

**John Johnstone of Alva – Rascal or Victim – Where does the truth
lie?**

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Introduction

My Great Great Great Grandfather, John Johnstone of Alva, went out to the East India Company in 1751 aged 16 where for some years he undoubtedly performed well and gained a good or even outstanding reputation. In 2008 his portrait by Sir Henry Raeburn was brought over from the National Gallery in Washington for an exhibition of Raeburn's work and I was taken aback to read the catalogue entry for the picture. The catalogue talked of the painting being an outstandingly good example of Raeburn's work and then added:

“Johnstone, who presumably commissioned the portrait does not appear to have been a very pleasant man. He was the fourth son of Sir James Johnstone of Westerhall and was on the Council of Bengal from 1761 to 1765. A not very complimentary impression of his behavior is given by Lord Macaulay in a description of a meeting of the Council in the latter year, at which the Governor General, Lord Clive, signaled his intention of stamping out the bribery and corruption which were rife among servants of the Company....”
The Council met, and Clive stated to them his full determination to make a thorough reform, and to use for that purpose the whole of the ample authority, civil and military, which had been confided to him. Johnstone, one of the boldest and worst men in the assembly, made some show of opposition. Clive interrupted him, and haughtily demanded whether he meant to question the power of the new government. Johnstone was cowed, and disclaimed any such intention. All the faces round board grew very long and pale; and not another syllable of dissent was uttered.”

Reading this damning report about him and the publication in 2011 of Emma Rothschild's book “Inner Lives of Empire” revolving around correspondence between John's twelve siblings spurred me into finding out more about him. In this paper I try to give a balanced view of John Johnstone and the events that happened in India to demonstrate that popular judgments of his character and his conduct in the East India Company may not be fair or appropriate.

John's Character

John was always seen by his family as a man of strong principle, upright, honest and extremely open hearted and generous, always helping those in trouble. One story handed down in the family and also recorded in Burke's "Family Romances"¹ discusses a large fortune he inherited from a friend in India, a Ms. Warwick, who had lost touch with her only brother. Their friendship had arisen when she nursed John back to health when he became ill not long after he arrived in India, and when she died it was found she had left her entire estate to John. Soon after getting the inheritance and with the need for making money in India a thing of the past John was within days of returning to the UK when he met a Naval Officer who was trying to find his sister, the same Ms. Warwick. John handed the entire legacy over to him, refusing his suggestion that he should at least keep half of it. He then again took up his work in India.

Emma Rothschild also sent a copy of a letter in the National Library of Scotland dated 2nd April 1870 from one of John's Grandsons, Montague, thanking for a gift in which he refers to John Johnstone: "My Sister's heart beats with the noble pulse of generosity and with old Johnstone promptings that rise above prudence, the spirit which we have so often lauded in our grandfather lives yet to be displayed by his descendants."² Thus, when confronted with these very different descriptions of John's character I decided to try and look into various sources and discover more about this apparently blighted relation.

¹ See appendix 1

² National Library of Scotland, Letter to Mrs. J. Gray, 2nd September 1870, Acc8100
148

John's History

John Johnstone was the fourth son of Sir James Johnstone of Westerhall, born in 1734. The history of the Johnstone family during the 18th century demonstrates a fascinating catalogue of politics and empire. Emma Rothschild's book "Inner Lives of Empire" discusses the life of John and his eleven siblings during this period. The history of my family during this century is unusually well documented as John's sister Betty stayed at home and kept originals of all the letters sent via her between her much travelled brothers and sisters. Rothschild's book uses these letters as a base for exploring the achievements and influence of one family and of their disparate views on the main political issues during this crucial period of British colonial history.

John arrived in India aged 16 in 1751. I know little of his earlier years when he was a junior servant but during this time he studied Persian and Bengali³ and became one of the very few British fluent enough to negotiate in those languages. His success was obvious, within ten years he managed to rise through the ranks of the Company, joining the Bengal Council in Calcutta in 1761. During this ten-year period John achieved plenty, but also found himself and his family victim to the harsh circumstances and risks that occurred from working in India. His younger brother Patrick who had followed him to India in 1754 died in June 1756 in the prison of the Nawah Siraj-ud-Daulah, notorious as the "black hole of Calcutta."

At some stage he moved to Calcutta and after it was sacked in 1756, volunteered for the army under Major Kilpatrick who set up a small force to try and retrieve the company's affairs. When Lieut. Colonel Clive arrived he offered John a Commission. Clive finally established British dominance in Bengal at the Battle of Plassey on June 23rd 1757 where John commanded the Artillery. After that John was sent to command the artillery in the successful pursuit of a Mr Law who was working with the French. John got back to Calcutta in September 1757. Next an expedition was planned to divert the French who were preparing to lay siege to Madras and John was sent ahead as Chief of the Company's Settlements in the Dekan to encourage support for the

³ Rothschild, E., 2013. *The Inner Life of Empires: an Eighteenth-Century History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. pg21

Rajah of Vizianagram in his revolt against the French and to organise supplies of all necessary provisions for the army in their campaign when they arrived. Clive's army duly destroyed an army of 1200 French and 7000 Sepoys.

Although he had been wounded at the Battle of Piddapoor John was then sent to negotiate with Sullabutjung whose army of 30,000 men was then expected to support the French at Madras. He successfully persuaded him to work with the British instead and settled a treaty which yielded to the Company the provinces of Mazuliptam and Nezampatam worth in those days £55,000 annually.⁴

He was then sent to take possession of Midnapoor in which he again succeeded. John's letter to the proprietors of the East India Company explains the hardships enduring during this trail. He and his men were vastly outnumbered and undersupplied in both food and ammunition.⁵ He was then appointed to direct British (EIC) affairs in Burdwan. This province was an essential region of the EIC rule being the chief source of revenue at the time. John worked here alone for 2 years during which time he felt he "exerted himself in a manner which the Company...had reason to approve."⁶ Furthermore, he credits himself stating that he was able to collect more revenue than any man appointed to the region before him. Later in 1764 two juniors were sent to assist him. Though this was a period of success for John's career he also faced hardship losing his third fortune (the first being lost as a result of the sacking of Calcutta and the second in a dispute with the Dutch in 1759⁷) during the conflict with Cossim Ali Cawn in 1762. Though this was a blow to John's accomplishment, his letter to the EIC reflects on this period as a time of measured thinking and successful and diligent compromise during difficult circumstances. Information concerning John's earlier career can be found in his letter to the Proprietors of the East India Company dated 1766 from which much of this history is drawn. None has challenged any detail in his letter and, there seems little doubt that until this time it was widely acknowledged that John had had a very successful career, was highly respected and had been widely praised.

⁴ Johnstone, J., 1766. *A letter to the proprietors of East-India stock*. London. pg3

⁵ Ibid pg4

⁶ Ibid pg6

⁷ Ibid pg1

The Battle of Plassey

The Battle of Plassey is seen by many historians as being a major changing point of British rule in India as it allowed the British to reinstate their authority in India after “a year of shame.”⁸ For Robert Clive, Plassey was regarded as the greatest success of his career. The defeat of the Nawab of Bengal on June 23rd 1757 elevated Clive’s status and in the words of Bence Jones helped him become “the most powerful man in a country approaching the size of France.”⁹ It was this reputation that he clung to throughout the rest of his life.

The transition that followed Plassey allowed young men in the service of the EIC greater freedom to pursue their own fortunes in a much larger market place. Prior to Plassey many young British, including John Johnstone and with a high proportion of Scots, went out to India in their teens because it was known to be an interesting adventurous life not without danger but also with the opportunity to make a reasonable fortune. There they started as ‘Writers’. Once they had proved themselves sufficiently they were promoted to ‘Factor’. However, the pay of all EIC employees was pretty derisive, barely enough for them to rent a room and it was understood that they had to start trading for themselves almost as soon as they had arrived so that they could make enough to live on and could save to return home. Throughout this early period there continued a stable system under which juniors in the EIC were allowed to trade within limits which grew with seniority. This changed after the Battle of Plassey.

William Kuiters outlines the transition in his book “The British in Bengal 1756-1773.” The period prior to Plassey encouraged long-term commitment to the EIC in which the employee’s fortunes would grow over time. However, 1757 onwards saw an increase in British political power in Bengal and this established a forum which allowed individuals to make fortunes through inland trade and other schemes

⁸ Lenman, B., & Lawson, P. (1983). Robert Clive, the 'Black Jagir', and British Politics. *The Historical Journal*, 26(4), 801-829. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2639285> pg809

⁹ Bence-Jones, M., 1988. *Clive of India*. London: Constable & Company Limited. pg155

depending on various conditions. This also saw an increased need for servants as the Company expanded, consequently Calcutta's European population grew.

So Plassey changed the system to one where junior servants were able to come to India and make vast fortunes in much shorter periods of time. Moreover, making one's fortune became seen as inevitable rather than dependent on circumstances. Kuiters notes "Even before 1756 fortunes had occasionally been made by servants with only ten years of service but between 1756 and 1770 this circumstance became rather the rule than the exception."¹⁰ This further led to the rapid increase in trading opportunities, henceforth the volume of trade being conducted grew immensely. This transition further established India as a destination and attractive career option for ambitious young men but within this developing trading market little consideration was given to its impact on the existing trade of the Indians.

¹⁰ Kuiters, W.G.J., 2002. *The British in Bengal, 1756-1773: a society in transition seen through the biography of a rebel: William Bolts (1739-1808)*. Paris: Indes savantes. pg 225-6

William Bolts

William Bolts seems to have had a German father but it is not clear where he was born. Although possibly partly Dutch, he always seems to have thought of himself as English and spent most of his early life in England. He arrived in Bengal in the summer of 1760 aged 20 and was immediately appointed a Factor, the Directors having decided to take on a few new men with some business experience, fearing there were too many who came straight out from the UK and had no experience of anything. He was an unusual man with multifaceted talents and abilities. Unlike many of his colleagues Bolts chose to learn Bengali, a skill that he deemed indispensable in dealings with the Indians. Bolts' ability to speak Bengali combined with his business talent resulted in his eventual appointment as the President of Cutcherry in 1763.

His natural business talent attracted the attention of many higher up in the Company service. One being notably Henry Verelst who helped Bolts dispose of some goods in return for Bolts' services.¹¹ Bolts' achievement in the EIC can be documented through various alliances made; Company servants such as John Johnstone, Hay, Verelst, Gray and Ellis all credit his services. Ellis wrote to Vansittart proclaiming Bolts "a young gentleman whose diligence and capacity in accounts may be of great service to us."¹² Bolts' accomplishments within the EIC present him as a shrewd and talented businessman. He was someone who noticed opportunities and acted upon them, and although working for the EIC many of his business and personal ventures seem to be reflective of his own goals and relationships.

He also did do several things that were clearly quite unacceptable. For instance, Verelst asked Bolts' to help keep a certain lady, Miss Elizabeth Keene, sweet for him whilst he was away by giving her presents and money in Verelst's name. Bolts informed Verelst that he had done exactly as Verelst asked, whereas he had in fact done nothing of the sort. Verelst was a more senior member of the EIC who had helped Bolts advance in the service of the EIC and it was this act that ended their good relations. It should be noted that Miss Elizabeth Keene later married John

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid pg99

Johnstone. Bolts however credits Verelst's jealousy arising from this occasions as a reason for his later fall from grace.¹³ Also later Bolts' betrayal discredited Verelst's own reputation, raising questions over his judgement of character.

¹³ Ibid pg102

Johnstone, Hay & Bolts Partnership

It is within this change after Plassey that one is presented with the beginnings of John's troubles in the EIC. John having already lost three fortunes was understandably keen to establish himself yet again as a successful trader. There is little doubt that the increased lands and powers established after Plassey and the inflow of more Europeans had created an unattractive free for all in which the Indians were badly treated and I think he would have liked the thought of not being too directly and actively involved in such a cut and thrust trade which was clearly damaging the Indians. Equally he would have been fairly desperate to make enough money to be able to retire to Britain and given that he had already lost three fortunes by this point, would have certainly been unwilling to give up trade while everyone else was making hay. William Bolts at that time was still a member of the EIC and had been quite widely praised and given more responsibility and I can understand why John would have decided that joining in a partnership with Bolts and Hay was an attractive option, probably thinking he would be able to profit from successful trading whilst being able to leave the cut and thrust work to Bolts who was known for his ruthless trading practices. However Bolt's reputation was clearly held against Johnstone whose constant loyal support for his partner in dealings with Council further tarnished his reputation and will have turned Vansittart against him.

Again it seems not difficult to understand why John should choose Bolts as a partner if you look at Bolts' own successes prior to the agreement in March 1762 and the fact that he seemed to be held in quite high esteem in the company at that time having just been made Chairman of the Court of Cutcherry, which made him responsible for all legal actions in Bengal that did not affect Europeans.

Problems with Vansittart

The Johnstone, Hay & Bolts partnership was a financial success for all those involved, after one year of business Bolts' share amounted to £22,000.¹⁴ Their primary revenue came from deals concerning the trading of salt. Kuiters estimates that it is likely that the partnership controlled up to ten per cent of the salt manufactured in Bengal.¹⁵ Their trade was not limited to salt, and stretched beyond the Bengali borders to areas such as Assam and the Purnea district. It was these areas that began the troubles for the Johnstone, Hay & Bolts partnership for Mir Kasim hoped that areas beyond Calcutta would be exempted from British influence. He installed rulings that prevented British merchants from advancing money for their goods, thus preventing them from making further inroads into his monopolies.¹⁶ Bolts consequently wrote entirely on his own initiative complaining on behalf of the EIC about the limitations of this new law to the faujdar of Purnea. This letter was eventually shown to Vansittart who in turn showed it to the Court of Directors. This initiative damaged Bolts' reputation for the first time in his career, he later claimed that he had been doing no more than following the examples set by his seniors.

The fact that Bolts appears to have been by far the most successful trader on the continent was above all what seems to have upset those in power and in particular Vansittart. His ability to create business deals meant that his fortune was more than that of those higher in the Company, and many felt that his actions were above his position. I can see nothing illegal in his trading as this was the pattern of trade in Bengal. Nonetheless, the fact was that he had shown himself to be unpredictable and untrustworthy, combined with his personal success upset and annoyed those at the top. It seems that Vansittart realising that Bolts' successes were negative to his own abilities to trade used his authority on more than one occasion to disrupt Bolts' trade as much as possible.

An example of this is described in Kuiters' book;

¹⁴ Ibid pg108

¹⁵ ibid 109

¹⁶ Ibid 110

“In 1764, the Company’s resident in Rangpur, Joseph Jekyll, had complained about Phillip Pollock, an agent of Johnstone, Hay & Bolts partnership at neighbouring Dinajpur. On Jekyll’s representations, the Council ordered the recall of Pollock and has informed the partners of this decision. They answered that the oppressive proceedings Mr Jekyll in pursuing his private trade had already obliged them to recall Pollock. Johnstone, Hay & Bolts accused Jekyll’s agent Mohun Shaw, acting under Jekyll’s orders, of seizing and imprisoning the *ryots* to who the partnership had advanced money for the delivery of opium or saltpetre upon refusing to repudiate their agreements with the partnership and to accept advances from Mohum Shaw instead. The Council took the representation of Johnston, Hay & Bolts into account and ordered Jekyll to send Mohun Shaw down to Calcutta immediately. Jekyll was also to answer the Council as to the truth of the partnership’s allegations at his address. After an investigation into the affair and after the partnership’s witnesses had been heard before the Council, it was declared that Mohun Shaw *‘did exceed the orders of his master and gave unlawful interruption to the business of Messrs Johnstone, Hay & Bolts...’* It is noteworthy to see that Jekyll was kept out of harm’s way by the Council and that responsibility for the allegations was imputed entirely on his agent.¹⁷”

The fact that no blame was put on Jekyll, clearly the instigator of the incident, leads one to consider that Vansittart may have been asserting his influence and was responsible for the incident. Moreover, the fact that the ruling was in favour of Johnstone, Hay & Bolts’ suggests that at this time they still maintained good relations with the Company and also indicates that their business was seen to be very much in line with Company policy.

Bolts was for many reasons seen as a threat to the Company, he used his talents as a businessman to benefit his own private earning bringing him into conflict with the Company. He challenged the authority of the Company, and was a fierce competitor to their own business. It does seem that Vansittart to improve his own business prospects and get rid of a participant who had resisted his attempts to rein him in eventually had Bolts chased out of India by a series of fairly manipulative ploys.

¹⁷ Ibid pg112-113

Vansittart and the Rebel Council

There is little doubt that after Plassey there were no holds barred in the EIC employee's dealings to make money and while Bolts may have been one of the hardest and toughest traders he was certainly not alone in this. Vansittart who took over the Governorship of Bengal from Clive when Clive returned to England not long after Plassey, was well aware that trading was running riot and that many of the growing numbers of junior EIC employees were making a lot of money very much to the detriment of the Indian population. He commendably did try to bring some order out of this chaos and restrict such excesses but did it in such a way that most EIC men had their trading possibilities drastically reduced whereas Vansittart himself was able to trade more profitably. A majority of Councillors found this self-interested approach unacceptable and voted against a number of his proposals that they did not think should be supported.

At this time while Vansittart as Governor was Chairman of the Council of Bengal under its then constitution he only had an equal vote with other Councillors with a casting vote if voting was equal and several of the motions he proposed were rejected, some at meetings at which he was not present. While many Councillors joined in this revolt there seems little doubt that John as the strongest character, was generally seen to be the leader of what became known as the 'Rebel Council'. Only Hastings consistently supported Vansittart in all these measures and notably Verelst, his close friend and successor as Chairman, supported the Rebels on several occasions. Apart from concerns about Vansittart promoting his self interest John was also opposed to the increasing power being transferred to British officials which limited the scope for enterprise and free trade of both Europeans and Indians sometimes creating an EIC monopoly.

One can understand Vansittart's frustration at being unable to implement the policies he wanted. Johnstone, Hay & Bolts had achieved a certain notoriety and taken quite a lot of council time on matters such as the Jekyll affair. Vansittart will also no doubt have liked the thought of disrupting the success of the Johnstone, Hay & Bolts business. So one can perhaps understand why he wrote a letter to the Board in London complaining about Johnstone and Hay, who the Board then dismissed from the

Company service. John however re-joined the company six months later and was given the same responsibilities only to fall out shortly afterwards with Clive. Hay on the other hand had unknown to them been killed in battle before the Board dismissed him.

Whilst popular literature seems to suggest that Johnstone brought his dismissal upon himself due to doubtful business practices, there seems nothing illegal about Bolts rather tough approach to business and I see Johnstone's refusal to turn a blind eye to Vansittart's flagrant abuse of his authority as very likely to have played quite a part in Vansittart's decision. The rebel Councillors with Johnstone as their de facto leader who voted down some of his initiatives were only using the democratic voting arrangements in the Council designed to guard against motions proposed, usually by the Governor, but not supported by a majority of Councillors. Vansittart won't have liked this but it was hardly just cause for dismissal. Vansittart will also have welcomed the disruption dismissal caused to the business of Johnstone Hay & Bolts. This raise the question of whether it was appropriate or just for Vansittart to write as he did and have Johnstone dismissed.

Problems with Clive

As news of the increasing exploitation of the Indians filtered back concern in London grew and it was this situation that Clive was expected to and was eager to change when he returned to Bengal. Clive can be described as a traditionalist, he very much believed that rank should dictate one's success and thus the idea of young, new servants earning similar if not greater fortunes to those in higher ranks went against his principles. He considered this "a sign of anarchy, of disrespect of authority and subversive of good government."¹⁸ Hence the establishment of the Society of Trade in 1765¹⁹ not long after John had returned home was seen as a means of restoring the old order, allowing seniority to dictate economic success and redistributing profits to ensure this occurred. However, Clive and the Directors in London failed to see the faults in this scheme. Whilst this would return the power to those at the top it would also create a hotbed for corruption and the majority of the EIC servants would be left discontented. It also failed to understand the changing nature of the EIC so that from its outset the Society of Trade was doomed to criticism from many lower servants of the EIC.

Prior to Clive's return to India George Johnstone, supported by his siblings, had entered into an uneasy alliance with Clive to ensure Sullivan did not remain as Chairman. This benefitted Clive, for only with the removal of Sullivan could he guarantee his return to India and take the complete charge of British interests in India which led to the establishment of the British Empire in India as we know it. The Johnstones had entered this alliance understanding that this would lead to better relations and cooperation with Clive. John had just been sent back to England as a result of Vansittart's complaint and implicit in their co-operation as understood by the Johnstone's was that Clive would reinstate John in India. When George and John realised that Clive was not going to honour the agreement they understood they had to reinstate John in the EIC to protect his position. Thus, they put forward a resolution to shareholders reinstating John before the crucial vote on the board so that Clive could not vote against it without losing the battle to depose Sullivan. John Johnstone, now

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ ibid pg88

undoubtedly furious with Clive's betrayal tried to pick legal holes in Clive's Jaghir. Both issues will have incensed Clive and together can only have strengthened the dislike of John that it appears he already had.

Following the removal of Sullivan from the Chair Clive was able to proceed with his plans. He, who had made more money than most by the usual and lawful means but had also accepted his Jaghir which was generally seen as unacceptable was now sent out as poacher turned gamekeeper. Upon his return to India, one of the main tasks expected of him undoubtedly was as he put it to 'Clean the Augean Stables.'

At the meeting of Council referred to in Macaulay's Essay, in May 1765, Clive set out his interpretation of his newly acquired powers given by the London Board. He interprets them as completely eclipsing the power and authority of the Council who had run the entire operation since its foundation. This interpretation seems to be clearly greater than the powers intended to be given to him. The Council believed, and I think it is now clear, that he had only been given the most draconian powers until he had dealt with the revolt in progress when he was in London and which he had been sent out to quell. They were then meant to lapse. However, he delayed his departure from England and did not arrive in India until nine months later by which time the revolt had been quashed some months earlier so he was in no way entitled to give himself the overriding powers he did.

The powers were enshrined in a letter to Clive from the Board the relevant paragraph of which was;

“The General Court of Proprietors having, on account of the critical situation of the Company's affairs in *Bengal*, requested Lord *Clive* to take upon him the station of President, and the command of the Company's military forces there, his lordship has appointed President and Governor accordingly, as mentioned in the preceding part of this letter.

The intention of the General Court in desiring Lord *Clive* to go to *Bengal* was, that, his lordship's characters and influence, peace and tranquility might be the easier restored and established in the Subahship. In order, therefore, to answer these purposes in a manner that we apprehend may prove most effectual, we

have thought proper to appoint a Committee on the occasion, consisting of his lordship, Mr. *William Brightwell Summer*, Brigadier-general *Carnac*, also Messrs. *Harry Verelst* and *Francis Sykes*, to whom we do hereby give full power to peruse whatever means they shall judge most proper to attain those desirable ends. But however in all cases, where it can be done conveniently, the Council at large is to be consulted by the said Committee, though the power of determining is to be in that Committee alone. We further direct, that as soon as peace and tranquility are restored and established in the Subahship of *Bengal*, then the said extraordinary powers are immediately to cease, and the said Committee be dissolved.²⁰”

On reaching India in May 1765 the issue that Clive used to attack John was also highly doubtful. He had sent out instructions that all EIC staff should sign a covenant not to make profits and this reached Calcutta in January 1765. Spencer, chairman of the Council and the Council as a whole did nothing to comply with them. This was normal EIC practice for virtually all instructions from London were disregarded until back up came from London to confirm enforcement. This was largely because London took decisions on information at least four months old and the decisions which then arrived four months later in India were often based on information clearly so out of date as to make them wrong. Clive himself consistently disregarded London instructions (see page 224 Bence Jones).

During this transition period John had led a delegation to negotiate terms with the new Nawab which included as always the subject of presents. I do not believe there is any reason to think that the way it was handled, by three of the most senior Bengal Councillors, was materially different to the handling of the previous deal. It was in many ways similar to the negotiations led by Clive where he was handsomely rewarded. No doubt the Nawabs were not particularly keen to offer these presents but it was accepted as standard practice in India. When Clive arrived in Calcutta John was accused of having accepted presents against the new company rule, and of browbeating the donors into giving them. To further prove his point, Clive brought

²⁰ “Copy of the sixty-seventh Paragraph of the General letter from ‘the Court of East India Directors to their Governor and Council in Bengal, on the appointment of Lord Clive and the Select Committee. Dated, June 1st 1764.’”

the three native participants to Calcutta and had them kept in solitary confinement for several days until they changed the evidence they had given to that which Clive wanted to get. They were all terrified of Clive and wondered no doubt whether they would survive if they crossed him. So they all ended by changing their testimony and saying, as Clive indicated he would like, that they had been forced against their will to make these presents.

At the time of these negotiations no one had signed or had been asked to sign the covenant, and indeed John never did and it seems quite clear that John and the others were perfectly entitled to take presents at that time. It was a typical Clive tactic to express rage and fury about something when he knew perfectly well the action was in line with traditional EIC practice. When it became clear that Clive intended to make an example of him John immediately resigned from the EIC and got an early boat back to Britain wanting no doubt to get onto the seas before Clive could think of a reason for imprisoning him.

However, we must question why, if this process was the norm, should Clive have taken such a violent course to disgrace John? Clive believed passionately that no one in a lower position should ever challenge decisions taken by a superior. When John joined the Bengal Council it was set up so that each member was in possession of one vote. Clive gave himself absolute power and would object to anyone not following the view expressed by the Chairman and being part of a 'rebel council' in spite of the fact that the Chairman seemed at times to be supported by no one other than Hastings and the voting arrangements were presumably drafted to control action proposed by a Governor that did not have general support in Council

John Johnstone, never prepared not to challenge wrong doing, questioned Clive's right to assume the powers he believed he wrongly claimed and although other Council members agreed with him, he was the only Council member of sufficient stature and confidence to question Clive on them. Clive further recognized that this was just what had happened in the Rebel Council, John again not being prepared to see someone abusing his power for his own benefit and to the detriment of others.

To emphasise his cleaning of the Augean Stables Clive will have wanted someone with a high profile to make an example of and given that John had earlier been dismissed and that the Johnstone, Hay & Bolts partnership had a bad reputation to some extent thanks to Vansittart it may not be surprising that he picked on John. The fact that to get his family's support in dethroning Sullivan with the implication that he would then support John is just another example of his duplicity.

Moreover, Clive will have known for some time that he intended to assume far more powers in India than he had been authorized to take and will have recognised John's unwillingness to turn a blind eye to such things and to be very likely to create difficulties if he remained in India. It now seems probable to me that this may have played quite a part in Clive behaving as he did in attacking John. He was certainly devious and Machiavellian whenever it suited him and he used his duplicity to get John back to England as quickly as possible.

Clive's feud with Johnstone was an unfortunate start to his second government. One wonders whether his treatment of John was wholly vindictive, or if he was making him a scapegoat for the genuine resentment he felt toward the new system that had developed in India. If he had come to Bengal happy at the prospect of being a king once again, he would have found that his crown had lost some of its lustre. The glory that Clive attained following his first journey to India was not so readily available. Instead he found himself drawing glory and fame from others who were already there. The lack of crisis with the Indian and European rivals to act as a challenge – other than a minor rising in Bihar which was put down by one of his Brigade commanders with no more help from Clive himself than the uncharacteristically barbaric advice to expose the heads of the chief rebels on poles – seems to have embittered him. “Up to his departure from Bengal in 1760 he was still in many ways the young hero of Arcot; now at forty, he was instead middle-aged and increasingly cantankerous, liable to jump to wrong conclusions, often having to apologise to those he had treated unfairly through his ‘warmth of temper.’²¹” Thus Clive's own bitterness to the changing nature of the EIC, combined with his own failing dominance in India, sustained his dispute with Johnstone.

²¹ Bence Jones pg251

Clive's later days too did not occur in the way that he had hoped. The glory and gratitude that he felt he deserved did not transpire and instead he faced questioning and attacks from those who he once considered his allies. This is not to say that this was undeserved, his own actions and those of the East India Company as a whole were only ever for their own selfish benefit and glory rather than for the good of the people of India. Within this one can draw attention to why his feud with Johnstone impacted both their lives considerably once they had returned from India. Clive left India in bad blood, the authority that he assumed he would have when he returned did not exhibit itself in the way in which he wished it to. Johnstone to him may be seen as one of the first to question his newly founded authority and also as someone who threatened the sanctity of his 'kingdom.' The Jewel of the British monarchy was also the jewel of Clive's accomplishments - thus threatened both with competitors and old age, Clive's initial attack on Johnstone can be seen as his attempt to reassert what he feared he had lost in the six to seven years he was away. Johnstone by openly criticising his newly founded authority, asserted in the form of the Select Committee, found himself, along with Leycester, unexpectedly a target for Clive's Indian revival.

Following his initial trip to India, Clive found his status protected by the victory of Plassey and what that meant for British presence in India. However, upon his return he found his authority somewhat lost in the new matrix of governing and the increased power given to the individual and their own ability to trade outside Company service. Within this one must remember that Clive was not necessarily the great army officer that his victories seem to suggest. Instead there is plenty of evidence suggesting that his triumphs resulted from good luck and fast thinking at the time.²² Clive was undoubtedly a ruthless and successful leader in the EIC, but it is likely that he was aware that much of his persona as a great military strategist and fighter was exaggerated. Hence, he may have felt that his image was at risk and his return to India would enable him to reassert his authority both in the state and back in England.

²² Bence Jones Pg48-49

Clive having assumed absolute power in India then completely changed the role of the EIC in India setting himself up as a ruthless despot. The debate about the EIC and the policies activated and implemented by Clive continued in London led by Bolts, John, and George Johnstone who brought it more into the public domain and in due course Clive was disgraced for the way in which he had acted. This was a sad end for a great British hero who after his victory at Plassey had entirely through his own initiative expanded the Company's wealth and sphere of influence and must be fully credited with creating the British Empire in India that followed.

Clive's return to England in 1760 did not transpire in the way that Clive had hoped. The glory and gratitude that he felt he deserved on his return from India after his first trip did not occur and he instead felt underappreciated. Thus he saw his return to India as an opportunity to reinstate past fame and hoped to use the faults of the Company's policy to achieve this. Clive saw Johnstone as means towards accomplishing this, and also perhaps as a threat given John's strong character and success in the Company. Hence through making an example of Johnstone and damaging his reputation Clive hoped better to be able to establish unfettered authority to run India as he thought fit rather than as instructed by his employers in London, a ploy not out of character for Clive.

Problems with Macaulay

Comments by Lord Macaulay in his famous essay which has had wide circulation have clearly been a major factor in damaging John's reputation.

Macaulay was a fervent admirer of Clive and his famous essay is a paean of praise with no mention of how undoubtedly difficult Clive was to work with or the fact that Clive had made more money than anyone else through the very practices he was now ending. Macaulay I understand did not know Clive but was a tremendous and uncritical admirer of the man who achieved so much for Britain in India. His own views on Clive's character do seem a bit contorted. Below are some descriptions of Clive's character put forward by Macaulay.

“We can by no means agree with Sir John Malcolm who is obstinately resolved to see nothing but honour and integrity in the conduct of his hero. But we can as little agree with Mr. Mill who has gone so far as say that Clive was a man to whom deception, when it suited his purpose, never cost a pang. Clive seems to have been constitutionally the very opposite of a knave, bold even to temerity, sincere even to indiscretion, hearty in friendship, open in enmity. Neither in his private life, nor in those parts of his public life in which he had to do with his countrymen, do we find any signs of a propensity to cunning. On the contrary, in all the disputes in which he was engaged as Englishman against Englishmen, from his boxing matches at school to those stormy altercations at the India House and in Parliament, amidst which his later years were passed, his very faults were those of a high and magnanimous spirit. The truth seems to have been that he considered Oriental politics as a game in which nothing was unfair. He knew that the standard of morality among the natives of India differed widely from that established in England. He knew he had to deal with men destitute of what in Europe is called honor, with men who would give any promise without hesitation, and break any promise without shame, with men who would unscrupulously employ corruption, perjury, forgery, to compass their ends. Asiatic and European morality was constantly in his thoughts. He seems to have imagined, most erroneously in our opinion, that he could effect nothing against such adversaries if he was

content to be bound by ties from which they were free, if he went on telling truth and hearing none, if he fulfilled, to his own hurt all his engagements with confederates who never kept an engagement that was not to their own advantage. Accordingly, this man, in the other parts of his life an honorable English gentleman and a soldier, was no sooner matched against an Indian intriguer than he became himself an Indian intriguer, and descended, with out scruple, to falsehood, to hypocritical caresses, to the substitution of documents and to the counterfeiting of hands.”²³

From many sources it seems clear that Mr. Mill was right. Within Clive’s dealings with the English and Europeans, there are many examples where his actions are as Machiavellian as in his dealings with the Indians. Macaulay shows himself as lacking much understanding of what were perhaps Clive’s main weaknesses.

John was unfortunate that Macaulay’s unperceptive essay should have become such a well known and oft-quoted paper.

²³ Pg71

John's Political and Philosophical Differences

Emma Rothschild sights the disagreement between John and Clive as being part of a much larger battle concerning “the relationship between the East India Company and the India sovereigns, and the regulation of British officials’ involvement in Indian commerce.²⁴” Opposing the biased opinions of Macaulay, she writes that it was John who was attempting to protect the rights, freedom and business of those living in India both European and Indian. John’s actions, in Clive’s opinion, removed the important distinction between Indian’s and Europeans. It created a sense of equality which in turn diminished the sense of British entitlement, for whilst the Indian tradesmen were often sovereigns, the British were emigrant merchants. Hence John was trying to achieve a more open market situation in which both Europeans and Indians would have more freedom to exercise their enterprise, whereas Vansittart and even more so Clive were trying to centralize all authority and limit peoples ability to show enterprise. John’s view was in line with what London and the British public in general supported whereas Clive used his despotic powers to move sharply in the opposite direction. The debate on this continued after Clive returned to England and ended up in Clive’s subsequent disgrace.

Certainly throughout the time after Plassey John became increasingly concerned at the inability for any British citizen in India to get British justice. The only court available was run by the Council who appointed the judges and cases were regularly found in their favour. He did campaign for British justice to be available for British people in India and he made the following comment in his Defence letter as he returned to England:

“If there are men in this kingdom who undervalue the blessings of our happy constitution who do not hold the liberty which prevails in this island as the most inestimable of human enjoyments, I should prescribe as an infallible means of reforming their depraved and mistaken opinions to send them for six months to the kingdom of Bengal in the Company’s service, during the subsistence of the present Select Committee.”

²⁴ Rothschild Pg146

John's Defense

John following his return to England wrote to the Proprietors of the East India Stock in 1766 presenting his own account of the happenings in India at the time. He starts by describing his time serving the EIC, in which he discusses the loss of his fortune of 3 different occasions, his time serving in various conquests, as well as his business practices within the Company. John is very understandably eager to highlight his worth in the Company; he discusses his worth, persistence and loyalty to the EIC in times of trouble such as the war with Coffim Ali Cawn. He ensures that throughout this dialogue he is considered fair, just and not one to take more than his share in Company profits.

John goes on to discuss the disagreements between Lord Clive and his (John's) friends. He credits his friends support as a key reason for Clive's successes which ensued his return to India, though he states that at no point did he engage in these discussions. John also considers this to be the beginnings of his troubles with Clive. John is sure to discuss the issue of Clive's own jaghir.

Further in the letter, John discusses his own arrival in Calcutta in February 1765 following the death of Mir Jaffer and the questions concerning his successor. Detailed descriptions of the proceedings follow. The new treaty that was composed altered the power structure that had been put into place by Clive; rather than place the majority of the power in the hands of the EIC, it ensured that the Nabob retained autonomy within reason. Details also discuss the presents given to each Company servant following the appointment of the new Nabob. John does however write on more than one occasion how the presents were offered and received in good grace. "We told the Nabob we wanted no favour from him, but what came willingly and sincerely from his heart."²⁵ and "When we agreed to accept the presents everything seemed settled, and no objection could be made against our receiving it."²⁶ Thus, in this correspondence John's innocence is confirmed by anecdotes of his faithful service prior to Lord Clive's second arrival in India.

²⁵ Pg20

²⁶ pg24

The letter continues with Clive's arrival in India, 3rd May 1765, John briefly discusses Clive's disappointment arriving in India to find that the quarrels he came out to fix had already be sorted. Though it is not outwardly stated, the letter seems to suggest that Clive's disappointment that arose from a lack of disagreements to fix fed his desire to find other means to assert himself in the Company service.

Within this letter there is important evidence discrediting Clive's practices. One of the Company servants, Mootyram, who was asked to give evidence concerning the presents received by John and his companions was seized and held captive for some time before giving evidence for the second time, Johnstone states around 14 nights. Following his release his evidence completely changed, no doubt fearful of consequences that may occur if he did not change his original statement.²⁷ John gives evidence of the changing statements of Mootyram, both of which are laid out in his letter. He further states that the changing circumstances of the questionings, combined with the distinct sense of being threatened and coerced, and the imprisonment meant that Mootyram's essential statement was not a fair reflection of the events that had been taking place. Instead Mootyram's statement was the words of a committee that had decided to act illegally for their own benefit and status. This is by no means an unfair conclusion; evidence does seem to suggest that this was the case. It is likely that as a result of Mootyram's imprisonment John felt it necessary to leave India as quickly as possible so as to protect his own wellbeing and so that he would be given the opportunity to defend his actions, given the lengths that Clive was willing to go to. John's statements concerning Mootyram continue stating he "denied positively, that I had ever authorized Mootyram or any other person, to ask presents of Juggat Seat in improper or unlawful terms."²⁸ He goes on to discuss that having received letters from the council he found he could no longer continue in Company service whilst such accusations existed.

Further in the letter, John discusses how after much deliberation it was felt that not enough evidence was given to prove John guilty of the crime. He states at this point

²⁷ pg39

²⁸ pg45

that evidence given by Mahamud Reza Cawn only transpired because he was “sufficiently intimidated, and afterwards sufficiently rewarded to accommodate himself to what was desired of him.²⁹” John’s accusations against Lord Clive are countless, throughout the letter bribery and threats are common mentions all of which question Clive’s integrity in the EIC. Whilst an obvious point may be that John only said such things to save his own reputation, there is little evidence to suggest that John’s claims were disputed by any other EIC Servants.

“The Nabob’s present appears to have been voluntary;” he writes “for in the letter he admits that when the Nabob delivered the note to me, it was at first refused, and only at last accepted. And with respect to Mahamud Reza Cawn’s own present, his refusing so often to take back the bills when offered to him, is a demonstration which must outweigh all possible evidence to the contrary, that the presents were given of his own free will, and were an acknowledgement, which by the custom of the country he thought indispensably proper.³⁰”

John’s defence is aided by this statement which once again is not questioned. It seems that if this were the case, arguments stating John forced Reza Cawn to give him presents were lost in the voluntary nature of this transaction.

John also reaffirms that orders were regularly ignored from England because of the time it took them to arrive in India. He further states “The words of the letter from the Directors relating to the these covenants, dated 1st June 1764, did not limit any particular time for signing them,³¹” hence John could not be prosecuted for not obeying an order that in normal circumstances would be ignored until it was confirmed by an authority figure from London. Moreover, John confirms that he never signed the covenant which meant that the newly implemented laws of the EIC and Select Committee did not affect him as he had not agreed legally to it.

²⁹ Pg47

³⁰ pg53

³¹ Pg66

John's letter to the proprietors of the East India Company is full of evidence that seems to suggest that his innocence in this situation is unquestionable. As stated previously, though it is evident that this letter is biased, there is no doubt that much of what is written is the truth. The reason I say this is because little of the content in this defence has been questioned. John's admittance to never signing the covenant about presents legally meant that he had no reason to obey these new orders. Clive's consistent use of manipulation against weak and easily convinced EIC servants seems throughout this statement an essential reason why John faced the prosecution he did. Without these key changing statements from Mootyram and Mahumad Reza Cawn it is likely that John would have never faced the problems he did. Clive's actions which very obviously changed the discourse of these confessions incriminate Clive whilst also perhaps proving that John was wrongly dismissed and discredited from the Company service.

Conclusion

On his relationship with Clive, I see John as having accumulated a useful fortune by all the usual and at the time acceptable practices of the EIC to which must be added his share of the Johnstone, Hay & Bolts profits. For Clive to accuse him so blatantly of things he knew to be false and thus to ruin his character seems typical of Clive. The whole matter was grossly contrived and exaggerated and I do not believe John's character should have suffered in the way it has.

It is also clear that John's philosophy was far more in tune with what had become the wishes of London. He hoped to protect the rights, freedom and business of those living in India both European and Indian allowing all to benefit from entrepreneurial freedom very unlike the policies being carried out by Vansittart and then Clive which aimed to increase centralised control. Once back in England, Clive was accused for the line he took, quite different to what the Company had indicated he should do and public opinion turned against him.

Clive was very possibly not a good soldier, he was a hopeless organiser and totally disobedient, forging his own path as he thought fit at the time. He was also almost unbelievably untrustworthy and Machiavellian. However, he also was a man of quick decision and action, determined always to get his own way, who when he returned to India, although clearly not authorised to do so, assumed despotic powers and then completely changed the aims and direction of the East India Company in a way quite different from his instructions from London. He then almost singlehandedly created the British Empire as we all knew it in India. For this he is seen as one of our greatest national heroes and I find it sad that in his lifetime he got so little credit for this and even sadder that he should end his life in discomfort and almost in ignominy.

There were three debates in the House of Commons in May 1773, in the first Clive spoke rather brilliantly for two and a half hours, in the second, two weeks later he spoke for one hour and twenty minutes and when he left the third debate and went to his house he had no idea whether he would wake up penniless. However, the House turned in his favour at the end. His speeches in his own defence were brilliant and I have to say that having read a lot about Clive I was surprised that he was able to

speaking quite so well in a debate, so perhaps I have come in some ways to underestimate the man.

Following my research, I remain firmly of the view that John was an extremely upright and honourable man. The only step which clearly played a part in undermining his reputation, one which I can understand him making, was the formation of the trading partnership, Johnstone, Hay & Bolts. This exposed him to a number of accusations but I question whether many of these did not arise because of Vansittart's abuse of his power in attempts to limit the partnerships trade. It must be admitted that John almost certainly benefitted from some profits arising from harsh business practices against the Indians but I see no case for Vansittart having him dismissed, which I see as a misuse of authority by a governor unscrupulously prepared to use his powers for his personal benefit.

Sir Raymond Johnstone, September 2017

Appendix 1

Burke Family Romances,

The 4th edition, Published by Hurst and Blackett, 1876

“Lady Ogilvy’s Escape”

Margaret Johnstone, Lady Ogilvy, had several talented, distinguished, and fortunate brothers, of whom it may be interesting to give a short notice. Her second brother, William, married Miss Pulteney, daughter of Daniel Pulteney, and sole heiress of the Earl of Bath. In consequence of succeeding to her immense fortune, Mr Johnstone assumed the name of Pulteney. He became fifth Baronet, and claimant of the Marquessate of Annandale on the death of his eldest brother. His only daughter, who was created Countess of Bath, died without issue. Her vast estates were inherited by her maternal relatives, the Duke of Cleveland and Sir Eichard Sutton. Sir William Johnstone Pulteney’s heir in the Westerhall estate, the great American possessions, and the claim to the Marquessate of Annandale, is Sir Prederick, the eighth Baronet, great-grandson of the third son of Sir James and Dame Barbara. Sir James’ fourth son, John, had a very singular career. He went out in early life to India, with the ambition of acquiring station and fortune. After he had been there for some time, and had distinguished himself as a hard-working civilian, in the position which his fathers influence had procured for him, he was seized with a dangerous fever, which had nearly proved fatal to him. He owed his life, under Providence, to the tender care and assiduity of an elderly lady of the name of Warwick, who spared no pains in nursing him. Mrs Warwick had been for many years settled at Calcutta, and was a woman of very large fortune. She adopted Mr

Johnstone as her son, and at her death left him all that she had, which amounted to considerably upwards of a hundred thousand pounds. Mr Johnstone was anxious to enjoy this succession while yet young. He accordingly realised it as speedy as possible, with the intention of returning home immediately, and purchasing an estate in Scotland. Mrs Warwick had often related to him the circumstances of her history, which were romantic and extraordinary. She said that she had no near relations, excepting a brother, from whom she had been separated in infancy, who, she believed, had entered the navy, but with whom she never had been able to keep up intercourse; and she did not know whether he was dead or alive.

Having turned all Mrs Warwick's property into money, Mr Johnstone was on the point of embarking for England with a large fortune, and with the advantages of youth and health, which few rich Indians possess. He had taken out his passage, and was living, during the last two or three days of his stay in India, at the principal hotel in Calcutta. While sitting in the coffee-room reading a newspaper, he overheard one waiter say to another, "Carry up Captain Warwick's portmanteau to No. 5." The name of his benefactress arrested his attention. It struck him — Can this Captain Warwick be in any way connected with her? He immediately sent his card to the gentleman in No. 5, with a request that he might be allowed to call on him.

He was immediately ushered into the presence of an elderly man; and after an apology for the intrusion, he begged to be permitted to inquire into the particulars of his past life; "for" said he, "I feel an interest in your name, which is an uncommon one. A namesake of yours was my dearest friend."; Captain Warwick very frankly told him all

that he knew concerning himself and his family. He said, he had only had one sister, from whom he had been separated in early life, and who, he believed, had gone to India; but he had never been able to trace her subsequent fate. From many particulars which he mentioned, it was quite evident to Mr Johnstone that this was Mrs Warwick's only brother. Having convinced himself of the fact, he said to Captain Warwick, he could give him the most satisfactory account of his long lost sister, who had been his dearest friend, and who had on her death appointed him her trustee; that she had died very wealthy; that all her property had been confided to his care; and that he now handed over to him, as the rightful owner, considerably upwards of £100,000. Thus did this inflexibly just man deprive himself of everything, and sacrifice all his future prosperity, in order to do that which his high and independent feeling of integrity led him to believe to be his duty. As soon as Captain "Warwick discovered the real state of the case, he offered to divide the inheritance with Mr Johnstone. This, however, Johnstone obstinately refused to agree to. He remained in India, spending many years in the arduous pursuits of honour and wealth. It is satisfactory to know that he was eminently successful. He returned an elderly man, about ninety years since, to England, with a fortune much more than double that which his unbending and high-minded principle had caused him to renounce in early life. He immediately purchased large estates and beautiful seats in his native country; Alva, in the county of Clackmannan, which formerly belonged to a baronet's family of the name of Brskine, now represented by the Earl of Eosslyn ; and the Hangingshaw, in the county of Selkirk, which formerly belonged to Murray, of Phiphaugh. The family of Mr Johnstone's only son are numerous and prosperous.