>1</sup> However, along with Benedict Anderson’s ‘census, map and museum’, the archive was also a site for the production of new histories and ideologies of nation, state and empire; and this function was often related in complex ways to its contested use as a technology of control.<sup>2</sup>

This paper studies two archival proposals submitted to the India Office (IO) in 1875. These projects, proposed by Clements Markham (1830—1916) and George Birdwood (1832—1917), articulate different fantasies of the archive: where Markham’s mobilises the rhetoric of nineteenth-century geography in its most universalising and militant guises to arrive at something that approaches the Latourian model of a centre of calculation, Birdwood’s scheme rests upon a sense of the archive as a site of ideological recovery and hagiographical

---

<sup>1</sup> See T. Ballantyne, Archive, discipline, state: power and knowledge in south Asian historiography, *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 3 (2001) 87-105.

<sup>2</sup> B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, 1983, 163-185.

eneration.<sup>3</sup> Though advanced in the service of divergent imperialist politics, both participated in the construction of what has been usefully termed a ‘reverential historiography’: in this case, a valorisation of the early navigators, administrators and mercantile elites who began the work of the English East India Company (EIC) in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.<sup>4</sup> After the granting of a royal charter to the company in 1599, these navigators established the trade networks, factories and, eventually, land rights and tax revenues which laid the foundation for maritime pre-eminence and territorial empire. However, by the time Markham and Birdwood submitted their proposals, the East India Company had ceased to exist. After nearly a century of being subjected to ever more stringent governmental oversight, the company was wound up by act of parliament in 1858, and sovereign control of India vested in the newly-created India Office. Both proposals, therefore, took place in the context of a successor agency, and each bore a particular relationship to the EIC and its legacy. Both proposals glossed the early modern navigators as inceptionary figures in a long historical arc of imperial destiny, and as progenitors of the present and future imperial state, in an example of what Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger call an ‘invented tradition’.<sup>5</sup> The invented traditions of Victorian Britain were, as Hobsbawm and Ranger write, often formulated as ways of codifying a cultural identity where the need for one was felt. In this case, as Bernard Cohn demonstrates in his essay on the Imperial Durbar and the invention of royal spectacle in India, a period of particularly acute anxiety in the 1870s and 1880s, occurring coterminously with rapid shifts in the modes of imperial governance, necessitated the invention of a symbolic order of empire which would fix British rule in India, and indeed in other colonies, within a meaningful historical narrative.<sup>6</sup> The invented tradition in which both Birdwood and

---

<sup>3</sup> B. Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society*, Cambridge MA, 1982.

<sup>4</sup> C. Breight, Realpolitik and Elizabethan ceremony: the Earl of Hertford's entertainment of Elizabeth at Elvetham, 1591, *Renaissance Quarterly* 45 (1992) 20-48.

<sup>5</sup> E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (Eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, 1983.

<sup>6</sup> B. Cohn, Representing authority in Victorian India, in Hobsbawm and Ranger (Eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, 165-210.

Markham's work were implicated was one which cast the age of Elizabeth I as precedent and pattern for imperial expansion and maritime hegemony, emphasising the qualities of Protestant sobriety and parliamentarism (as against the Catholic or absolutist tendencies of imperial rivals in both eras), stoic white masculinity (as against the sexual and racial threats of the tropical other), and a particular conception of bourgeois collectivism in the pursuit of mercantile virtue.<sup>7</sup> In divergent ways, both schemes also sought to mobilise documentary relics within an archival structure that was an essential technology of the Victorian imperial state. In both Markham's and Birdwood's proposals, the absorption of old records into the imperial archive involved the mobilisation of tropes of inception, recovery and continuity. Their differences lie in how these old materials were conscripted to inform an implicit politics of empire, in the one case technocratic and in the other nostalgic, and in how these interventions were structured by the disciplinary, institutional and affective affinities of the individuals involved.

This is largely congruent with Patrick Joyce's observation that archival policy within the India Office from the 1870s onwards was broadly directed towards a retrospective reinvention of the EIC as an agent of empire rather than as a trading company, emphasising a continuity of purpose between the early seventeenth-century navigators and the imperial technocrats of the late nineteenth century, and obscuring the very different nature of the projects in which these men were engaged. However, the schemes' differences illustrate the extent to which archival practice could become a field of political contestation, in ways which are vividly illustrative of Joyce's characterisation of the India Office as a place where civil servants and administrators exercised the 'faculty of arrangement' by which imperial order was made, through the circulation of files and memoranda, and the careful ordering of paperwork.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> For some examples of this positioning, see J.A. Froude, England's forgotten worthies, *Westminster Review*, July-Oct 1852, 32-67; M.C. Fuller, *Voyages in Print: English Narratives of Travel to America, 1576-1624*, Cambridge, 1995, 158; N.T. Courtenaar, Postcolonial ekphrasis: Salman Rushdie gives the finger back to the empire, *Contemporary Literature* 8 (1997) 232-259.

<sup>8</sup> P. Joyce, *The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State since 1800*, Cambridge, 2013, 171-184.

Where Markham's scheme was broadly technocratic, gesturing towards a radically centralised imperial future in which information management effected totalising real-time surveillance and control, Birdwood's was essentially nostalgic: based on a reverence for the pre-1858 EIC and its scholarly cultures, and figuring India itself – as produced by those cultures – as a site from which a protest against technocratic modernity might be mounted.<sup>9</sup> The work of memorialisation could produce narratives of both continuity and rupture. Placing navigators at the commencement of a grand imperial teleology could just as easily constitute a polemical critique of current imperial politics as an endorsement of them.

The study of archives as, in Nicholas Dirks' formulation, 'simultaneously the outcome of historical processes and the very condition for the production of historical knowledge', is well established, especially in colonial history, where the histories of archival practice and of the exercise of power are intertwined in often strikingly legible ways.<sup>10</sup> In the mid-to-late nineteenth century, the relationship between archive and empire was mediated by several other simultaneous and related developments: the growth of 'statistical sciences' and quantitative analysis as a tool of governance, and the emergence of the surveillance state together with the communications technologies that would make its global application a technical possibility; the disciplinary codification of history based on evidentiary archival research, and as a site for the articulation of forms of national and racial identity; and the simultaneous consolidation of geography and anthropology as scientific disciplines by which the world and its inhabitants might be subjected to totalising, standardised and comparative modes of classification.<sup>11</sup> While

---

<sup>9</sup> A.P. Kaminsky, *The India Office, 1880-1910*, London, 1986; D. Williams, The formation of policy in the India Office, 1858-1869: a study in the tyranny of the past, *Journal of Indian History* 51 (1973) 873-892; D. Williams, *The India Office 1858-1869*, Hoshiapur, 1983.

<sup>10</sup> N.B. Dirks, Annals of the archive: ethnographic notes on the sources of history, in B.K. Axel (Ed), *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and its Futures*, Durham, 2002, 48.

<sup>11</sup> See, in particular, B. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*, Princeton, 1996; A. Desroisières, *The Politics of Large Numbers: A History of Statistical Reasoning*, translated by Camille Naish, Cambridge MA, 1998; E. Higgs, *Life, Death and Statistics: Civil Registration, Censuses and the Work of the General Register Office, 1835-1952*, Hatfield, 2004; P. Levine, History in the archives: the Public Record Office and its staff, 1838-1886, *English Historical Review* 101 (1986) 20-41; D.N. Livingstone, *The Geographical Tradition:*

it can be instructive to read the archives of empire, either with the grain or against it, as transparencies on which colonial epistemologies and anxieties can be found inscribed, this often neglects the processes, conflicts and contingencies which determine those archives' formation. This article studies the history of how a particular archive was formed in order to suggest that an archive can be read – as much in the shapes that it failed to take as in those that it did – as a record of contending political, disciplinary, institutional and historiographical commitments. In doing so, it demonstrates how some of the conflicts between these commitments played out within the spaces of imperial government.

### CONTEXTS: EMPIRE, ARCHIVE AND KNOWLEDGE

By the 1870s, the complex of administrative and governmental archives, institutions of knowledge and cultural articulations of nation, state and empire, was becoming ever more closely interrelated. However, administrative aspirations to efficiency, security and panoptical surveillance contended with realities in which the documentary repositories of state were often improvisatory and struggled to adapt to rapidly changing technologies of logistics, writing and communication.<sup>12</sup> Within the India Office, the number of departments dealing with different subjects proliferated, and the flows of paper between departments, and between the India Office and other government agencies, became increasingly complex during the 1860s and 1870s.<sup>13</sup> The Indian Civil Service, and the India Office after 1858, had been central to the

---

*Episodes in the History of a Contested Enterprise*, Oxford, 1992; P. Pels (Ed), *Colonial Subjects: Essays on the Practical History of Anthropology*, Ann Arbor, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> H. Bowen, *The Business of Empire: The East India Company and Imperial Britain, 1756-1833*, Cambridge, 2006, 151-181; J.W. Cell, *British Colonial Administration in the Mid-Nineteenth Century: The Policy-Making Process*, New Haven, 1970; M. Moir, *General Guide to the India Office Records*, London, 1988.

<sup>13</sup> Moir, *General Guide*, 60-124; Cell, *British Colonial Administration*, 3-44; see also J. Dittmer, Theorizing a more-than-human diplomacy: assembling the British Foreign Office, 1839-1874, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 11 (2016) 78-104.

professionalisation, standardisation and bureaucratisation of the civil services in general. The documentary cultures of the EIC, as Richmond Barbour, Miles Ogborn and others have shown, developed from the pragmatics of early modern communication and the emergence of modern corporate identities. Networks and practices that remained as late as the early nineteenth century preserved, in increasingly more complex and intricate forms, many of the original protocols of circulation and verification, and many of the original tensions between concentration and dispersal in how power and authority were spatialised.<sup>14</sup> By the mid nineteenth century, however, the autonomy of the three presidencies from which India was ruled – Bombay, Madras and Calcutta – had been eroded by communications technologies’ multiplier effects on the speed and scale of correspondence, which acted hand in hand with the ways in which the increasingly interventionist British state was slowly wrestling the shape of Indian government towards a more centralised, more accountable and more tractable model. This process was dramatically consolidated by the 1858 Government of India Act, which, following the trauma of the 1857 uprising, formally abolished the EIC’s rule over India, wound the company up and established the India Office as a distinct government agency, directly accountable to parliament, and entrusted with the whole task of governing India. The reorganisation of the structures of governance that followed the act formalised some of the centralising moves that had been occurring incrementally before 1858: London and Calcutta were made the twin poles of imperial governance, with India’s submission to Calcutta, and Calcutta’s to London, carefully formalised.<sup>15</sup> These developments accelerated the naturally centripetal tendencies of an ever more rationalised bureaucracy, and the burden of making sense of intelligence across all scales began to shift increasingly towards London.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> R. Barbour, *The Third Voyage Journals: Writing and Performance in the London East India Company, 1607-10*, Basingstoke, 2009; M. Ogborn, *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of English East India Company*, Chicago, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> D. Williams, The Council of India and the relationship between the Home and Supreme Governments 1858-1870, *English Historical Review* 81 (1966) 56-73.

<sup>16</sup> Williams, *The India Office*.



As Donovan Williams and Arnold Kaminsky have argued, this move towards a more modern, Weberian bureaucracy did not pass without cultural resistance. The 1860s and 70s were attended by a rift between old company hands and professionalised civil servants of the new Office.<sup>17</sup> The EIC had been, in some senses, a state apart. Its constitutional and administrative structures existed in parallel to those of the British state, and it had developed a distinct ethos of service and a strongly defined administrative culture which inevitably began to be effaced with the transition to crown rule.<sup>18</sup> Considerable resistance was generated by the shift, particularly under the reforming permanent undersecretaryships of Louis Mallet (in office 1874—1883) and Arthur Godley (in office 1883—1909), from a culture which valued personal idiosyncrasy, loyalty, in-country experience and the cult of the gentleman amateur to one which emphasised standardisation, bureaucratisation and collective process. Underlying much of this resistance was an attachment, often nebulously articulated, to pre-1858 ways of doing things, and a resentment of the new imperial technocracy. To a great extent, Markham embodied that new technocracy and Birdwood the EIC's orientalist past.

## CLEMENTS MARKHAM: GEOGRAPHY MILITANT AND THE COMPREHENSIVE ARCHIVE

Markham was one of the preeminent characters of what Felix Driver has usefully termed 'geography militant'.<sup>19</sup> His career demonstrates a striking mobility across geographical space,

---

<sup>17</sup> Joyce, *The State of Freedom*, 147-149; Kaminsky, *The India Office*, 35-62; Williams, *The India Office*, 84-96; Williams, *The formation of policy in the India Office*.

<sup>18</sup> Moir, *General Guide*; M. Moir, *A Study of the history and organisation of the Political and Secret Departments of the East India Company, the Board of Control and the India Office 1784-1919*, with a summary list of records, unpublished Master's thesis, University of London, 1966.

<sup>19</sup> F. Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire*, Oxford, 2001; Livingstone, *The Geographical Tradition*, 216-259.

disciplinarity, and cultural and institutional contexts, and was marked by peripatetic interests, obsessive and often idiosyncratic work, and feverish energy. He began as a navy midshipman, spending time in Andean Latin America and in the Arctic with one of the earliest Franklin search expeditions. From 1854 to 1875 he pursued simultaneous careers as a bureaucrat in the EIC and India Office and as a prolific writer, translator and editor of early modern voyages, organiser of expeditions, and evangelist for applying Humboldtian world geography to the practice of empire. His first employment was as a clerk in the Board of Control, the agency established to exercise parliamentary oversight of the EIC in 1784, completing the process of bringing the company formally under government direction. The board's function was effectively to establish a system of surveillance over the company's governance of India, and to be a clearing-house for all proposed legislation and directives. This function, often exercised against considerable resistance and in an atmosphere that often broke out into mutual suspicion, necessitated complex bureaucratic structures and stringent protocols. Markham became intimately familiar with these protocols, and with the ways in which information and authority circulated between London and India. Following the formation of the India Office he was moved to the Revenue and Statistics Department, where he was given increasing scope to innovate, experiment and begin a portfolio career.<sup>20</sup>

Amongst other projects, he proposed and carried out an expedition to transplant cinchona trees from Ecuador to India (thus providing a supply of quinine, the only known prophylactic against malaria, for European use in South Asia), and accompanied the punitive 1867—1868 Abyssinia expedition as field geographer. He spent the latter part of his life as a grandee of the Royal Geographical Society, during which time he alienated many of his colleagues with his grandiosity and tactlessness, produced a body of scholarship on the history

---

<sup>20</sup> A.H. Markham, *The Life of Sir Clements R. Markham*, London, 1917, 164-167; D. Williams, Clements Robert Markham and the Geographical Department of the India Office, *Geographical Journal* 134 (1968) 343-352.

of exploration which was as voluminous as it was shoddily executed, and was the driving force behind the British Antarctic expeditions which culminated in the loss of Captain Scott's party.<sup>21</sup>

His work in the India Office, though short, was of a piece with the improvisatory energy and ambition of his career in general. Working variously in the Political and Secret Department, the Revenue Department and the Public Works Department during the India Office's early years, he was continually frustrated by bureaucratic disorder: papers did not circulate efficiently enough for his liking, and the relevant records were often difficult to call up. The archives, he wrote later, 'were lost or left to rot, and even the correspondence books were destroyed. Many previous documents were sold as waste paper, other were purloined or torn to pieces'.<sup>22</sup> In particular, he noted that maps, surveys and statistics were hard to come by. He became convinced that there should be a central repository of geographical information, and in 1867, when the India Office moved into its new premises, he was invited to try it. Over the next two years he established his new department as a repository of all the information that could be classified as 'geographical' – reports, maps, plans and charts, not only relating to the current state of India, but all such documents dating back to the EIC's foundation.

There was some precedent for the incorporation of early modern materials into modern geographical archives and collections. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Alexander Dalrymple had made use of the old journals and records of the EIC in updating the admiralty's records of hydrographical information.<sup>23</sup> Markham's commitment was conditioned by his work as an antiquarian. He dominated the Hakluyt Society much as he came to dominate

---

<sup>21</sup> R. Drayton, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain and the 'Improvement' of the World*, New Haven, 2000, 206-211; Markham, *Life of Sir Clements R. Markham*, 343-352; D. Williams, Clements Robert Markham and the introduction of the cinchona tree into British India, *Geographical Journal* 128 (1962) 431-442.

<sup>22</sup> C.R. Markham, *Memoir on the Indian Surveys*, London, 1871, 9-10.

<sup>23</sup> A.S. Cook, Establishing the sea routes to India and China: stages in the development of hydrographical knowledge, in: H.V. Bowen, M. Lincoln and N. Rigby (Eds), *The Worlds of the East India Company*, Woodbridge, 2002, 119-136.

the RGS, and more or less concurrently. He served thirty-six years on its committee, acted as its secretary (1858—1886) and president (1889—1910), and produced twenty-nine edited volumes of early modern travel narratives.<sup>24</sup> Much of what is interesting for us in Markham's archival practice proceeds from his refusal to acknowledge a substantive disciplinary gap between the practice of geography and that of history.

Just such a refusal had been the occasion of the Hakluyt Society's founding in 1846. The society was formed as an outgrowth of the RGS. Its primary instigator, William Desborough Cooley, was dissatisfied with certain majority opinions in the RGS regarding the admissibility of early modern and medieval documents within the discipline's corpus of knowledge. Its inaugural statement of intent defined its task as 'to print, in English, for distribution among its members, rare and valuable Voyages, Travels, and Geographical Records – including the more important early narratives of British enterprise'.<sup>25</sup> Interest in Richard Hakluyt (1553—1616) as a propagandist for British colonialism and as an advocate of collecting geographical information in the service of empire, was intense, both from historians looking for a genealogy of British global pre-eminence (his *Principal Navigations* had been described by J.A. Froude as 'the prose epic of the English nation'), and from geographers looking for a genealogy of their own discipline.<sup>26</sup> The society's founding statement continues:

---

<sup>24</sup> Death of Sir Clements Markham, *The Geographical Journal* 47 (1916) 161-176; W. Foster, The Hakluyt Society, 1846-1946: a retrospect, in: E. Lynam (Ed), *Richard Hakluyt and His Successors: A Volume Issued to Commemorate the Centenary of the Hakluyt Society*, Hakluyt Society Second Series 183, London, 1946, 141-170; A. Savours, Clements Markham: longest serving officer, most prolific editor, in: R.C. Bridges and P.E.H. Hair (Eds), *Compassing the Vaste Globe of the Earth: Studies in the History of the Hakluyt Society, 1846-1996*, London, 1996, 165-188.

<sup>25</sup> R.C. Bridges, William Desborough Cooley and the foundations of the Hakluyt Society, in: Bridges and Hair (Eds), *Compassing the Vaste Globe of the Earth*, 51-78; D. Middleton, The early history of the Hakluyt Society 1847-1923, *The Geographical Journal* 152 (1986) 217-224.

<sup>26</sup> D. Carey and C. Jowitt (Eds), *Richard Hakluyt and Travel Writing in Early Modern Europe*, Farnham, 2012, 2; R.J. Mayhew, The effacement of early modern geography (c.1600-1850): a historiographical essay, *Progress in Human Geography* 25 (2010) 383-401.

[Hakluyt] had it in view, as he informs us, ‘for the benefit and honour of his country, to bring Antiquities, smothered and buried in dark silence, to light; and to preserve several memorable exploits by the English nation achieved, from the greedy and devouring jaws of oblivion’. But now the time seems to be arrived when the treasures of the older geographical information, may be advantageously reproduced on a plan more comprehensive than Hakluyt's, as well as more in the spirit of an advanced literary age.<sup>27</sup>

The Hakluyt Society's innovation was to posit themselves explicitly as the inheritors of Hakluyt's own project, which was at once one of memorialisation and one of science. The trope of recovery from oblivion was repurposed to refer to the records of Hakluyt's own time, and deployed as authorising strategy and moral imprimatur for the critical move, which was that the ‘Geographical Records’ were to be treated as live data and absorbed into the growing contemporary archive of knowledge about the world. If the RGS, as Driver and others have argued, was envisaged as a centralised repository of information connected with the emergent discipline of geography, and gathered through its more militant techniques, the Hakluyt Society's innovation was to insist on the compatibility of early modern data with that gathered more recently.<sup>28</sup> Markham, characteristically, pressed the point by insisting that this was, in essence, what the Elizabethans had been doing all along. In the appendix to his *Memoir on the Indian Surveys*, he writes:

A department for the systematic utilisation of the geographical work has been considered to be an important and indeed an essential element in the Home Government

---

<sup>27</sup> Bridges, William Desborough Cooley, 65.

<sup>28</sup> Driver, *Geography Militant*, 27-37.

of a great Colonial Power, ever since Columbus first sailed from Palos. ... In those days it was called the Office of the Cosmographer of the Indies, but, allowing for the difference of time, the duties were the same as those which should devolve upon a similar department at the present day. ... When the East India Company was first formed in London, its enlightened managers had not then a great empire to administer ... but very few days had elapsed before they saw the necessity for a Geographical Department as part of their system of management. Correct geographical information was, they well knew, as necessary for a body of merchants as for the administrators of an empire; and two months after the incorporation of the Company we find Richard Hakluyt, the illustrious founder of the East India Geographical Department, preparing memoranda of the chief places where sundry sorts of species do grow, gathered out of the best and latest authors; of the prices of precious stones and spices; of what is good to bring from the Indies by him that is skilful and trusty .... [Hakluyt] was the unpaid but most efficient head of the Geographical Department of the India House.<sup>29</sup>

In conscripting the language of Hakluyt's reports to the EIC, and in importing nineteenth-century disciplinary and political categories into the thought of the company's founders, Markham's nerve here is remarkable. There had, of course, been no dedicated 'Geographical Department' at East India House. Hakluyt had been awarded the title of Historiographer to the EIC shortly after its foundation in 1599, and allowed access to the logbooks and journals of returning navigators. He never published anything from these materials, and when he died in 1616, such papers as he had collected entered the keeping of his successor, Samuel Purchas.

---

<sup>29</sup> Markham, *Memoir on the Indian Surveys*, 400-401.

Some of them featured in Purchas's *Hakluytus Posthumus*, and many of the manuscripts were lost.<sup>30</sup>

What Markham articulates here is a conception of an imperial archive that approaches Bruno Latour's model of a 'centre of calculation': a space in which data, having been rendered mobile, stable and combinable by the correct recording techniques, communications technologies and epistemological tools, might be concentrated and combined to produce knowledge.<sup>31</sup> Markham's invocation of early modern cosmographers' offices as models for what he had in mind anticipates modern studies of how such offices mobilised the emerging technologies of marine cartography and systematised recording to establish combined repositories of navigational, economic and political data.<sup>32</sup>

This kind of repository was, in fact, exactly what he had in mind. In the autumn of 1874 he submitted a *Memorandum of Proposals for the Organisation and Conduct of the Statistical Work of the India Office, for the Special Committee on Statistics*, which articulated this ambition in the strongest possible terms. The memorandum is a remarkable document, a culmination of everything Markham had learned in the India Office's records, and a model, in effect, for how an empire such as that of the British in India might collect, store, retrieve, manipulate, interpret and disseminate its information. It begins:

The statistical work of the India Office is grouped under 4 heads, and the aim should now be to establish an efficient and harmonious system by which all existing information may be readily available, the methods of bringing it together may be watched and amended, and

---

<sup>30</sup> L.E. Pennington (Ed), *The Purchas Handbook: Studies of the Life, Times and Writings of Samuel Purchas, 1577-1626*, two volumes, Hakluyt Society, Second Series 185-186, London 1997, I, 3-120. For differing views on the disciplinary origins of geography and the possibility of drawing a line of succession from Hakluyt's project to that of the Hakluyt Society, see L.B. Cormack, 'Good fences make good neighbours': geography as self-definition in early modern England, *Isis* 82 (1991) 639-666.

<sup>31</sup> Latour, *Science in Action*, 216-257.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, J.B. Harley, Silences and secrecy: the hidden agenda of cartography in early modern Europe, *Imago Mundi* 40 (1988) 57-76; G. Schilder, Organization and evolution of the Dutch East India Company's hydrographic office in the seventeenth century, *Imago Mundi* 28 (1976) 61-78.

final results may be eventually reached. ... Classification is the beginning of all accurate enquiry, and until the materials for investigation have been not merely arranged, but classified on correct principles, no advance can be made ... with it every subject, and every sub-division of a subject, fall naturally into their places, and progress is steadily made.<sup>33</sup>

Markham's four proposed divisions of work can be itemised as follows. Firstly, assistance in the collection of statistical data: Markham envisaged a radical extension and rigorous standardisation of statistical collection in the field. After this would come the work of classifying that data, 'the already accumulated and annually arriving material'. Next, 'investigation and inter-comparison of data, with a view to reaching definite conclusions': the raw data was to be made into knowledge. Finally there would be the work of supplying statistical information, 'for official use, and for the Parliament and the people of this country'.<sup>34</sup>

To begin with classification: Markham's document devotes considerable space to outlining a complex taxonomy of data, with all classes of information divided by group and subgroup. For almost every classification there is a carefully constructed list of divisions and sub-divisions: literature, police, jails, civil suits, criminal justice, administration, municipalities, military, hydrography, irrigation, agriculture, navigation, language, demographics, and so on. The entry for 'life', for example, encompasses 'registration; wages; sanitation, which embraces all subjects related to diseases and their amelioration; and emigration'; likewise, '[t]he statistics of protection embrace civil and criminal justice, jails, and police; and those of instruction are divided under the four heads of schools and colleges, missionary work, and science and art. At the foot of every list of sub-divisions is the stipulation

---

<sup>33</sup> C.R. Markham, Memorandum of Proposals for the Organisation and Conduct of the Statistical Work of the India Office: for the Special Committee on Statistics, 1874, British Library, India Office Records [hereafter IOR] L/R/4/29, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Markham, Memorandum of Proposals, 3.



‘for as far back as there is record/are records’, or ‘Early history’, or ‘History’. The need to extend the work of knowledge backwards in time is constantly insisted upon.

Part of the sophistication of the scheme lies in Markham's conscious appreciation of the ways in which his four divisions of work interact as part of a whole: just as the collection of data determines to a large extent its classification, so classification determines the processes and results of investigation. In Latourian terms, data is mobile – transferrable back and forth across the network, from periphery to core and back again – and it is immutable, the same flowing in as flowing out, unaffected by context.<sup>35</sup> One need only find the right ways of processing it. To a degree unusual in departmental memos within the India Office, Markham continually reverts to abstractions and first principles in his explanations of how the details of work should proceed, and is anxious to convey the sense that his meticulously arranged classifications and close attention to details are grounded on a substantial theoretical base. So, for the work of ‘investigation’,

The three bases of all statistics are space, number, and time. Space is the abstract of all relations of co-existence; number, of all relations of comparison; time, of all relations of sequence. In correct classification, the Surveys and other Census Returns must come first, and remain separate as the bases of all other investigations.<sup>36</sup>

The impression given here is of data as infinitely recombinable according to the requirements of the questioner, once enough control is exerted over its collection and reception, and once the right matrices have been devised in which to process it. Indeed,

---

<sup>35</sup> Latour, *Science in Action*, 216-257.

<sup>36</sup> Markham, Memorandum of Proposals, 5.

The new system must become useful as soon as it is commenced, and this end can be secured first by dealing with the current year, and working backwards until the whole collection of documents in the office is classified, not on a mere chronological plan like the Calendars of State Papers, but on scientific principles. Thus there will at length be the ready means of gaining a complete knowledge of the history of every measure and every subject relating to India and, moreover, *desiderata* will be detected and supplied. For, as regards many important measures, the material for their accurate comprehension is not now in the India Office. The absence of these missing papers will appear by following the proposed system, while by any other they will not be known to be absent until too late, *i.e.*, until actually wanted.<sup>37</sup>

This is perhaps the logical conclusion of any fantasy of a perfectly organised archive: since the structure in place corresponds exactly to that of whatever could be known or worth knowing about the archive's subject, any gap in the archival fabric necessarily corresponds to data that is missing and must be supplied.

To what extent this approximates a 'centre of calculation' in Latourian terms is perhaps the wrong question. Several studies of the knowledge producing institutions and networks that grew up alongside colonial expansion and consolidation in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have used Latour's model as a yardstick against which to measure the aspirations and achievements of their subjects. However the aspirations of organisations such as Kew or the RGS were articulated at the time, and however closely they can be mapped to a Latourian ideal, they were always attended in practice by the entropic drag of friction, wastage, structural flaws, the problematics of ordering data as a totality, and the necessarily contingent

---

<sup>37</sup> Markham, Memorandum of Proposals, 12.

and situated modes of its collection.<sup>38</sup> This would doubtless have been true of Markham's scheme, had it been adopted; but the fact that it remained a fantasy enables it to be read purely as such. In this, it resembles the 'imperial archive' that Thomas Richards identifies as a presiding trope of much late Victorian fiction; a bank of data dedicated to maintaining 'the possibility of comprehensive knowledge... not a building, nor even a collection of texts, but the collectively imagined junction of all that was known or knowable, a fantastic representation of an epistemological master pattern, a virtual focal point for the heterogeneous local knowledge of metropolis and empire'.<sup>39</sup> Markham's scheme approaches Richards' formulation as much in its totalising ambition as in its claims to epistemological mastery through rigorous taxonomical distinction. To a striking extent, its aspirations also match those that Matthew Edney argues characterised the work of mapping India. Both projects sought to produce a synoptic view of India, rendering it both known and knowable, and producing it as a singular entity in the political imaginaries of both coloniser and colonised. If, in Edney's phrase, these are the 'rhetorics of cartography', it might be possible to identify in Markham's proposal an emergent rhetoric of the archive.<sup>40</sup>

History, too, was to be territorialised, and assumed into an arrangement which, while ostensibly based on 'space, number, and time', in practice subordinated time to space and number. The records are to be arranged, Markham writes, 'not on a mere chronological plan, like the Calendars of State Papers, but on scientific principles'.

---

<sup>38</sup> R. Craggs, Situating the imperial archive; the Royal Empire Society Library, 1868-1945, *Journal of Historical Geography* 34 (2008) 48-67; Driver, *Geography Militant*, 27-37; D.P. Miller, Joseph Banks, empire, and 'centers of calculation' in late Hanoverian London, in: D.P. Miller and P.H. Reill (Eds), *Visions of Empire: Voyages, Botany and Representations of Nature*, Cambridge, 1996, 21-37.

<sup>39</sup> T. Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire*, London, 1993, 11.

<sup>40</sup> M.H. Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765-1843*, Chicago, 1997; Edney, The irony of imperial mapping, in: J.R. Akerman (Ed), *The Imperial Map: Cartography and the Mastery of Empire*, Chicago, 2009, 11-45.

The whole of the India Office records, printed and in manuscript, should be classified and arranged on the above system, including all the Consultations which fill the cellars, all the Proceedings of Governments, all Despatches and Collections from India in every department, all reports, Selections from records, contents of Gazettes and Supplements, and published books or articles bearing on the above subjects. ... The period covered will be a hundred years for the leading subjects and two or three hundred years for a few, such as trade, military operations, and marine surveys. It is of the greatest consequence to carry back every question as far as records are available; for inter-comparison is the main function of statistics, and, as regards some of the most important such as the phenomena of prices they must be considered with reference to a large number of years.<sup>41</sup>

The final task of the statistics department, as Markham saw it, would be the supply of information 'for official use, and for the Parliament and the people of this country'. Besides the 'classified catalogue' – the index to the whole records according to his schema, taking up several hundred volumes and housed in its own dedicated room in the India Office – there would also be a specialised department dedicated to producing twenty digests, updated annually, on each major heading. Finally, there would be a yearly combined digest of the state of India as a whole, with reports on infrastructure, trade and the (morally, spiritually and culturally improving) state of life of the inhabitants. This was to be much like the *Report on the Moral and Material Progress of India* which he had experience of preparing on a yearly basis for parliament, but on a rather grander scale and aimed at the general public. It would, in essence, mobilise the vast informational resources of the statistical office and of the archive it commanded towards the creation of a popular scoresheet of colonial policy, envisaged

---

<sup>41</sup> Markham, Memorandum of Proposals, 11.

inevitably as being generally in credit. The keepers of the archive could, his scheme suggests, also carve themselves a role as the exegetes of imperialism to the British public.

Markham's proposal received a sympathetic audience in the Special Committee on Statistics, whose official response noted that 'we have been struck by the want of a general index, prepared on a uniform system, which should be a ready guide to those who desire to learn what is on record with reference to any given subject'.<sup>42</sup> However, a memo by Henry Waterfield, secretary of the Statistics and Commerce Department, noted the scheme's impracticality, writing that Markham must have made his cost and time estimates 'in ignorance of the amount of the records'. Waterfield estimated that to calendar all the existing volumes would take, at a conservative estimate, three hundred years of man hours at a cost of £60,000. Clearly, Markham's scheme for a grand register of Indian statistics was not to be. However, Waterfield did see the attraction in using some of Markham's classificatory tables, and applying them to the organisation of the already extant and incoming records. Keeping an ongoing index under the subject headings suggested, he calculated, should not impose on each department more work than that of 'one good man for 3 or 4 days in each month, at the outside', and that at a cost of about £218 per annum.<sup>43</sup>

The committee concurred: if the memorandum's proposal for an entire reorganisation of the records was impracticable, its proposed division might at least make a useful directory of the archive as it was. Each department was to compile a monthly list of all correspondence, and send it to the Record Department, 'there to be brought into one index by a clerk or somewhat superior writer'. It was hoped that this would be particularly useful for following up matters which fell under the purview of multiple departments:

---

<sup>42</sup> Third report of the Special Committee on Statistics, 13 November 1874, IOR L/E/2/51 item 256, 8r.

<sup>43</sup> H. Waterfield, Minute paper on the Third Report: note to the Special Committee, 23 October 1874, IOR L/E/2/51 item, 1r-2v.

To take an example which has lately occurred, the question of the erection of a lighthouse at Cape Guardafui had to be viewed in a political, a marine, commercial, and a financial point of view, besides the points relating to survey and site, so that the records of the Foreign, the Marine, the Revenue (Commerce), the Financial, the Public Works, and the Geographical Departments, might all have to be consulted before the correspondence could be said to be complete. Under the system of a general index, a reference to a single book, would show what papers there were on record on the subject.<sup>44</sup>

In short, Markham's proposal was to be adopted, but only in the most reduced sense, stripped of its dedicated central registry, its encyclopaedic superstructure and all its fantasies of a single unified field of infinitely recombinable data.<sup>45</sup> The taxonomy which was supposed to provide the keys to a technocratic ideal appeared to the committee as a well designed indexing tool. The summative and transhistorical aspirations of Markham's scheme became, instead, a relatively minor but useful alteration to a bureaucratic order that remained largely unchanged. In 1877 Markham resigned amid rancour on all sides.<sup>46</sup>

## GEORGE BIRDWOOD: COMPANY NOSTALGIA AND REVERENTIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

The nostalgia which Kaminsky and Williams identify as one of the distinguishing marks of the old company hands in the India Office (however loosely that grouping might be defined)

---

<sup>44</sup> Waterfield, Minute paper on the Third Report, 8r.

<sup>45</sup> Manuscript enclosure to Waterfield, Minute paper on the Third Report (undated), IOR L/E/2/51 item 256, 9r.

<sup>46</sup> Williams, Clements Robert Markham and the Geographical Department of the India Office, 348-351.

found one of its chief movers and propagandists in Sir George Birdwood.<sup>47</sup> In contrast to Markham, Birdwood's career demonstrates some of the ways nostalgia was mobilised within, and in some ways against, the emerging configurations of state, archive and museum. The distinguishing characteristic of the old company hands was time spent in-country as an officer of the company: a sharp distinction from technocrats and scientists like Markham, whose engagements with India usually took place entirely from the imperial centre, or – as with the cinchona project – were flying visits focused on one particular activity. Like most of his generation in the India Office, Birdwood had spent much of his early life in India: born to a longstanding company family in Karnataka, he attended public school and medical training in England and Scotland, and returned to India as a surgeon in the Indian Navy. After service in the Persian Gulf in 1856—1857, he returned to Bombay to play a full part in the city's intellectual life. A professor of medicine and botany, and founding registrar of the Medical School, he was also secretary of the Bombay branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, curator of the government museum, and special commissioner for Indian products at the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1867. Returning to London in 1868, he spent the rest of his life working at the India Office, and writing and lecturing widely, with increasing eccentricity and obstreperousness, on Indian matters.<sup>48</sup>

Much of Birdwood's writing revolves around a palpable sense of mourning for institutions and milieux which he considered to have been irrevocably lost or betrayed. If his political views and professional affiliations placed him with the Old India Hands, he also saw himself as the inheritor and champion of a strain of EIC-endorsed orientalist scholarship which

---

<sup>47</sup> Kaminsky, *The India Office*, 35-62; Williams, *The India Office*, 84-96; Williams, The formation of policy in the India Office.

<sup>48</sup> V. Chirol, Birdwood, Sir George Christopher Molesworth, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford, 2004; online edition, May 2011, <http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.catalogue.libraries.london.ac.uk/view/article/31896?docPos=1>, last accessed 10 February 2017; K. de B. Codrington, *Birdwood and the Study of the Arts in India*, London, 1970; L. Mallet, Sir George C. M. Birdwood, K.C.I.E., C.S.I., M.D., LL.D. His life and work, *Journal of Indian Art* 8 (1900) 119-156.

was threatened by the more positivist disciplines that Markham represented. His writings on Indian culture and handicrafts draw on the tradition of comparative linguistics developed by William Jones, filtered through an increasingly obvious attachment to Wilhelm Müller's more explicitly racialised typology (and, implicitly, hierarchy) of cultures.<sup>49</sup> In many respects, he fits the mould of the intellectuals Theodore Koditschek identifies as turning against liberalism after the uprising of 1857, who continued the essentially whiggish strain of imperial history pioneered by the likes of Thomas Macaulay and J.A. Froude, but reframed it within what Koditschek calls 'a multi-millennial logic of bio-social development'.<sup>50</sup> In subordinating the scale of imperial history, measurable in centuries, to the scale of a racial history that corresponded more or less with the geological time of evolution, these historians could reassert an explicitly racial civilising mission and teleology whose significance dwarfed temporary setbacks such as anticolonial revolt. Moreover, by theorising English Protestant colonialism as a historical actor amenable to narratives of progress, while relegating colonial subjects to a *durée so longue* that it negated their capacity to act, it quietly stripped those potentially seditious subjects of some of their capacity to frighten.

Birdwood participated in this sleight of hand with gusto. Through his scholarly expertise in Indian material cultures, and his compulsive etymological genealogies, he used the epistemological tools of late nineteenth-century racial theory to construct an India envisaged as authentic, agrarian, docile and effectively in permanent stasis. His furious antipathy towards the political enfranchisement of Indians replicated many of the standard dehistoricising tropes of orientalist historiography. In defending the South African colour bar, for example, he wrote that 'so long as the Hindus hold to [the caste system], India will still be India; but from the day

---

<sup>49</sup> T. Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire*, Basingstoke, 2002, 5-6, 41-42; for Birdwood's own writings on race, culture and empire, see G.C.M. Birdwood, *Sva*, London, 1915, especially his essays on 'The Rajputs in the History of Hindustan', 93-148, and 'Indian Unrest', 299-320.

<sup>50</sup> T. Koditschek, *Liberalism, Imperialism, and the Historical Imagination: Nineteenth-Century Visions of a Greater Britain*, Cambridge, 2011, 213-214.



they break from it, there will be no more of India.... That glorious peninsula will be degraded to the position of a bitter “East End” of the Anglo-Saxon Empire, as were Shadwell and Limehouse and Bermondsey, of London, by the abolition of the Honourable East India Company, on September 1, 1858!’.<sup>51</sup> Here, as elsewhere in Birdwood’s writings, it is not entirely clear precisely what the object of mourning is. Modernity – suggestively figured as abject, urban and industrial, with a suggestion of racial promiscuity – is opposed to a culture whose inherent value resides in its ahistoricity. The decline of a paternalistic (and racially and confessionally separatist) ethic in imperial administration is cast as having endangered Britain’s true mission in India, which is to curate it as a kind of nature reserve of the spirit. Eventually, he writes, India is to be ‘upraise[d]’ to independence, and allowed to resume historicity; but this is envisaged as occurring a century or two in the future.<sup>52</sup>

Almost from the beginning, Birdwood’s task at the India Office was to preside over the dispersal of the products of the EIC’s scholarly culture, and to facilitate their absorption into an exhibitionary complex which was becoming more centralised and disciplined, more directed towards mass pedagogy and the shaping of national pasts and futures.<sup>53</sup> The India Museum, the EIC’s own collection of Indian handicrafts, products, samples, specimens and curios, had existed in some form since the late seventeenth century. Now its cultural artefacts were to be sent to South Kensington (where they formed a foundational collection of what is now the Victoria and Albert Museum), and the India Office would retain only the ‘economic collections’ – the material database of samples of natural resources and manufactured products,

---

<sup>51</sup> Birdwood, *Sva*, 318-319.

<sup>52</sup> Birdwood, *Sva*, xviii.

<sup>53</sup> T. Bennett, The exhibitionary complex, *New Formations* 4 (1988) 73-102; T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, London, 1995. See also T.J. Barringer, The South Kensington Museum and the colonial project, in: T.J. Barringer and T. Flynn (Eds), *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture and the Museum*, London, 1998, 11-27; A. Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, New Haven, 1994; P.H. Hoffenburt, *An Empire on Display: English, Indian, and Australian Exhibitions from the Crystal Palace to the Great War*, Berkeley, 2001.

which the India Office wanted to keep in a central location for viewing by representatives of commerce.<sup>54</sup>

In the autumn of 1874 Birdwood came into possession of ‘a large cylindrical black box’ from the office of Sir John W. Kaye, who was retiring as secretary to the Political and Secret Department.<sup>55</sup> That there should have been such a chest lying uninvestigated in Kaye's office is not out of character. Kaye, a military historian and *litterateur*, belonged to the soldier-administrator culture of the Indian colonial governing caste identified by Douglas Peers, a culture to which Birdwood's scholarly nostalgia might easily be read as a close successor.<sup>56</sup> Kaye was an eccentric and curmudgeonly character, a ‘mighty anachronism’ and a vocal centre of resistance to the drive towards efficiency and professionalisation under the reforming undersecretaryship of Louis Mallet.<sup>57</sup>

The box contained forty documents dating from between 1608 and 1758. The majority of them – twenty-eight in total – were letters patent from the crown to the company, granting a variety of permissions and licenses. Letters patent had been a primary means of encoding in documentary form royal sanction for a wide range of behaviours, permissions and exemptions, as well as formally declaring the terms of loans, remittances and grants. The first two documents in the chest were letters patent from 1608 and 1609 granting permission to deal in ungarbled (unsorted) spices; a privilege for which royal sanction had to be sought.<sup>58</sup> One document which particularly caught Birdwood's eye was an original roll of subscribers to the 1698 joint stock.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> A.J. Arberry, *The India Office Library: A Historical Sketch*, London, 1967; R. Desmond, *The India Museum, 1801-1879*, London, 1982, 81-93; W. Foster, *The East India House, its History and Associations*, London, 1924, 148-151.

<sup>55</sup> J.W. Kaye to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, 27 April 1875, 5.

<sup>56</sup> D. Peers, Soldiers, scholars, and the Scottish Enlightenment: militarism in early nineteenth-century India, *International History Review* 16 (1994) 441-465.

<sup>57</sup> Williams, *The India Office*, 84-88, 93-96.

<sup>58</sup> Letters Patent Granted to the East India Company, IOR A/1/3, A/1/4; K.N. Chaudhury, *The English East India Company: The Study of an Early Joint-stock Company, 1600-1640*, London, 1965, 167-172.

<sup>59</sup> The subscription roll is now preserved at IOR A/1/53.

Birdwood used this box of documents to stage-manage a moment of historical recovery which would instantiate a particular order of value in the India Office's historical archive while positioning himself as its progenitor. That order of value reflected Birdwood's own ideological investments: a reverence for the fiscal-military state of the EIC over the bureaucratic state of the India Office, an excoriation of the latter's atrophied sense of tradition, and a dedication to the creation of a reverential historiography of early modern empire. The early records of the EIC were to be placed within the structure of a modern state archive, envisaged as both an instrument of bureaucratic control and a repository of national and imperial memory; and within it, they were to be afforded special place as relics of inceptionary moments in the historical narratives of which that memory was constructed.

Birdwood's first move was to engage Noel Sainsbury of the Public Record Office to catalogue the contents. Then, with characteristic flamboyance, he revealed the find in a memorandum to the undersecretary of state. The memo begins:

On my appointment to the Curatorship of the Museum, Col. Burne C.S.J. sent me a box which he had received from Sir John Kaye on the retirement of the latter from office, with the statement that it had been lying in his room from beyond the memory of any one in the Political Department, and was said to contain very important documents. I found in it 51 tally-sticks;— a bag marked 'fifteen pagodas', which on being opened, I found to contain two lumps of iron;— and forty parchments all mixed together in the greatest confusion.<sup>60</sup>

This is not so much a bureaucratic communication as a carefully structured narrative and rhetorical performance. This opening skilfully dramatises a moment of archival recovery, and

---

<sup>60</sup> Memorandum of Statistics and Commerce Committee, submitted 17 April 1875, IOR L/E/2/53, item 531, 2r.

accords Birdwood, as discoverer and witness, a central position in that moment. The vague archaism and invocation of immeasurable historical time – if only in contrast to the claims of modern bureaucracy – is a recurrent image, as is the alertness to bathetic absurdity. Most importantly, however, there is the implicit claim of having rescued valuable, indeed sacred, documents from chaos: the moment of archival recovery is also one of the rediscovery of an inheritance. The truth of this claim is debatable. While, as noted, the India Office's custody of its own records and those of the EIC after 1858 was somewhat chaotic, and the archival regime in the EIC during the first half of the nineteenth century had acquired an unfavourable reputation amongst historians and administrators (one heavily promoted, as here, by officers such as Birdwood, who often had self-interested reasons for doing so), the chest's contents had in fact been meticulously catalogued by Peter Pratt, a clerk in the company's Registry Department. Between 1817 and 1835, Pratt, an accomplished and pioneering antiquarian, had made significant progress in cataloguing the older material in the archives.<sup>61</sup> Rather than absorbing the chest's contents into his growing collections, he seems to have simply catalogued them and moved on. The chest disappeared from the records again until Kaye's retirement. In the subsequent documentation relating to the records, no mention is made of when Pratt's catalogue was discovered. It remains a possibility that it was inside the chest. Whether or not that is the case, Birdwood tends to leave his claims to archival recovery untroubled by any but the most muted acknowledgment of previous archivists' efforts.

Birdwood's memo goes on to enumerate some of the documents, calling attention particularly to the 1698 subscription roll, and then makes some requests: for remuneration for Sainsbury, and for permission to publicise the findings further in a paper for the Royal Society of Literature. It ends by making a slightly eccentric plea for the 1698 document to be enshrined at a centre of imperial power:

---

<sup>61</sup> W. Foster, *Guide to the India Office Records*, London, 1919, v.

I would also venture to suggest that the parchments should be carefully restored, and exhibited in this Office. I would not have them sent to the Museums. They are not idle curiosities to be toyed about in museums, but State Archives which should be reverently kept in the India Office itself: and after restoration should be rolled up, and put away in a glass cabinet in the Council Room. The roll of the original Subscribers of the £2,000,000 stock which contains the names of nearly the whole of the well to-do middle class people of England a century ago, should never again pass out of sight.<sup>62</sup>

Perhaps what Birdwood most strongly insists upon here is a claim to continuity. His anxiety that the roll of subscribers should not be ‘toyed about with in museums’ is effectively an insistence upon its relevance, upon the ideological wound that would be inflicted were it to be hived off as mere history, consigned to display among other objects subjected to the popular gaze as an artefact. Rather, Birdwood wishes to install the document at a centre of temporal British colonial power, the Council Room of the India Office: not only to invoke a lineage, but to claim a colonial present about which he felt ambivalent in the name of a colonial past to whose characteristics – the EIC, England, certain cultures of mercantile bourgeois collectivism – he owed his own personal allegiance.

The initial response to Birdwood’s memo was mixed. Sir John Kaye himself seems to have been offended by the suggestion that he had been neglectful of these documents – not, in fact, an unusual charge to be levelled against Kaye – and he made this known in an irascible letter to the *Pall Mall Gazette*.<sup>63</sup> The response of the undersecretary and council was more muted. Having acceded to the request to pay for Sainsbury’s services, and given permission

---

<sup>62</sup> Memorandum of Statistics and Commerce Committee, 4r–v.

<sup>63</sup> Kaye to *Pall Mall Gazette*, 27 April 1875. Kaye’s tendency to blithely ignore the circulatory protocols of the IO’s new order was suspected in some quarters of having contributed to the 1867 Abyssinian crisis, see The Abyssinian difficulty, *Westminster Review*, Jan–Apr 1868, n.s. 33, 192.

for Birdwood to present both his findings and a printed calendar of the papers to the RLS, they addressed the issue of the 1698 document:

3. That the documents be carefully restored and exhibited ^with the tally sticks^ in the Museum and ^that they^ be eventually sent to the Library for custody.<sup>64</sup>

The word ‘Museum’ is heavily underlined in pencil. Furthermore, Sir Henry Bartle Frere (at that time on the Council of India, and in fact an early patron of Birdwood’s in Bombay) added his own note: ‘[t]he documents will be much better seen in the Museum or Library than in a Cabinet – HBF’.<sup>65</sup> There was also, as the memorandum circulated, some irritation expressed at Sir John Kaye, both for his public outburst and for his own hoarding of originary documents. It seems that Kaye had had in his room the original Treaty of Allahabad; further enquiries ascertained that it was now hanging in a council member’s office.

Birdwood’s symbolic intervention, then, was rejected. The episode is also, perhaps, suggestive of a defeat in the conflict over the means of historical production, and the ways in which the imperial state, past and present, would be defined and narrativised. The Council of India’s own changing role was significant. The body had been set up in 1858 as a panel of experienced administrators of India, largely grandees from the former company, and was in theory given oversight of all dispatches and proposed legislation. As a means of retaining the expertise of former EIC officers in the India Office’s policy-making process, however, its effective power declined steeply over the first three decades of the office’s existence. By 1875 it had become something of an anachronism, increasingly sidelined by the executive power of the undersecretary.<sup>66</sup> Perhaps Birdwood was aware of this, and his projected placement of the

---

<sup>64</sup> Memorandum of Statistics and Commerce Committee, 4r.

<sup>65</sup> Memorandum of Statistics and Commerce Committee, 3v.

<sup>66</sup> Williams, The Council of India.

1698 roll in the council chamber more an act of explicit memorialisation than recuperation. That the Treaty of Allahabad – the moment at which the EIC ceased to be the bourgeois mercantile corporation that Birdwood venerated, and became a territorial empire – should be placed in a more convincing centre of imperial power speaks to the ascendancy of the forms of government against which he directed his historiographical practice.

However, while Birdwood's more obviously gestural interventions were rejected, his main gambit was successful, and henceforth the records of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were generally accepted as falling under his authority. The contents of the chest, with more documents added as they came to the attention of Birdwood and his assistants and successors, were designated the 'Parchment Records', and were to become Series A: Statutes, Treaties and Charters, the foundational fond of the modern India Office Records. Over the next two decades he found time, and was able to secure resources, for the cataloguing of thousands more documents from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and by 1879 he was able to publish his initial *Report on the Old Records of the India Office*. This report, and all its subsequent editions, amply bore out the performative nature of his original discovery, and all reprinted the text of his 1875 memorandum.<sup>67</sup> The third edition of 1891, in particular, presented itself as a summative statement on what was now an established historical repository, with the addition of a short essay on the records' current situation which went some way towards articulating how Birdwood conceived of his achievement:

It is a true pleasure to me to here testify to the wonderful improvement that has been effected since 1879 in the order and condition of the India Office Records. ... [T]he many thousands of loose papers that had hitherto been simply tied up in vaguely-

---

<sup>67</sup> G.C.M. Birdwood, *Report on the Miscellaneous Old Records of the India Office*, 1 November 1878, London, 1879.

assorted bundles were carefully collated with the documents in the better preserved regular series of the records, and bound up with them in chronological order; the volumes comprising each series being consecutively numbered, and placed in distinct ranges of cases. The royal charters, and other parchment records still in existence, have been unfolded, cleaned, flattened, and, after careful examination, put away in large shallow boxes, shelved on a specially constructed locking skeleton cupboard, standing in the centre of the muniment, provided entirely for these 'Parchment Records', as they are now designated, and other special relics of the late Honourable East India Company. The bulk of the documents in the general Record Rooms are distributed in such a way as, in the first place, to best subserve the purposes of the Departments requiring constant access to them. But the convenience of the public has also been considered in the arrangements adopted, and, when they are completed and in full operation, it will be possible for anyone provided with the proper authority to obtain, within a few minutes, any volume that may be wanted from any of the India Office Record Rooms.<sup>68</sup>

This passage itemises rather neatly the specifically archival procedures by which Birdwood aimed to produce the invented tradition or mythography of early modern empire, and mobilises many of the tropes with which he conceptualised, articulated and propagandised his archival project. The primary claim is to having recovered order out of chaos, through the careful application of responsible custodianship and taxonomic rigour. The conscientious archivist judges previous archival regimes, distinguishing order from disorder, 'vaguely-assorted bundles' from 'better-preserved regular series', and liquidates the former in order to improve the latter. The series thus produced are sorted by chronology, indexed by number, fixed by

---

<sup>68</sup> G.C.M. Birdwood, *Report on the Old Records of the India Office, with Supplementary Notes and Appendices*, London, 1891, viii-ix.



binding, and interred in the 'distinct ranges of cases' which finalise the material expression of the taxonomic scheme. The body of the archive is anatomised, dissected and fixed in place, each part labelled to distinguish it from others. Distinction, however, is also an ethical procedure, and the act of recovery and sorting is also an act of redemption: the 'special relics' are treated with veneration ('unfolded, cleaned, flattened', afforded 'careful examination') and installed in a central position for reverential keeping in a 'specially constructed locking ... cupboard'. Order, discernment and a sense of proper veneration all distinguish the archivist from his predecessors. Those predecessors, it is implied, could not or would not distinguish between records and relics; did not provide within the archive sufficient architectural space for the records' proper arrangement and ease of consultation, much less an appropriate sense of the sacred; and had no sense of the superiority of solid bindings and distinct ranges of cases (fixed, ordered, sequential) over bundles (loose, fungible, subject to promiscuous shuffling). Finally, Birdwood alludes to the archive's continuing use as a technology of rule, its 'distribution' determined by the needs of imperial administration: it is understood to be, still, a site of governmentality. While it is to be conscripted to the production of historical narrative, any researchers must be 'provided with the proper authority': the central muniment is locked. The archive is to be neither promiscuous nor porous, and secured against unauthorised readings. Gaining access to the India Office Records remained, indeed, a notoriously difficult task for historians.

Much of this ideology of the archive is articulated in Birdwood's use of the word 'muniment'. This can be a record room, a specific legal document embodying or delegating authority, or a fortified stronghold. The senses of domiciliation, authority, precedence and enclosure are all arguably present. The authority he inscribes in and through his archive is both the authority over history which it establishes by collecting the materials of the past within its

walls and subjecting them to the discipline of its formal arrangements, and the authority which it enables as the working archive of an imperial state.<sup>69</sup>

What the arrangement of the muniment most powerfully conveys is the way in which, for Birdwood, the obsessive search for originary moments dominates the process of archiving and the authorisation of national history. The parchment records quite literally inaugurate and instantiate the EIC's power to act, embodying the authority of the constitutional arrangements around which he wished to construct a politics of mourning and recovery. Even after the end of his career in the India Office, Birdwood was still writing feverishly about these documents: 'Of the minor charters a large number are to be found at the India Office, but many are also lost to sight. It is not likely that any of the missing muniments have actually perished. *They are assuredly lying hid somewhere, and a systematic search should be made for them;* and above all for the CHARTER OF ELIZABETH'.<sup>70</sup> The charter to which he refers is that signed by Elizabeth I on the evening of 31 December 1599. Just as the charter of Elizabeth will turn out to have created a company which constructed an empire, Birdwood's founding of his muniment authorises the archive's, and its controllers', command over history.

## CONCLUSION

If the imperial state was administered and constituted through written documents, the two archival schemes sketched here illustrate some of the ways in which that state was extensive

---

<sup>69</sup> Here, although outside the scope of this article, Jacques Derrida's theorisation of the archive as 'at once the *commencement* and the *commandment*' seems instructive in understanding Birdwood's implicit rhetorics of authority. For Derrida, as for Birdwood, the archive is the site where epistemological, legal and political authority intersect. J. Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, translated by E. Prenowitz, Chicago, 1996, 1-5; see also E. Ketelaar, Muniments and monuments: the dawn of archives as cultural patrimony, *Archival Science* 7 (2007) 343-357.

<sup>70</sup> G.C.M. Birdwood and W. Foster, *Relics of the Honourable East India Company: A Series of Fifty Plates with Letterpress*, London, 1909, 1, emphasis in original.

through time as well as space. They illustrate some of the rationales and rhetorics by which this extensivity was conceptualised at a moment of transition and anxiety, when the British empire was moving towards a more centralised government and struggling to codify a narrative of its significance. In their various differences, and their engagement with divergent conceptualisations of the archive and its relationship to power, they exemplify some of the ways in which the development of imperialist historiographies in response to that moment was riven by contestation over means and ends.

Ultimately, Birdwood and Markham's schemes problematise Patrick Joyce's observation that the archival policy within the India Office from the 1870s onwards was broadly directed towards a 'retrospective reinvention of the old East India Company ... presenting the Company not as a trading company but as a socio-geographical agent of economic empire, which the India Office was in fact then becoming'.<sup>71</sup> In both cases, the rhetoric of the archive was directed not towards a conscription of the past to a self-evident imperial present, but to an implicit vision of an imperial future – in one case of totalising techno-informatic mastery, in the other a triumphal return to an imagined originary ethic. To be sure, the aspirations of Markham's scheme are closer to Joyce's formulation. If it is possible to parse the scheme's politics, or indeed those of Markham himself – a consummate technocrat, the precise tenor of whose imperialism seems never to have been expressed except in the blandest of stock phrases – they are largely in tune with the consolidating liberal communications state and its heavily policed, relentlessly surveilled global empire.

In his wider work on the India Office and the bureaucracy of empire, Joyce notes the complex cultural procedures of the file and its circulation within the spaces of governance. In the performativity of the bureaucratic self and its erasure, in the technologies of the file and case, and in the architectonics and spatial networks of the movement of information both within

---

<sup>71</sup> Joyce, *The State of Freedom*, 180-182.

and between centres of governance, Joyce assembles an impression of the imperial state as ‘not a unity, a clearly centred entity, but as something distributed between many authors, arranged in many forms and layers of interlinked agency’.<sup>72</sup> Though increasingly systematised and centralised, and constantly in danger of being overwhelmed by the volume of paper, authority here is still vested effectively in ‘the men of the state’, however distributed their decision-making process. Markham’s scheme can perhaps be read as mounting an implicit challenge to this order. As in Richards’ formulation of the ‘imperial archive’, its totality and efficiency are scarcely scalable to individual agency or identity, or to the situated and contingent nature of human action. Birdwood’s reverentialism can, then, be read as an implicit riposte to this emergent fantasy. His wish to place the 1698 roll of subscribers in the Council Room insists on the primacy of the (English, masculine, Protestant) individual and his capacity to act.

The conflict is also one between established and emergent disciplinary formations. Markham, finding a culture of reverentialism around the materials of early modern navigation already more or less established, quickly arrogated its materials and practices to a larger and more ambitious purpose. This clearly reflected the peripatetic and assimilative instincts of disciplinary geography in the mid to late nineteenth century, and the ways in which it annexed the territory of adjacent disciplines in order to position itself as the quintessential knowledge practice of empire – in this case, an extension of colonial fiat over the global and cultural spaces of the past as well as those of the present.<sup>73</sup> For Markham, reverential practice became a strategy by which the state could instrumentalise the past; and, in his invocation of Hakluyt, he made an explicitly disciplinary move to claim the materials of antiquarian history for contemporary global geography. Birdwood’s antiquarianism proposed a countervailing strategy. His muniment was framed as a melancholic, but potentially triumphal, repository of

---

<sup>72</sup> Joyce, *The State of Freedom*, 173.

<sup>73</sup> Driver, *Geography Militant*; Livingstone, *The Geographical Tradition*, 216-259.

an imperial ethos, in which reverential practice became the only means by which the state, by paying homage to a now secured past, could be reformed and renewed.

To write the history of archives, as of all knowledge producing institutions, is by necessity to engage in the biographical and prosopographical study of the people who made them. David Lambert and Alan Lester's concept of 'imperial careering', and Peter Hulme and Russell MacDougall's remarks on biography's usefulness in 'getting at the sense of *trajectory* among the personnel of Empire ... the transference of colonial experience and practise from one setting to the other', might normally be applied to figures moving dramatically across the global spaces of the imperial web. However, they might just as well be applied to those whose most consequential moves were within the space of single offices in the imperial centre.<sup>74</sup> The figures who circulated in such institutions, and the cultures that developed within them, bore a complicated relation to the history of the institutions themselves. In this case, it is hardly surprising that the formation of state archives for the production of authorised histories and geographies would invoke ideological conflicts in which the whole essence of the imperial project was held to be in some way at stake. Nor is it surprising that the precise nature of the connection between the individual, the institution and the vision propounded remains somewhat obscure. The personal involvement of the men who administered the empire in the writing of its histories made the shape of those histories as much a matter of personal predilection and social relationality as of institutional, political or ideological commitment. History, and the archives that made it, became sites for the production of ideology, identity and affect; and in the process, they also became sites of contestation, collaboration and compromise.

---

<sup>74</sup> D. Lambert and A. Lester (Eds), *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, 2006; P. Hulme and R. McDougall (Eds), *Writing Travel and Empire*, London, 2007, 6-7.