

# **'Chasing commodities over the surface of the globe'**

## **Shipping, port development and the making of networks between Glasgow and Bombay, c.1850-1880**

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**Commodities of Empire  
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**‘Chasing commodities over the whole surface of the globe’:  
Shipping, port development, and the making of networks between Glasgow  
and Bombay, c.1850-1880**

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## **Introduction**

Readers familiar with Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* will recognise the inspiration behind the rather long-winded above title. Written in 1848, well before the changes it outlined had come into full effect, its main interest arguably now lies in the globalising thrust which Marx identified with the new forces of industrial capitalism in its search for “a constantly expanding market for its products”. Marx also emphasised that this was, equally significantly, a process about establishing multilateral connections between places based on the “immensely facilitated means of communications”, which had seen the emergence of steam navigation, railways and electric telegraphs. Marx, it is true, perceived industrial capitalism as the child of a new social class, the “bourgeoisie”, based above all in imperial Britain. But the *Communist Manifesto* also offers an implicit scenario that is really more about movement and connections: a sense of how industrialism’s “colossal productive forces”, identified in particular with the conquest of nature and the revolution in communications, made possible new interactions and power configurations among this new ‘bourgeoisie’, now globally mobile to an unprecedented level.<sup>1</sup>

This apprehension of a historically crucial globalising moment marks its relevance to perhaps the key concern of the ‘new’ global history, which is about exploring the complex exchanges, relationships and interconnections between different peoples, societies and parts of the world. This paper will draw on Marx’s focus on commodities and communications to interrogate the virtually synchronic making of the ports of Glasgow and Bombay, and the related development of new connections between the two cities during the second half of the nineteenth century. This wider comparative perspective also offers the possibility of going beyond Marx’s ‘Eurocentric’ empirical focus, in *Capital*, on industrial Britain as a self-enclosed capitalist system while maintaining, against some recent critics, the continuing fruitfulness of his concern with industrial processes and productions. These, it will be argued, were a crucial factor in some of the most significant world historical changes of this era. By linking Glasgow’s industrial significance to the city’s ‘Scottish sub-imperial’ function, the essay will also highlight the importance of a neglected regional metropole of British imperialism in the building up of the new ‘globalising’ networks. At the same time, it will seek to show the complex intertwining of capitalism and political imperialism in the operation of these networks. Finally, it will suggest that political, economic and technological dominance notwithstanding, Europeans were unable to completely dislodge Indian merchants from some of the most lucrative Bombay-centred trade routes.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, London: Penguin, 2002 [1888], pp.223-5.

## The Herald and the Canal

When the Suez Canal opened on 17 November 1869, the *Glasgow Herald*, the city's main newspaper, commented in an editorial:

Among the grand and humane objects of modern science...is the abridgement of space and time and pain. The whole coastline of Africa has hitherto intervened between Europe and India. More than half of this vast sweep has been abolished by the Suez Canal which, in a manner, cuts the continent of Africa through by the neck, so that its tremendous material bulk may no longer hamper the swift designs of Europe – the brain of the world.<sup>2</sup>

Like much of the British press of the time, the *Herald* was politically liberal and unionist, and staunchly supportive of imperial designs. But place and locality were, here, significant. This was a Glasgow paper with a readership consisting predominantly of the Scottish commercial classes – merchants, industrialists, shipbuilders – all of whom had a keen interest in the new waterway. Indeed, it was the Glaswegian shipbuilding firm of Lobnitz and Co. that had supplied the dredgers for the Suez Canal.<sup>3</sup>

The editorial is interesting on a number of levels. The text is, first, an assertion of science's cultural authority as the sign of unquestionable progress, typical of the age of European imperial expansion and of voyages of exploration. But cultural authority rests on perceived material achievement. Hailed as a great success of modern engineering science, the Canal represented the latest illustration of the creation of new artificial waterways. To Europeans, it seemed that the march of science towards the material conquest of global distance was unstoppable; and the purpose of such scientific progress, it is made clear, is ultimately political, to bring India closer to Europe so as to open it up to its 'swift designs'. While this is expressed in very general terms, the *Herald* is in fact addressing its own specific class readership, the great Scottish houses of commerce predominantly based in Glasgow. This is important because it foregrounds an interesting difference between Scottish and English perspectives on the Canal, which in turn serves to reveal a distinctively Scottish sub-imperialism now emerging in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The Suez Canal was a French engineering project and opposition to it in England was strong, Prime Minister Palmerston dismissing it as a 'bubble scheme';<sup>4</sup> politicians, press, and even engineers like Robert Stephenson had stated both the Canal's unfeasibility and its undesirability. It would provide imperial rival France with primary access to the riches of India and the East and jeopardise British maritime supremacy; and while English colonial business circles were more favourably disposed towards the project, their voices tended to be rather muted. In Scotland, however, the Canal was seen in both political and business circles as something of a potential opportunity. By the mid-nineteenth century, Scottish trade with India was substantial and growing, and the prospect of a great reduction in costs involved in the halving of the three-month journey via the Cape of Good Hope appeared rather attractive.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Glasgow Daily Herald*, 17 November 1869.

<sup>3</sup> John Shields, *Clyde Built. A history of shipbuilding on the River Clyde*, Glasgow: William Maclellan, 1950, p.90.

<sup>4</sup> *Glasgow Daily Herald*, 1 December 1869.

<sup>5</sup> Marx himself observed that the Canal had dramatically quickened the turnover time of world trade with consequent increases in the productivity of capital and the rate of profit (Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 3, London: Penguin, 1991, p.164.

The distance from Glasgow to Bombay was cut from 10,860 nautical miles via the Cape to 6,020 miles via the Suez Canal. As the *Bombay Gazette* observed, “Bombay happens to be that part of the East where the saving of distance appears greatest”.<sup>6</sup>

The Glasgow Chamber of Commerce was invited to the festivities marking the Canal’s inauguration, as was the Anchor Line, one of a number of major Scottish shipping companies to emerge in the second half of the century. Its steamer *Dido* was one of 64 vessels chosen to participate in the procession through the Canal.<sup>7</sup> With its opening, the Anchor Line, whose initial field of operations in the 1850s was the export trade to New York, soon offered an ‘Indian Service’ to Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta, as well as a ‘Mediterranean Service’ to Spain, Portugal, Italy, Sicily, and Egypt.<sup>8</sup> By the late 1870s, the considerable expansion in the Bombay trade involving commodities such as cotton piece goods, locomotives, metal goods and various kinds of machinery, led to “specially constructed steamers of large cargo capacity” that were held to be “among the largest carriers of their time”.<sup>9</sup>

### **Glasgow’s imperial industrialism**

The cotton industry of Glasgow and the west of Scotland was largely founded on attempts by local weavers to imitate and replace the fine cotton fabrics which represented the bulk of the East India Company’s (EIC) imports from India.<sup>10</sup> In particular, the finer and lighter cotton cloths known as muslins, spun from Indian cotton yarn, became as from the 1780s the staple textile manufacture of Glasgow, while thicker fabrics such as calicoes, cambrics, and shirtings tended to be made in Lancashire.<sup>11</sup> The introduction of power weaving initially enhanced rather than replaced the capacities of handloom weaving, lowering prices and making Indian cottons more affordable to a wider domestic public.

At the same time, subsidiary bleaching and dyeing industries were also established, leading to increased imports of saltpetre, much in demand by dyers, from India.<sup>12</sup> As muslins and other finely woven cottons and linens increasingly set the tone for fashionable dressing during the first half of the nineteenth century, the cost of fine cotton cloth had, by 1850, fallen to just one percent of its 1784 price.<sup>13</sup> At the Great Exhibition of 1851, it was reported that “Glasgow’s textile displays really outshone everything else in the cotton section”. Especially prominent was the great variety of muslins, advertised as “suited to East Indian, home, American and continental markets”.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Bombay Gazette*, 1 January 1870.

<sup>7</sup> *Glasgow Daily Herald*, 13 December 1869.

<sup>8</sup> Anchor Line advertisement, *Glasgow Daily Herald*, 19 December 1870.

<sup>9</sup> Anchor Line Ltd., *History of the Anchor Line 1852-1911*, Glasgow: John Horn, 1911, p.23.

<sup>10</sup> James Monteith, a leading weaver from Anderston, is credited with discovering, in 1780, a method of weaving imitation Indian muslins entirely of cotton. The scramble to take up this new product over the next couple of decades led to the rapid rise in demand for fine cotton thread (‘The Beginnings of the Chamber of Commerce’, *Glasgow Chamber of Commerce Journal*, 55:7 (July 1970), p.357).

<sup>11</sup> *Glasgow Ancient and Modern, or The History of Glasgow from the Earliest to the Present Time*, by Writers of Eminence, Glasgow: John Tweed, 1872, pp.1227 & 1229.

<sup>12</sup> ‘The Early Days of the Chamber of Commerce’, *Glasgow Chamber of Commerce Journal*, 15:11 (November 1970), p.555.

<sup>13</sup> Toby Musgrave & Will Musgrave, *An Empire of Plants. People and plants that changed the world*, London: Cassell, 2000, p.85.

<sup>14</sup> ‘The Second Empire – The Glasgow Chamber in the 1830s and 1840s’, *Glasgow Chamber of Commerce Journal*, 57:10 (October 1972), p.333.

As an expanding cotton textile industry replaced linen and tobacco as Glasgow's leading manufacture,<sup>15</sup> the need for new overseas markets beyond the transatlantic colonies made the city's commercial class strong supporters of 'free trade' in the first half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, Glasgow became one of the main centres of the campaign to end the EIC's trading monopolies with India and China.<sup>16</sup> Among the stated grievances against the EIC, with its London base, were its lack of interest in exporting northern manufactured cotton goods and its denial of opportunities of gaining shipping experience on the route to India to outports such as Glasgow.<sup>17</sup>

More than any other part of Britain, Glasgow, and more generally Clydeside, housed the "meshworks of mutually supporting innovations" in the coal-iron-steam-cotton circuit that led to the emergence of scientific engineering and large-scale industry.<sup>18</sup> Scottish landed and merchant capital flowed into the region enabling coal extraction and iron production, which triggered steam power. Steam powering of factories in turn triggered, through the influence of colonial connections, a flow of cotton textiles, which, in expanding world markets, created both the flow of profits and the demand for new machinery which produced further experiments with iron and steam technologies. These 'triggers and flows', then, would not quite have worked without the enabling contextual framework of colonies and point to the decisive influence of the 'periphery' on metropolitan development.

These experiments brought industrial and academic interests into regular interaction, and in 1841 the first chair of engineering in Britain was created at Glasgow University.<sup>19</sup> One of the results of this collaboration was the iron steamship. The Canal-hopping *Dido* was a state-of-the-art iron screw steamship, the design and technology of which had been pioneered on Clydeside by the Napiers. It was equipped with the new compound engine, again invented by Clydeside engineers, which improved the function of steam by reducing coal use by about 40 percent enabling iron steamers to cover longer distances without coaling.<sup>20</sup> Between 1870 and 1920, Clyde shipyards dominated world shipbuilding, a position based on holding a virtual monopoly of the British merchant marine market.<sup>21</sup> Yet it is important to emphasise just how intimate the relationship between industrial invention and imperial venture became during this period: the iron, and subsequently steel, steamship was fundamentally a response to the demand for ever more rapid connections with the southern world, for both commercial and political purposes.

Imperial connections were also at the heart of another engineering feat as the iron steamship was joined by submarine telegraphy as another invention that was largely pioneered in Glasgow. It was based, once again, on collaboration between marine engineers and research scientists at Glasgow University. This enabled the harmonisation of theory and practice which led to the designing of cables for different purposes and conditions, rather than

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<sup>15</sup> By 1841, textiles and clothing made up 37.56% of Glasgow's industrial employment (John Butt, 'The Industries of Glasgow', in W. Hamish Fraser & Irene Maver (eds), *Glasgow. Volume II: 1830 to 1912*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996, p.98).

<sup>16</sup> The Glasgow East India Association was prominent in the powerful nationwide agitation on the part of industrialists and merchants against the Company (Gordon Jackson, 'New Horizons in Trade', in Fraser & Maver (1996), p.225).

<sup>17</sup> Margaret A. Whitehead, 'The Development of the Clyde's Eastern Trade circa 1815-1850', unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Strathclyde, Department of History, 1993, p.631.

<sup>18</sup> Manuel De Landa, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, New York: Zone Books, 2000, pp.76-7.

<sup>19</sup> Crosbie Smith & M. Norton Wise, *Energy and Empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p.654.

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Fox, *The Ocean Railway*, London: Harper Collins, 2003, p.274.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony Slaven, 'Modern British shipbuilding, 1800-1990', in L. A. Ritchie (ed.), *The shipbuilding industry. A guide to historical records*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992, p.5.

the mere copying of successful precedents that had resulted in only a quarter of the 11,000 miles of existing submarine cable lines actually working in the mid-1860s. Failures included the 3,500 miles of the Suez-Bombay telegraph of 1859-60.<sup>22</sup> Existing government-controlled overland lines via Persia were not to the satisfaction of commercial interests, the Manchester Chamber of Commerce complaining about long delays and garbled and incomprehensible messages due, it claimed, to the fact that the lines passed through “several continental countries and amongst many half civilised tribes”.<sup>23</sup>

The Glasgow Chamber of Commerce despatched a Memorial to the Secretary of State for India urging the setting up of “a new line of communication to be worked exclusively by British subjects and under British rule as far as practicable”. The Chamber advocated that the telegraph network should coincide with the impending steamer route to Bombay via the Suez Canal and Aden.<sup>24</sup> With the Imperial Government having invested heavily on land lines, however, it was a private company, the British Indian Submarine Telegraph Company that took the initiative, prompted by the success of the Glasgow-designed Atlantic telegraph of 1866.

The Suez-Bombay submarine cable via Aden was successfully laid in April 1870, an operation that required the use of the biggest ship in the world, the *Great Eastern*, carrying the heaviest ever weight in freight of 21,000 tons. At Aden, the cable linked up with the existing Aden-Alexandria-Malta line.<sup>25</sup> A few months later, the laying of another submarine cable between Falmouth, Gibraltar and Malta, again by a private company, completed the 8,000 mile trans-oceanic connection between Britain and Bombay.<sup>26</sup> These emerging submarine cable companies were at pains to point out to the Secretary of State that although the telegraphs were “primarily established for commercial gain”, they also fulfilled “great imperial purposes”.<sup>27</sup>

### **The production of Glasgow as a global port**

But perhaps the most significant engineering achievement was the deepening of the river Clyde itself so as to render it navigable by the ever bigger and faster steamers engaged in the inter-continental trade, and the concomitant production of Glasgow as Britain’s third most important port. For much of the first half of the nineteenth century, trade between Scotland and India was conducted primarily from Greenock rather than from Glasgow, which though an important trading town was not a significant port, being sited at a relatively narrow and shallow point on the river. Only in the late 1840s did Glasgow overtake Greenock in foreign trade tonnage.<sup>28</sup>

A variety of machines belonging to the new industrial age – ploughs, harrows, and in particular steam dredgers – were used to both deepen and widen the Clyde, creating the

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<sup>22</sup> Smith & Norton Wise (1989), pp.675 & 678.

<sup>23</sup> Letter from the Manchester Chamber of Commerce to the Glasgow Chamber, 8 October 1867 (Minutes of the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce for the year 1867, 340).

<sup>24</sup> Minutes of the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce for the year 1867, 347-49.

<sup>25</sup> *Glasgow Daily Herald*, 11 November 1869.

<sup>26</sup> Parliamentary Papers, Session 1871, vol. 51: East India Telegraphs, 366-67.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 390.

<sup>28</sup> John F. Riddell, *Clyde Navigation. A History of the Development and Deepening of the River Clyde*, Edinburgh: John Donald, 1979, p.326.

deepwater channel that enabled steamers to sail from Glasgow at regular schedules and at all states of the tide by the time of the opening of the Suez Canal. Writing a few years afterwards, James Deas, engineer of the Clyde Trust, who planned many of the most significant works, observed that “from a mile below Bowling upwards to Glasgow, a length of 12 miles, the Clyde of the present day is nearly as much an artificial navigation as the Suez Canal”.<sup>29</sup> River correction and regulation were also happening elsewhere in Europe, on international waterways such as the Rhine and the Danube, as enthusiasm for the “magical properties” of the steamship drove this process of the conquest of nature.<sup>30</sup>

The excavated material was used to fill in the ground along the river, creating new riverbanks which enabled shipbuilders such as John Barclay and Alexander Stephen and engineers like the Napier brothers to set up establishments close to the river.<sup>31</sup> By the mid 1870s there were no fewer than forty shipbuilding yards along the banks of the Clyde.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, pressing demand for sufficient shipping accommodation led to much heated debate and the production of a series of reports commissioned by the Clyde Trustees on the issue of harbour improvement. The development of docks only took off in earnest following the passage of the Clyde Navigation Act of 1858 and its establishment of a new management authority, the Clyde Navigation Trust, in which the new Scottish shipping companies and the Chamber of Commerce were well represented.<sup>33</sup>

The building of Kingston Dock, and especially Queen’s Dock at Stobcross, was designed to place Glasgow alongside London and Liverpool as the third ‘first-class deep-sea port’ in Britain in keeping with the city’s perception of itself as ‘the second city of the empire’ with an increasingly global trading network. In his report proposing these works, Deas’s predecessor John Ure had pointed to the exponential increase of the “foreign steam trade” and the need to both accommodate the largest steamers “so many of which are built on the river”, and anticipate the “steady increase in the size of all ocean-going steamers”.<sup>34</sup> Constructed as open tidal basins the docks enabled steamers to enter and leave the harbour at all times without having to wait, as in the case of enclosed wet docks, for the opening of gates at high water time.

On completion, Queen’s Dock had a combined water area and quayside accommodation of 36 acres, and a low-water depth of 20 feet, able to house simultaneously some of the largest steamships of the day.<sup>35</sup> It was also the first dock in Scotland to be equipped with powerful cranes for the loading of both coal and heavy machinery such as locomotives. Significantly, it was the Anchor Line’s 2,080 ton steamer *Victoria* that was chosen to inaugurate the opening of the dock in September 1877.<sup>36</sup> Queen’s Dock and the adjoining Stobcross Quay were dominated by imperial shipping companies, providing berthage accommodation for the Anchor, City, Clan, and Donaldson Lines.<sup>37</sup> By this time,

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<sup>29</sup> James Deas, ‘The River Clyde’, in James Forrest (ed.), *Minutes of Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers*, 36 (1872-73), II, p.124.

<sup>30</sup> David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature. Water, Landscape and the Making of Modern Germany*, London: W. W. Norton, 2006, p.153.

<sup>31</sup> John F. Riddell, ‘Glasgow and the Clyde’, in Peter Reed (ed.), *Glasgow. The Forming of the City*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999, p.43.

<sup>32</sup> ‘The Clyde Shipbuilding Trade in 1875’, *The Scotsman*, 30 December 1875.

<sup>33</sup> Riddell (1999), p.127.

<sup>34</sup> Report by Mr. John F. Ure on the Extension of The Harbour of Glasgow, 3 October 1854, pp.9-10, 12.

<sup>35</sup> Riddell (1999), p.193.

<sup>36</sup> *Glasgow Daily Herald*, 19 September 1877.

<sup>37</sup> Riddell (1999), pp.216-7.

India had become the most important single imperial market for Scottish (and British) manufactures and had overtaken the USA as Glasgow's leading foreign shipping destination.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, dues levied on goods and stores shipped to Bombay and Calcutta for the Government of India provided "a considerable portion of the revenue" of the Clyde Navigation Trust.<sup>39</sup>

But as always, industrial 'progress' was not without its victims, nor was it a smooth and linear forward march. The decline of Greenock led to the spectacle of "hundreds of skilled craftsmen" walking the streets of the city "with little to talk about except their idleness and misery".<sup>40</sup> Also deprived of livelihoods were the Clyde's salmon fishermen, whose rights had traditionally been protected by Acts of Parliament. Salmon fishing now came to an end, as the blasting operations and the churning of the waters, together with the liquid refuse discharged into the river from the shipyards, drove the fish away.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, the emergence of the Suez Canal was itself partially responsible for a crisis of overcapacity as the production of capital and consumer goods began to exceed world demand by the mid-1870s. The effect of the economic depression on steam shipbuilding was particularly acute; and the proportion of tonnage of sailing vessels built on the Clyde shipyards to that of steamers, which had fallen to 1:20 in 1872, was back to level pegging by 1875.<sup>42</sup> A significant consideration here was the issue of labour and wages, with steamers requiring, relative to tonnage, the employment of almost double the labour of sailing ships. With an average pay of between £6-10 per month, steamer engineers and other skilled workers earned about three times the wages of seamen on sailing ships. The need to reduce the wage bill was thus an important consideration in the renewed demand for sailing tonnage in the mid-1870s.<sup>43</sup>

Alongside skilled seamen, port and shipyard workers also experienced the full force of the recession. The Clyde Navigation Trust stopped sickness allowance and holiday payments to its dockers;<sup>44</sup> ship pattern-makers employed by Alexander Stephen & Co. came out on strike against the reduction of their wages by half-pence per hour, a situation that illustrated the general fall in wages in the shipbuilding industry.<sup>45</sup> By late 1875, half of the Clyde shipyard workforce (25,000 men) found themselves idle.<sup>46</sup> When the economic climate improved in 1877, shipwrights demanded the restoration of their previous wage but were turned down by the masters. This led to another strike that was met by a management lock-out of the workers that lasted several months.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Gordon Jackson & Charles Munn, 'Trade, Commerce, and Finance', in Fraser & Mavor (1996), p.68. Between 1867 and 1913, the colonies received over half of all overseas Scottish capital investment, with India the leading recipient.

<sup>39</sup> James King, 'Memorial of the Trustees of the Clyde Navigation as to Dues on Government Stores for India' (Mitchell Library, Glasgow, T-CN3 394, 1887).

<sup>40</sup> Smith & Norton Wise (1989), p.729.

<sup>41</sup> Deas (1872-3), p.133.

<sup>42</sup> *Scotsman*, 30 December 1875.

<sup>43</sup> 'Steamers v. Sailing Ships', in *Industries*, 19 April 1889.

<sup>44</sup> 'Notice to Clyde Trust workmen' by James Deas, Engineer, Clyde Navigation, 20 April 1872.

<sup>45</sup> *Evening News*, 6 December 1875.

<sup>46</sup> 'The Clyde Shipbuilding Trade in 1875', *Scotsman*, 30 December 1875.

<sup>47</sup> *North British Daily Mail*, 8 August 1877.



## **Glasgow-Bombay networks I: capital and politics in the emergence of Scottish imperial shipping lines**

The emergence of both the Clan Line and the British India Steam Navigation Company reveals the expanded nature of the Scottish networks that linked Glasgow and Bombay in the second half of the century, articulating new relationships between shipbuilders, merchants, manufacturers, financiers, and governments based on what may be called the ‘shipping nexus’.<sup>48</sup> This process gave emerging British shipping entrepreneurs access to widely expanded sources of both capital and political influence which enabled them to dominate the intercontinental trade between Britain and India, and to also make a bid for supremacy in India’s ‘coasting’ trade (i.e. the long established commerce between India’s coastal ports that extended to neighbouring territories, and hitherto controlled by Indian merchants).

Originally a Londoner, Charles Cayzer, the founder of the Clan Line, had no Scottish connections when he arrived in Bombay in 1861 to take up a post with the firm of William Nicol & Co.<sup>49</sup> Among the original Scottish founders of the Bombay Chamber of Commerce in 1836, Nicol & Co. had grown into one of the largest companies in the city, acting as agents through which Scottish manufacturers sold their cotton goods in western India. Indeed, the firm was an important source of Indian market information for Scottish businesses, despatching weekly ‘Bombay trade reports’ which appeared in the *Glasgow Herald*. Nicol & Co. was also one of the leading exporters of raw cotton to Britain and owned wharves, basins and warehouses in the port of Bombay. In addition, the firm managed three of the coastal lines of the newly set up British India Steam Navigation Company, establishing a special ‘steamer department’ for this purpose, within which Cayzer was employed as a member of the stores superintendent’s staff.<sup>50</sup>

Cayzer’s experience of Bombay, his knowledge of the port and its trade coupled with the emergence of the Suez Canal, led to the ambition of setting up his own shipping company that would link Bombay with the western seaports of Britain. Returning home on leave in 1873, he carried out market research in Glasgow and Liverpool to ascertain the feasibility of the venture, aided, significantly, by the regular receipt of commercial news from the *Bombay Gazette*, including the progress of the ‘modernisation’ of the port of Bombay. As a result, he became convinced that there was a strong demand from Scottish and north of England manufacturers for an increase in direct shipping services from the Clyde and the Mersey to Bombay, in addition to those provided by the City and Anchor Lines, not least because of the heavy rail charges to London incurred by their goods. The cargoes that Cayzer was especially interested in carrying were cotton piecegoods from Clydeside and Lancashire and machinery and railway equipment from Glasgow.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> A variation on Robert Kubicek’s concept of ‘the ship nexus’ so as to emphasise the dynamism of the shipping enterprise. See Robert Kubicek, ‘The proliferation and diffusion of steamship technology and the beginnings of “new imperislm”’, in Margarette Lincoln & Nigel Rigby (eds.), *Maritime Empires. British Imperial Maritime Trade in the Nineteenth Century*, London: Boydell Press, 2004, pp.100-10.

<sup>49</sup> Augustus Muir & Muir Davies, *A Victorian Shipowner. A Portrait of Sir Charles Cayzer, Baronet of Gartmore*. London: Cayzer, Irvine & Co., 1978, p.18.

<sup>50</sup> J. Forbes Munro, *Maritime Enterprise and Empire. Sir William MacKinnon and his business network, 1823-93*, Bury St Edmunds: Boydell Press, 2003, pp.44 & 53; Muir & Davies (1978), pp.19-20.

<sup>51</sup> Muir & Davies (1978), pp. 36-7, 46, 49, 108.

Particularly interesting is the manner in which Cayzer set about raising the capital required to build a fleet of large tonnage ships for his new company, initially called Cayzer, Irvine & Co. On the strength of his Scottish Bombay connections, his project found favour in Glasgow rather than in the more important port city of Liverpool, which had, by this time, overtaken London as the leading British port for the export trade. He secured an entry into Glasgow business circles through Alexander Stephen, senior partner in the leading shipbuilding firm of Alexander Stephen & Sons of Govan, which specialised in ships for the Indian trade. The influential Stephen brought on board John Muir, head of James Finlay & Co., the leading merchant house in the city in terms of the Indian and Asian trade.

Although Cayzer was able, with the support of Stephen, to raise sufficient capital for an initial fleet of six ships by selling shares in the company to business subscribers from Clydeside, it was Muir who took the vital steps that transformed Cayzer Irvine into the Clan Line. He not only invested Finlay & Co. funds in the new shipping venture, but, trading on the prestige of the firm, persuaded some of the main Scottish banks to put at the disposal of the new shipping line credits totalling £600,000, which, together with a further £120,000 from a London bank, were used to extend and consolidate the fleet. Muir also advantageously secured the appointment of James Finlay's Bombay branch, Finlay, Muir & Co., as sole local agents of the Clan Line. In addition, these connections also secured for the shipping company the lucrative cargo of stores for the Government of India. By the early twentieth century, the Clan Line's routes had been extended to South Africa and Australasia.

If access to Glasgow capital and ships proved decisive in the realisation of Cayzer's ambitions for his Clan Line, a not dissimilar route had been followed, just over a decade earlier, by another Glaswegian shipper, William MacKinnon, whose British India Steam Navigation Company (BI) emerged as a major player in Indian coastal shipping as from the early 1860s. In the case of MacKinnon, however, perhaps the decisive factor was his access to Bombay-based sub-imperial political influence and patronage.

MacKinnon's initial Bengal-based steamship venture linking Calcutta and the Burmese rice ports was followed by the transfer of the management of the firm from Calcutta to Glasgow. Here, MacKinnon used his own fortune from the Indian trade to buy himself on to the Board of the City of Glasgow Bank.<sup>52</sup> This resulted in a shift in the pattern of shareholding with Glasgow capital – from Clydeside businessmen and the City of Glasgow Bank – gaining the ascendancy over London-based capital. At the same time, impressed by their marine engineering innovations, MacKinnon decided to have his steamers built by Clyde, rather than by Thames, shipbuilders, with “the assistance of generous amounts of short-term credit from the City of Glasgow Bank”.<sup>53</sup> Seeking to expand his Indian coastal shipping lines, he set off once again from Glasgow to India, arriving in Bombay in November 1861, just at a time when the colonial state, in a bid to cut down expenditure, had begun to privatise its maritime transport operations. Even more significantly, MacKinnon's arrival in Bombay coincided with incoming Governor Bartle Frere's plan to make use of private coastal steamer lines for geopolitical purposes. An important aspect of this policy was the desire to renew Bombay's sub-imperial function as a base to extend British spheres of influence in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Michael Fry, *The Scottish Empire*, Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2001, p.261.

<sup>53</sup> Munro (2003), p.53.

<sup>54</sup> Munro (2003), pp.37-47. Bombay's sub-imperial vocation had been established in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century under East India Company rule when Pitt's government imposed a naval base function to the Company's territorial

Yet again, it was the firm of Nicol & Co. that provided the launch pad for the extension of MacKinnon's steamship enterprises to western India. Through the good offices of the firm's most prominent figure, John Fleming, another Glaswegian, MacKinnon gained access to Bombay government officials, and soon developed a close personal friendship with Governor Frere himself. As a result, BI was awarded mail contracts for three western India coastal steamship lines in 1862 – south from Bombay to Cochin on the Malabar Coast, north from Bombay to Karachi in Sind, and north-westwards from Bombay to Basra in the Persian Gulf. All three lines were managed by Nicol & Co. A year later, with additional funding from the Government of India, BI launched a Bombay-Calcutta service via Ceylon. By the late 1860s, the company's various lines had government contracts worth £62,000 a year and had emerged as the Government of India's 'official' steamship operator.<sup>55</sup>

An alliance between the colonial state and private capital was clearly in evidence here, with BI's steamship operations representing the maritime wing of the transport revolution being conducted overland by the railways which were, by this time, already well engaged in reshaping the Indian landscape. BI steamers, however, provided an additional dimension in their capacity as active agents of a Bombay-based sub-imperialism promoted by Bartle Frere. The Bombay-Basra route provided communications and supply-line support for an interventionist policy designed to secure British influence over the Arab states in the region. This included the imposition of a British solution to the conflict between Oman and Zanzibar, and by the mid 1870s, BI was effectively functioning as one of the main pillars of British consular authority at Bushire, Basra, Jeddah and Zanzibar.<sup>56</sup>

BI had considerable resources at its disposal. It had secured through-traffic agreements with the Anchor and City Lines for the transshipment of passengers and goods out of Bombay, and it enjoyed the patronage of the colonial state. Indeed, the Government of Bombay had removed the mail service on the Karachi route from the hands of the Parsi-owned Bombay Steam Navigation Company to award it to BI, thus deliberately favouring British over Indian capital.<sup>57</sup> As a result, BI was able to dispose of steamer competition on its western India lines, and the stage seemed set for it to achieve dominance over the trade in local commodities on these routes as well. This, however, failed to materialise owing to the resilience of established Indian merchant networks still conducting their trade in the old country vessels.

Like many other British companies, BI initially did rather well out of transporting raw cotton from the ports along the western coast to Bombay during the years of the American Civil War, but when demand virtually dried up after the mid 1860s, its steamers on the western India routes made little headway against the dominance of native country craft in a range of local commodities. In the 1870s, for instance, 90 percent of the lucrative trade in spices, fruits, and timber products between the Malabar Coast and Bombay remained in the hands of country vessels compared to BI's share of just 8 percent.<sup>58</sup> The line from Bombay to

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control of Bombay. This enabled the Bombay Government's later conquest of Aden in 1839, which was annexed essentially to serve as a convenient coaling station for steamers. But the taking over of Aden also had the enthusiastic support of the Bombay Chamber of Commerce, which believed that it offered opportunities for the penetration of cheap British cottons into the horn of Africa, "amongst the Arabs of the interior" whose taste for "cotton goods of fast colours" had been noted (*Report of the Bombay Chamber of Commerce for the First Quarter of 1839-40*, Bombay, 1839, pp.41 & 62).

<sup>55</sup> Munro (2003), 44-55.

<sup>56</sup> Munro (2003), pp.64 & 500.

<sup>57</sup> Munro (2003), p.45.

<sup>58</sup> Munro (2003), p.61.

Karachi remained an essentially mail and passenger service in spite of the best efforts of the Bombay Government to put business its way.

BI steamers' comparatively limited cargo-carrying capacity, however, meant high freight rates. The government attracted the wrath of the Indian press for its decision to award BI the contract for the conveyance of 8,000 tons of railway material to Karachi at what was viewed as the excessive rate of Rs 8 per ton. Native merchants pointed out that the contract was awarded without publicly calling for tenders which could have secured freight at half the rate, saving Rs 40,000. On this line as well, BI steamers found that they could not compete in freight rates with Indian country craft.<sup>59</sup> The company's profitability remained primarily dependant on government contracts.

## **Glasgow-Bombay networks II: Cotton, land reclamation, and port development**

With thirty square miles of sheltered water provided by the Colaba peninsula, Bombay was much more of a natural harbour than Glasgow. Unlike Glasgow, however, its fashioning into a modern port did not occur in a planned manner, motivated by the anticipated growth in the steam shipping trade, but haphazardly, fuelled initially by the conjunctural cotton boom of the early 1860s.

The development of the Bombay harbour foreshore involved the reclaiming of land from the sea with the objective of providing greater wharfage accommodation for the landing and shipping of the expanded volume of cotton goods, still carried by sailing vessels. Among a number of companies owning private wharves, it was again the firm of William Nicol & Co. that emerged as central to the process of land reclamation and port development. Two of its leading members, the Glaswegian brothers John and James Nicol Fleming, set up the Elphinstone Land and Press Company with the objective of making huge profits from land reclamation on the expectation of rising land values consequent upon the cotton boom.

The Elphinstone Company's activities were an expression of a wider commercial interest in the development of communications in western India. Even before the outbreak of the American Civil War, the Manchester, Glasgow and Bombay Chambers of Commerce perceived Indian cotton as a promising alternative to American supplies and were pressing the government to construct the required railways, roads, and canals that would open up the cotton growing districts of the western India interior. Arguing along classic Lockian lines that an important function of colonial rule was to 'improve' indigenous land so that it yielded exchange-value,<sup>60</sup> the Glasgow Chamber asserted that:

...ample supplies of cotton might be derived from British India, where the cultivation can be greatly extended, and where labour is abundant and cheap, provided sufficient encouragement were given for the application of British Capital to the cultivation of the soil.<sup>61</sup>

When the American Civil War broke out, the Glasgow Chamber joined Lancashire in demanding from the Secretary of State for India that India make good the shortfall to protect the livelihoods of the "4 millions of our people (who) are directly or indirectly dependent for

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<sup>59</sup> *Jam-e-Jamshed*, 20 September 1879. Report on Native Papers for the week ending 20 September, p.12.

<sup>60</sup> On this aspect, see Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Empire of Capital*, London: Verso, 2003, pp.96-9.

<sup>61</sup> Minutes of the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce, vol. 8, 1853-1862, 134.

their daily bread on our cotton manufacturers”.<sup>62</sup> The Government of India responded by directing those provincial governments with substantial cotton-producing regions to report immediately on what needed to be done to improve “the lines of traffic between the cotton producing districts and the ports of shipment”.<sup>63</sup> In 1863 it funded the setting up of a new Cotton Department by the Bombay government headed by an ‘Inspector-in-Chief’ based in Bombay who was in overall charge of seven well staffed establishments in the main cotton producing districts.<sup>64</sup>

The Bombay Chamber of Commerce, however, believed that equal priority should be given to the modernisation of the port itself, in particular increased wharfage accommodation for ships, a speedier and more efficient system of landing cargo, the building of warehouses for storage and of dry docks for ship repairs.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, port development occurred in a climate of unprecedented speculation. The sudden wealth produced by the high price of Indian cotton during the American Civil War led to a burst of speculative investments, which, facilitated by the European-controlled Bank of Bombay, saw the sudden emergence of companies offering shares in a host of ventures, including land reclamation. The activities of the Elphinstone Land & Press Company were very much part of this process. Nicol & Co.’s close ties with the Bombay Government ensured that the Elphinstone Company was able to engage in a process of privileged land grabbing.

The Company secured a government contract to reclaim and develop one hundred acres of land for the construction of a goods and passenger terminus for the Great Indian Peninsula Railway. In return, it was given the concession to reclaim a further 250 acres of land alongside the properties it had already acquired on the Elphinstone Estate,<sup>66</sup> with Governor Bartle Frere keen to give “every reasonable support to those taking proper steps...to increase the facilities for trade at the port”.<sup>67</sup> Possession of these sites, however, meant taking over the spatial locations of the Indian trade, including existing shipping and landing facilities for native craft. Right at the heart of native commerce was the Masjid Bunder: set up in the early part of the century through local public subscriptions, it was available to all merchants free of charge. As from 1867, however, the Elphinstone Company introduced transit duties on goods passing through the Bunder, ending centuries of free transit which local merchants had come to see as a customary right.<sup>68</sup> State guaranteed land reclamation thus incorporated a form of ‘primitive accumulation’ involving the privatisation of indigenous maritime space, hitherto a collective resource.

John ‘Bombay Jock’ Fleming, the Elphinstone Land & Press Company’s founder, first chairman, and major shareholder, straddled the commercial worlds of Bombay, Glasgow, and the city of London with equal ease, the dominant figure of a shipping/cotton network that extended to Colombo and Rangoon. The initial hub of his activities was Bombay where, as

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 403.

<sup>63</sup> M.J. Shaw Stewart, Under-Secretary to the Government of Bombay, Revenue Dept. to W.C. Anderson, Superintendent, Revenue and Assessment, Southern Mahratta County and Berar, 25 April 1861 (Parliamentary Papers, Session 1863/Vol.44: *Cultivation of Cotton in India: Correspondence 1860-63, part III – Bombay*, 392).

<sup>64</sup> Report of the Bombay Chamber of Commerce for the year 1872-3, 239-40.

<sup>65</sup> R. J. F. Sullivan, *One Hundred Years of Bombay: A History of the Bombay Chamber of Commerce 1836-1936*, Bombay: Times of India Press, 1936, p.71.

<sup>66</sup> Sharada Dwivedi & Rahul Mehrotra, *Bombay. The Cities Within*, Mumbai: India Book House, 1995, p.129.

<sup>67</sup> Elphinstone Land & Press Co. Ltd: *Report of the Third Annual General Meeting, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1862* (Bombay 1862), 3.

<sup>68</sup> Edward Pratt, *The Bombay Wharves: How the Right of Way over them was lost to the public and the commerce of the Port*, London, 1881, pp.3, & 30-2.

senior partner with the firm, he repatriated to Britain the profits made by Nicol & Co. during the cotton boom years of the early 1860s.<sup>69</sup> He was also involved in running a mail steamship business from Bombay to Karachi, which he subsequently withdrew from in favour of BI, though not before establishing a profitable commission agency house in Karachi. He then moved to London as senior partner of his firm of Smith, Fleming and Co. that rapidly acquired the reputation as “the best commission agency business in London”.<sup>70</sup>

His brother, James Nicol Fleming, “after reputedly making £300,000 from cornering raw cotton supplies in Bombay”, moved to Glasgow where he invested his profits in a new Glasgow merchant house before becoming a director of both the City of Glasgow Bank (after being nominated by MacKinnon) and the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce.<sup>71</sup> The remarkable thing about these firms is that they operated on a system of open and virtually unrestricted credit advanced to them by the City of Glasgow Bank: in effect, the Flemings channelled back to Glasgow not only some of the profits made in Bombay but also the accompanying loose business ethics of that era that had, amongst other consequences, led to the collapse of the Bank of Bombay in 1868. Indeed, the City of Glasgow Bank was to meet a similar fate, collapsing in the late 1870s and causing the ruin of the Flemings as well as of Nicol & Co., and a host of other firms in both Bombay and Glasgow. In the early 1860s, however, the profits of Fleming’s London, Bombay, and Karachi agencies from the cotton consignment trade reached “hundreds of thousands” of pounds per annum, and even after the end of the cotton boom, the average earnings of the three firms during the period 1867-70 still exceeded £90,000 a year.<sup>72</sup>

Capital for the land reclamation project was raised by issuing shares worth a thousand rupees each to members of the local merchant community, both European and Indian, with Parsis more than holding their own amongst the largest shareholders.<sup>73</sup> In the context of the rapid extension of the cotton trade of western India and the consequent need for improved port accommodation facilities, the company’s directors were confident that “the unquestionably lucrative nature of the enterprise...is the best guarantee of the ability of the company to command any amount of capital which may be required for its prosecution”.<sup>74</sup> They also believed that a steadily rising income would be derived from fees levied for the use of this new accommodation as well as from sales of reclaimed and developed land to merchants and trading companies. The Elphinstone Company was anxious to secure the services of an engineer of international reputation to supervise the extensive works planned, and in 1864, Thomas Ormiston, previously employed by the Clyde Navigation Trust and responsible for the design of Glasgow’s big steam cranes, was given the appointment.<sup>75</sup>

The wharves and warehouses were built on the 275 acres of land which the Elphinstone Company reclaimed from the sea during the decade 1860-70. The Reclamation

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<sup>69</sup> Munro (2003), p.103.

<sup>70</sup> Report of the Trial before the High Court of Justiciary, 201.

<sup>71</sup> Munro (2003), p.103; ‘Report on the Annual Meeting of the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce’, *North British Daily Mail*, 12 January 1870. Clyde Navigation Trust, *Newscuttings Books 1868-70*. T-CN 57, 4.

<sup>72</sup> Report of the Trial before the High Court of Justiciary, 161, 189, 195.

<sup>73</sup> Elphinstone Land & Press Co. Ltd, *Sixth Report to the Annual General Meeting*, 17 August 1865 (Bombay, 1865), pp.19-21. However, the Bombay Parsis, while still possessing enormous capital assets were no longer, as in the early decades of the century, the equal commercial partners of the Scots, particularly in the opium and cotton trade with China. Steamers had superseded their Bombay-built wooden sailing ships; they had lost political influence with the ending of Company rule, and were increasingly subordinated in the export trade as a result of Europeans’ geographically wider and politically more influential networking advantages.

<sup>74</sup> Elphinstone Land & Press Co. Ltd, *Third Report*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Sept. 1862 (Bombay, 1862), 3.

<sup>75</sup> *Glasgow News*, 17 April 1876.

came to be known as the 'Elphinstone Estate' and comprised the Nicol, Masjid, and Carnac bunders (wharves) as well as newly developed plots of land. Meanwhile, the GIP Railway terminus at Wari Bunder, which included two and a half miles of single railway lines, was completed and handed over to the government in 1865.<sup>76</sup> By the early 1870s, the GIP Railway was carrying almost two-thirds of all raw cotton consignments brought into the port from the hinterland.<sup>77</sup> During the cotton boom of the early 1860s, the company was able to report a steadily growing income from wharfage fees and warehouse rent. The collapse of cotton prices in 1865, however, produced an economic crisis in the city: the depression in trade led to a downturn in the company's fortunes and also brought about a sharp fall in the market value of land. The falling off of exports in general and cotton in particular, curtailed the demand for wharfage and warehouse accommodation and by 1866 the company's revenues began to decline.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, the recession hit just as plots of land, reclaimed at great cost, were coming on the market, but it proved "impossible to make any sales" as merchants curtailed their expenditure.<sup>79</sup>

In an era of savage and speculative colonial capitalism, the recession also underlined the perennial 'problem' of labour. The Company constantly complained of its high costs: both day and night shifts were required to complete the government's railway terminus order on time, with the directors lamenting being "forced to pay hitherto unheard of wages" to get sufficient numbers of labourers to do the work. They anticipated being in a position "to reduce the wages of all kinds of labourers" once the order had been completed.<sup>80</sup> Labour was in particular demand during this period as Bartle Frere's demolition of the city's old fortifications in 1862 led to the emergence of an extensive programme of public and commercial building works. The other major factor, however, in the high cost of urban labour was the sharp increase in the price of food grains due in large measure to the diminishing output of cereal agriculture in the Deccan, now displaced from the most fertile soils under the impact of increased cotton cultivation.<sup>81</sup>

The Elphinstone Company's main strategy to keep the labour wage bill to a minimum was to replace, as far as possible, the Indian workforce by cheaper imported Chinese labour, particularly stonemasons, carpenters, and blacksmiths, together with ordinary labourers or 'coolies'.<sup>82</sup> This move appears to have backfired, the directors soon blaming the Chinese labourers' poor productivity as the "most serious impediment to progress" of the reclamation works. Shareholders were told that this was due to large numbers of 'coolies' arriving "in a sickly, and many in a dying state, and it has been found a most difficult task to get the others to work steadily".<sup>83</sup> In fact, out of 2,304 Chinese workers shipped at Hong Kong between January and March 1864, 38 died during the passage to Bombay and another 537 either died or deserted on arrival.<sup>84</sup> In the eyes of the company, labour was purely an issue of costs and losses devoid of any ethical or human dimension. By 1866, the sad experiment with Chinese

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<sup>76</sup> Elphinstone Land & Press Co. Ltd: *Fifth Report*, 6; *Final Report*, 6 December 1870, iv.

<sup>77</sup> *Bombay Gazette*, 6 January 1873.

<sup>78</sup> Elphinstone Land & Press Co. Ltd: *Third Report*, 1; *Seventh Report*, 15 August 1866, p.6.

<sup>79</sup> Elphinstone Land & Press Co. Ltd: *Eighth Report*, 28 August 1867, p.9.

<sup>80</sup> Elphinstone Land & Press Co. Ltd: *Fourth Report*, pp.5-6.

<sup>81</sup> Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts. El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World*, London: Verso, 2001, p.329.

<sup>82</sup> Elphinstone Land & Press Co. Ltd: *Fifth Report*, p.2.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

<sup>84</sup> Elphinstone Land & Press Co. Ltd: *Sixth Report*, p.9.

labour was brought to an end, the company engineer stating at a shareholders' meeting: "I am glad to report that we may be considered to be done with the Chinese or nearly so".<sup>85</sup>

The company's strategy switched to drastically reducing the number of workers employed and to ensure that the majority of them were hired under the casual contract system. By 1867, the company had succeeded in reducing the overall wage bill from 12.2 million in 1864 to just 2.2 million rupees.<sup>86</sup> However, shareholders, seeing the value of their shares plummet to half their original value, were now looking to recoup their losses; and in 1870, Nicol & Co., as managers of the Elphinstone Company, made a final 'killing' by selling the entire Elphinstone Estate with its reclaimed lands to the Government of India for just under £2 million, "a price nearly double the capitalised net revenue of the property at the time".<sup>87</sup>

The Bombay Government had been a keen advocate of the purchase, justifying it to the Government of India on the grounds of the Elphinstone Estate's strategic location in the harbour area and the seemingly inevitable hike in the value of its properties.<sup>88</sup> An increasingly critical local public opinion however, viewed the acquisition rather differently, as an indication of the "pernicious influence" of the firm of Nicol & Co. "in the counsels of the Bombay government".<sup>89</sup> Even the Bombay Chamber of Commerce viewed the acquisition as a "bad bargain" for the trade of the port. The purchase saddled the colonial government with interest payments on a debt of 280 lakh (28 million) rupees, which, at the insistence of the Government of India, the Bombay Government transferred on to the trade of the port, further incurring the hostility of the merchant community, both European and Indian. It passed legislation that gave it the power to tax the trade of the port equal to interest payments on the debt at 4½ percent per annum for a period of 30 years.<sup>90</sup>

But even the taking over of the Elphinstone Estate, which was now added to its own Mody Bay properties on the Bombay foreshore, did not initially give the colonial government full control over the port and its wharves. A number of private companies continued to own wharves and, in the case of the influential firm of David Sassoon & Co., even a small wet dock, a facility still lacking on the Elphinstone Estate and other harbour properties controlled by the government. These were entrusted to a new form of harbour administration, the Bombay Port Trust, set up in 1873. Although theoretically based on the pioneering 'public ownership' models of the Mersey Docks & Harbour Board and the Clyde Navigation Trust, unlike its British counterparts, the Port Trust did not initially control the entire harbour foreshore but coexisted and competed for business with the private companies. Moreover, these 'private bunders' as they were called, remained outside the scope of the taxable powers of the Bunder Fees' Act of 1870.

The Port Trust was also different from the Liverpool and Glasgow bodies in that the entire thirteen-strong Board of Trustees was appointed by government, giving neither commercial interests such as the Chamber of Commerce, nor the Bombay Municipal Corporation any representation.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, as the Chamber of Commerce pointed out, there was no provision in the Port Trust Bill for government to make funds available for harbour

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<sup>85</sup> Elphinstone Land & Press Co. Ltd: *Seventh Report*, p.23.

<sup>86</sup> Elphinstone Land & Press Co. Ltd: *Eighth Report*, x.

<sup>87</sup> Elphinstone Land & Press Co. Ltd: *Final Report*, iv; Report of the Bombay Chamber of Commerce for the year 1878-9, Appendix M (Bombay, 1879), p.334.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p.332.

<sup>89</sup> Pratt (1881), pp.55-6.

<sup>90</sup> Bombay Chamber of Commerce 1878-9, Appendix M, p.332.

<sup>91</sup> Bombay Port Trust. Administration Report to 31<sup>st</sup> March 1880 (Bombay, 1880), p.1.



improvements, in particular wet docks, which the opening of the Suez Canal now rendered quite urgent.<sup>92</sup> The result was a disastrous initial seven-year period during which the Trust experienced low revenues and large annual deficits, as the private companies enticed business away from the government bunders by lowering landing, wharfage, and warehouse charges.<sup>93</sup> In 1876-7, for instance, steamers arriving in Bombay via the Suez Canal avoided the Trust wharves, discharging their cargoes at the Sassoon Dock and the Colaba company's bunders, causing a loss to the Port Trust of Rs 52,800 on imports and Rs 20,000 on exports. This had a crippling effect on the Trust's revenues, which year after year failed to meet the interest payments required by government on the costs of acquiring the Elphinstone Estate.

It was indeed a terrible irony that the main source of the Port Trust's revenues during these years was not, as had been anticipated, the global European trade but the local Deccan famine,<sup>94</sup> which led to a massive increase in the coasting food-grain trade, as the port became the nerve centre for the distribution of supplies to the afflicted localities that were now rushing in from other parts of India, and even as far as the Persian Gulf.<sup>95</sup>

Faced with mounting press and public criticisms and keen to secure a major improvement in the revenues of the Port Trust, the Government of India resolved to acquire the remaining foreshore properties owned by the private companies, and to incorporate them within a reconstituted Port Trust. This time, the Chamber of Commerce supported the purchase believing that extra revenue would be raised by the ending of competition between the Port Trust and the private companies. Moreover, the Chamber felt confident that with its increased representation, it would be able to influence the Trust's new Board to pursue a programme of planned and continuous harbour improvements. In the new Board, five out of the thirteen members were to be elected by the Chamber of Commerce; the eight others were to be nominated by the Bombay government, and included three natives of India who had to be "acquainted with the English language", as well as a salaried European chairman.<sup>96</sup> There was immediate dissent in the Indian press at the latter's "exorbitant" salary of Rs 1,800 a month.<sup>97</sup>

### **Bombay as 'dependant' global port**

As at Glasgow, the issue of dock accommodation for Bombay harbour was the subject of intense debate, though reaching agreement was much more difficult in a colonial context.<sup>98</sup> Opinion amongst the commercial classes was not on the whole favourable to wet docks in a natural harbour such as Bombay, "which is for nine months of the year a wet dock presenting

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<sup>92</sup> 'Bombay Legislative Council...', *Bombay Gazette*, 11 January 1873; 'The Suez Canal', *Bombay Gazette*, 13 January 1870.

<sup>93</sup> Bombay Chamber of Commerce, 1878-9, Appendix M, p.351.

<sup>94</sup> The effect of extended cotton cultivation in the 1860s was to displace cereal agriculture from the most fertile soils of the Deccan valleys on to the lighter soils converted from pasture, which were able to produce barely one-third of the former *jowar* (millet) yield. These soils eroded rapidly, creating a food security problem, most starkly illustrated by the famine of 1876 (Davis, 2001, pp.328-31).

<sup>95</sup> Bombay Port Trust, ...1878, p.49; Bombay Port Trust. *Administration Report for the year 1878-79* (Bombay, 1879), p.54.

<sup>96</sup> Bombay Port Trust. *Administration Report to 31<sup>st</sup> March 1880*, p.1.

<sup>97</sup> *Indian Spectator*, 28 March 1880. Report on Native Papers for the week ending 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1880, p.3.

<sup>98</sup> A Government appointed committee set up in 1867 to make recommendations on the dock issue and which included all branches of maritime commerce, failed to agree on a unanimous report ('Bombay Port Trust', *The Times of India*, 10 April 1879).

every facility for loading and unloading, for entering and leaving without regard to tides or...dock fees".<sup>99</sup> The European commercial houses and the major shipping companies, however, were anxious for year-round facilities for the increasingly bigger steamers that would save time and avoid the risks and costs of transshipment by lighters or cargo boats in the stream, and both the Chamber of Commerce and the Port Trust produced reports on the advisability of wet docks. Although arguments were made for adopting, on sanitary grounds, the Glasgow model of tidal basins, it was felt that wet docks would be more convenient for Bombay as the gates would enable the retention of high water levels, given the extreme fluctuations of the tide in the harbour that would otherwise require steamers to be constantly changing position.<sup>100</sup>

There were also issues relating to the size and location of the proposed new dock. The P&O and BI companies, as well as majority opinion in both the Chamber of Commerce and the Port Trust advocated the building of a large dock on the Elphinstone Estate capable of accommodating up to 50 ships each month, half of which would be steamers and the other half sailing vessels.<sup>101</sup> A large dock would also be able to receive steamers immediately upon arrival as well as enabling different cargoes to be unloaded at different parts of the dock.<sup>102</sup>

In contrast, Henry Ballard, Chairman of the Port Trust, supported by a minority of trustees, favoured a smaller, less ambitious wet dock on the Masjid Bunder, which, he argued, would first help ascertain the needs of the trade and thus provide a secure basis for future dock development.<sup>103</sup> The Bombay Government, still reeling from the criticism it had received for its role in the acquisition of the Elphinstone Estate, came out strongly in support of Ballard, adding that the smaller dock could be constructed in half the time, it would provide valuable lessons on the practicalities of dredging in the harbour, and that "in the event of failure, the loss would be less serious".<sup>104</sup> It was then completely taken aback when the Government of India declared its preference for the larger project, "satisfied that the smaller dock which the minority of the Trust and the Government of Bombay advocate would not provide sufficient accommodation to the trade of the port even at first".<sup>105</sup>

Funded once again by a Government of India loan, the Prince's Dock, as the new dock on the Elphinstone Estate came to be called, took four years to build, opening in 1880 just three years after Glasgow's Queen's Dock. Glasgow influences on the new Bombay dock came, above all, in the person of Thomas Ormiston who moved from the defunct Elphinstone Land & Trust Company to become Consulting Engineer to the Port Trust. With his nine years engineering experience at Glasgow harbour, it was Ormiston who made full use of his expertise to champion the more ambitious wet dock project in Bombay. Even though opposed by his Port Trust superiors, Ormiston was able to convince the Government of India to override the wishes of the Bombay government on the basis of his carefully prepared and

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<sup>99</sup> *Bombay Gazette*, 3 January 1880.

<sup>100</sup> Bombay Chamber of Commerce 1873-4, p.115; George A. Kittredge, 'Memorandum on Wet Docks', Bombay Chamber of Commerce 1873-4, pp.132-3.

<sup>101</sup> 'Report of the Chamber of Commerce Committee on Wet Docks'. Bombay Chamber of Commerce 1873-4, pp.111-2.

<sup>102</sup> Kittredge, 'Memorandum on Wet Docks', pp.127-130.

<sup>103</sup> 'Report of the Chamber of Commerce Committee on Wet Docks. Note of dissent from H. Ballard', Bombay Chamber of Commerce 1873-4, p.113.

<sup>104</sup> J. Macdonald, Secretary to the Government of Bombay, Public Works Dept to Bombay Chamber of Commerce, 12 November 1873. Bombay Chamber of Commerce 1873-4, p.148.

<sup>105</sup> Secretary to the Government of India, Public Works Dept, to Secretary, Government of Bombay, Public Works Dept, 28 January 1874. Bombay Chamber of Commerce, 1873-4, pp.149-50.

costed dock construction plans and specifications. Once given the go-ahead, he planned and supervised the construction works on the Prince's Dock. His knowledge of big crane designing contributed to equipping the new dock with twenty travelling cranes, including a 100-ton crane for lifting very heavy cargo that was regarded as the "special pride" of the dock; and he also ensured the provision of state-of-the-art technologies, such as the powerful steam dredger and steam hoppers, ordered from the Glasgow firms of J. and G. Rennie and John Elder & Co., which were used to dredge a channel of sufficient depth and width in the harbour to facilitate steamship access to the dock.<sup>106</sup>

The *Times of India* declared that the Prince's Dock was "one of the most important works ever constructed in India". At the opening ceremony, Bombay Governor Richard Temple also waxed lyrical describing the new wet dock as a "feat of science and skill", which was not only the first of its kind in all of Asia but was also not to be found in the "great ports of the Mediterranean" such as Marseilles, Venice, and Constantinople. The new facility provided a combined water and quayage space of just over 36 acres, again virtually identical to that of the Queen's Dock, and was capable of accommodating "22 large Canal steamers alongside as well as 12 more awaiting their turn in the middle".<sup>107</sup> The Prince's Dock was quite openly designed to cater for the major shipping companies dominating the import and export trade with Europe, such as the P&O, Anchor, Hall and Clan Lines, which were each awarded several berths, as well of course as the state subsidised BI. By the mid-1880s, steamship traffic had become completely dominant, with sailing vessel tonnage entering the dock falling from 23% in 1880-1 to just 9% in 1885-6.<sup>108</sup>

The dominant presence of steamers also meant the eviction from the centre of the harbour of the smaller native or 'country' craft – the *pattemars*, *dhow*s, *botellas*, and *baglas* that continued to carry the major part of the coasting trade. In the early 1880s, these vessels still amounted to 24% of overall ship traffic in the harbour, numbering 800 to 1000 during the busiest months of the trade calendar.<sup>109</sup> Prior to the construction of the Prince's Dock, they were able to enjoy free anchorage off the shores of the Elphinstone Estate.<sup>110</sup> Many of their owners belonged to the newly established 'Native Merchants and Traders of Bombay', which had petitioned the governor against the site chosen for the new dock. The petition pointed out that the proposed access channel to the Prince's Dock for the bigger ships would, for much of the time, effectively block off their smaller vessels from landing in that part of the harbour closest to the native town. As their boats would now have to land much further north, the necessity of having to procure land carriage for the distant transport of their cargoes to and from the Indian town would entail great extra expense and heavy losses. In reminding the Governor that "before the purchase of the Elphinstone property by Government, the greater portion of the foreign trade was carried on at Colaba and the Fort Customs Bunder...whereas the native trade was bound to the Elphinstone Estate",<sup>111</sup> the Bombay coasting merchants were recognising that the construction of the new dock was also about the extension of colonial maritime space and the displacement from accustomed locations and threat to the economic abilities of less powerful groups. They received little sympathy from Governor Temple who, in his speech at the opening ceremony of the Prince's Dock, singled out "the

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<sup>106</sup> 'The Prince's Dock', *Times of India*, 11 April 1879.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Bombay Port Trust. *Administration Report for the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 1885* (Bombay, 1885), iv.

<sup>109</sup> Bombay Port Trust. *Administration Report for the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 1884* (Bombay, 1884), ii.

<sup>110</sup> Bombay Chamber of Commerce 1873-4, p.170.

<sup>111</sup> 'Memorial of Native Merchants and Traders of Bombay against the proposed Docks, 20<sup>th</sup> July 1874', Bombay Chamber of Commerce 1873-4, pp.208-9.

native craft” as being wholly out of place in the new dock and expressed the hope that the “process of engineering eviction” under way would soon force them out of the Elphinstone Estate altogether.<sup>112</sup> Inevitably, accidents between steamers and native vessels using the same channel tended to be fairly frequent in the harbour during these years, with the latter incurring heavy losses. The Port Trust initially blamed the accidents squarely on the native vessels’ alleged deficiencies: either they were not equipped with lights or those in charge of them lacked “any knowledge as to the use of the respective red and green lights”.<sup>113</sup> Only in 1883 did the Trust issue instructions to steamers to make use of the steam whistle “to warn native craft to clear the way”.<sup>114</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper has sought to identify and explain the complex set of processes that led to the interconnected synchronicity of the making of Glasgow and Bombay as modern though unequal global ports in the second half of the nineteenth century. Readers might perhaps be a little surprised that the evidence does not quite support the revisionist view that Marx overstated “the role of the forces associated with industrialisation” in his attempts to explain the changed nature of British imperialism vis-à-vis India during this period. This view is only tenable by narrowly focusing on his hypothesis concerning the enhanced power of a new industrial ‘bourgeoisie’ in the counsels of imperial governance.<sup>115</sup> But Marx was also aware of the much more profound global impact of the new web of interlocking technologies which the ‘forces’ of industrialisation brought in their wake and which constituted “a qualitatively different mode of committing social labour to the transformation of nature”.<sup>116</sup> This study has identified Glasgow as pivotal to the globalising thrust of British industrial capitalism after 1850. It was the centre of many of the crucial industrial and technological innovations which provided enhanced opportunities for both the conquest of nature and colonial domination.

It has also shown the importance of understanding the transformations consequent upon the global commodity chase as a geographically stretched out process involving more-or-less simultaneous spatial changes in both ‘metropole’ and ‘colony’. If the Suez Canal provides the emblematic expression of the conquest of nature during this era, it was part of a more general trend towards the production of new waterways that witnessed the correction of major European rivers and the making of new ports. The river Clyde was transformed and Glasgow emerged as a port capable of accommodating the progressively bigger and faster steamships carrying the industrial goods produced in the factories of the city and the wider region to the four continents beyond Europe. Perhaps the most significant artefact of the industrial age, the steamship provided the indispensable link between capitalist commodity movements and imperial ventures.

This increasingly global vocation was premised on networks established within an expanding British empire. Here India held particular significance both on account of the longstanding nature of the Scottish colonial presence, and as the leading destination of Clydeside’s ‘fancy’ cotton goods exports. It was the threat to Glasgow’s raw cotton supplies

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<sup>112</sup> ‘The Prince’s Dock’. *Times of India*, 11 April 1879.

<sup>113</sup> Bombay Port Trust. *Administration Report for the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 1880* (Bombay, 1880), p.56.

<sup>114</sup> Bombay Port Trust. *Administration Report for the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 1883* (Bombay, 1883), p.54.

<sup>115</sup> P. J. Cain & A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism. Innovation and Expansion, 1688-1914*, London: Longman, 1993, p.318.

<sup>116</sup> Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, p.298.

during the American Civil War that made the city's commercial class an important part of the coalition of textile interests, which pressed upon both imperial and colonial governments the necessity of revolutionising cotton cultivation in western India. The transformation of the port of Bombay through land reclamation was one of the significant outcomes of this process, resulting ultimately – not without dissonance and resistance – in its dependant modernisation in the interests of the steamship-driven European trade.

Glasgow-Bombay connections were articulated by a series of Scottish-dominated networks, which, in their global ambitions, were simultaneously promoting commerce, communications and colonialism during this period. The study has also revealed the importance of Bombay as a sub-imperial location, crucial to the construction of the most significant networks of this era based on the shipping nexus. A transplanted institution created by Scottish merchants, the Bombay Chamber of Commerce constituted the fundamental building blocks of these networks. As a collective body, the Chamber had the capacity to act both autonomously and in collaboration with metropolitan Chambers, making it a particularly influential pressure group on – it must be said – a usually well disposed colonial government.

Under its umbrella, individual agency houses could also, again largely on the basis of Scottish kinship ties stretching back to the metropole and forwards to other imperial arenas, accumulate a great deal of economic clout and political influence. The firm of William Nicol & Co. effectively constituted the nerve-centre of both networks, its spatial stretch and multiple functions – leading agency in the import/export cotton trade on behalf of Scottish manufacturers, indispensable source of information for Scottish businesses, management of steamships, ownership of port accommodation sites, close ties with the Bombay Government – making it a particularly appropriate conduit for a new type of imperial merchant who, via the communications revolution, could now operate on a genuinely transnational basis and envisage an increasingly global business empire. Indeed, Nicol & Co. provides an excellent illustration of the functional diversification of agency houses in Asia brought about by the new forces of industrialisation back in Britain.

Ambitious imperial merchants like Charles Cayzer and William MacKinnon were able to make use of positions, contacts and experience gained with Nicol & Co. in Bombay to put together networks that were fundamentally based on the shipping nexus. This comprised shipbuilders, manufacturers, marine and civil engineers, import-export merchants, financial backers, coal suppliers, agents and business collaborators, stretching back to Glasgow as well as forwards to other colonial port cities such as Mombasa and Durban, Surabaya and Melbourne. The 'insider Scottish' complexion of these networks placed a premium on trust and favoured the interlocking of interests between different factions of capital, thus greatly increasing the effectiveness of their sub-imperial operations. This enabled levels of coherence, mobility and penetration that could hardly be matched by Cain and Hopkins's "gentlemanly capitalists" based in the square mile of London's financial and service sector, who were allegedly the focal point of British imperialism in the nineteenth century.<sup>117</sup> More generally, in contrast to these historians' view of a continuous and largely unchanging imperialism dominated by the City of London for two centuries, the argument here is that it was the emergence of these geographically circulating coalitions of capital, made possible by the development of industrial productive forces, that gave British imperialism new possibilities in the second half of the nineteenth century.

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<sup>117</sup> Raymond E. Dumett (ed.), *Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Imperialism. The New Debate on Empire*, London: Longman, 1999, pp.5-7.

Such ambitious transnational entrepreneurship also led to external networking with colonial governments. Cayzer secured the lucrative cargo of stores for both the central and provincial governments in India while the MacKinnon group's increasing penetration of the southern hemisphere was initially made possible by very generous government subsidies for the conveyance of mails. Involvement in the shipping nexus also gave European merchants other collaborative opportunities with the colonial state, as seen in the activities of the Elphinstone Land & Press Company relating to the development of the port of Bombay. Typically, such collaborations involved agencies of the colonial rather than of the London-based imperial state, and Cain and Hopkins's Whitehall-based civil servants and politicians did not figure prominently here. These collaborations often generated a formidable type of power that could secure unparalleled mobility of industrial factors of production, including both machines and wage labour, to achieve spatial changes in record time. As Rosa Luxemburg observed, this was much more easily achieved in a colonial, non-capitalist context where colonial government policies provided capitalism with an elasticity it would not possess at home, enabling the speedy appropriation of "the most important means of production" to secure "miraculous" changes in the landscape.<sup>118</sup>

Nonetheless, while it could alter landscapes, transnational capitalist imperialism still had its limitations. Generously subsidised by the colonial state, the BI still failed to dislodge Indian merchants from the coasting trade, nor was the Mackinnon group successful in making much headway against Indian and Arab merchant networks on the Red Sea and western Indian Ocean trade routes. Indeed, in an era of speculative capitalism, these Glasgow-Bombay networks remained inherently unstable and the demise of the firm of Nicol & Co. in the late 1870s brought the golden age of their initiatives to an end.

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<sup>118</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963 [1913], pp.358 & 370.

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**Commodities of Empire** is a joint research collaboration between the Open University's **Ferguson Centre for African and Asian Studies** and London Metropolitan University's **Caribbean Studies Centre**. These two institutions form the nucleus of a growing international network of researchers and research centres.

The mutually reinforcing relationship between 'commodities' and 'empires' has long been recognised. Over the last six centuries the quest for profits has driven imperial expansion, with the global trade in commodities fuelling the ongoing industrial revolution. These 'commodities of empire', which became transnationally mobilised in ever larger quantities, included foodstuffs (wheat, rice, bananas); industrial crops (cotton, rubber, linseed and palm oils); stimulants (sugar, tea, coffee, cocoa, tobacco and opium); and ores (tin, copper, gold, diamonds). Their expanded production and global movements brought vast spatial, social, economic and cultural changes to both metropolises and colonies.

In the Commodities of Empire project we explore the networks through which such commodities circulated within, and in the spaces between, empires. We are particularly attentive to local processes – originating in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America – which significantly influenced the outcome of the encounter between the world economy and regional societies, doing so through a comparative approach that explores the experiences of peoples subjected to different imperial hegemonies.

The following key research questions inform the work of project:

- 1) The networks through which commodities were produced and circulated within, between and beyond empires;
- 2) The interlinking 'systems' (political-military, agricultural labour, commercial, maritime, industrial production, social communication, technological knowledge) that were themselves evolving during the colonial period, and through which these commodity networks functioned;
- 3) The impact of agents in the periphery on the establishment and development of commodity networks: as instigators and promoters; through their social, cultural and technological resistance; or through the production of anti-commodities;
- 4) The impact of commodity circulation both on the periphery, and on the economic, social and cultural life of the metropolises;
- 5) The interrogation of the concept of 'globalisation' through the study of the historical movement and impact of commodities.

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