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Palmerston, Parliament and Peking: The Melbourne Ministry and the Opium Crisis, 1835-1840.

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PALMERSTON, PARLIAMENT AND PEKING:
THE MELBOURNE MINISTRY AND THE OPIUM CRISIS, 1835-1840

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of History

by

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With the sword at their throat they have become
members of what is facetiously called the
'Brotherhood' of Nations!

William Hunter, an "Old Resident" of the foreign
factories in Canton, 1825-1842

The 'Fan Kwae' at Canton: Before Treaty Days
(London, 1882; reprint, Shanghai, China: Oriental
Affairs, 1938), 95.

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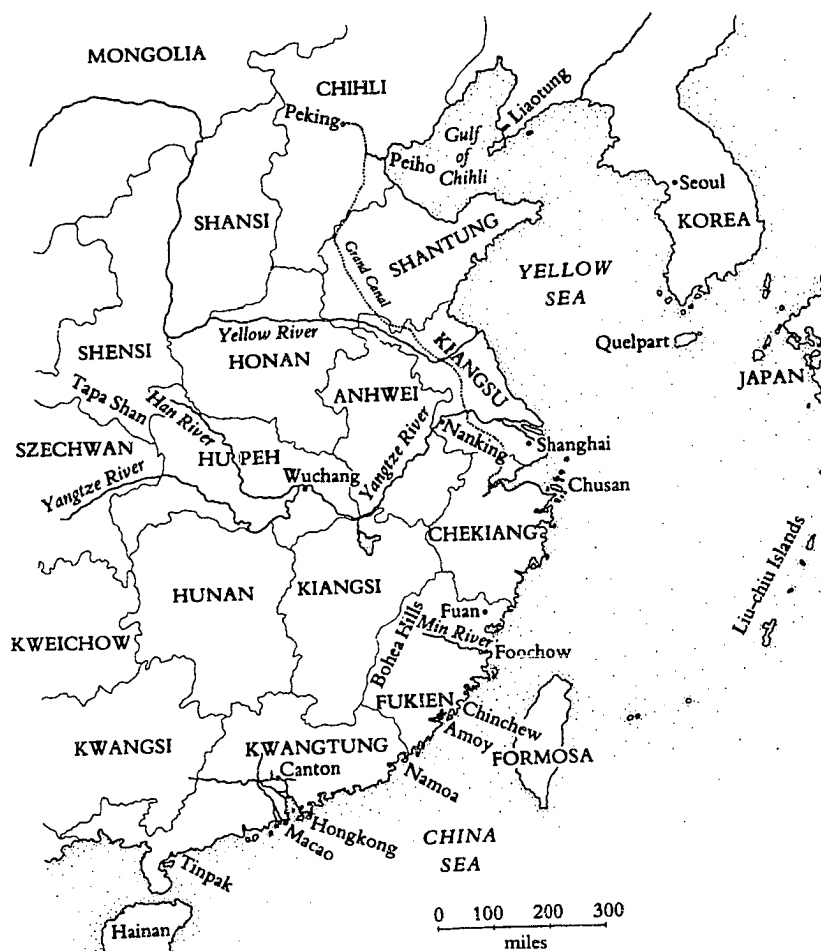
Next, I extend my appreciation to Vaughan Baker and Amos E. Simpson. Since I left USL with a Master's degree, they have not stopped teaching me how to be a better human being. Their continued friendship and guidance have taught me that the study of history is only a means to an end--creating a better world for my family and friends.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

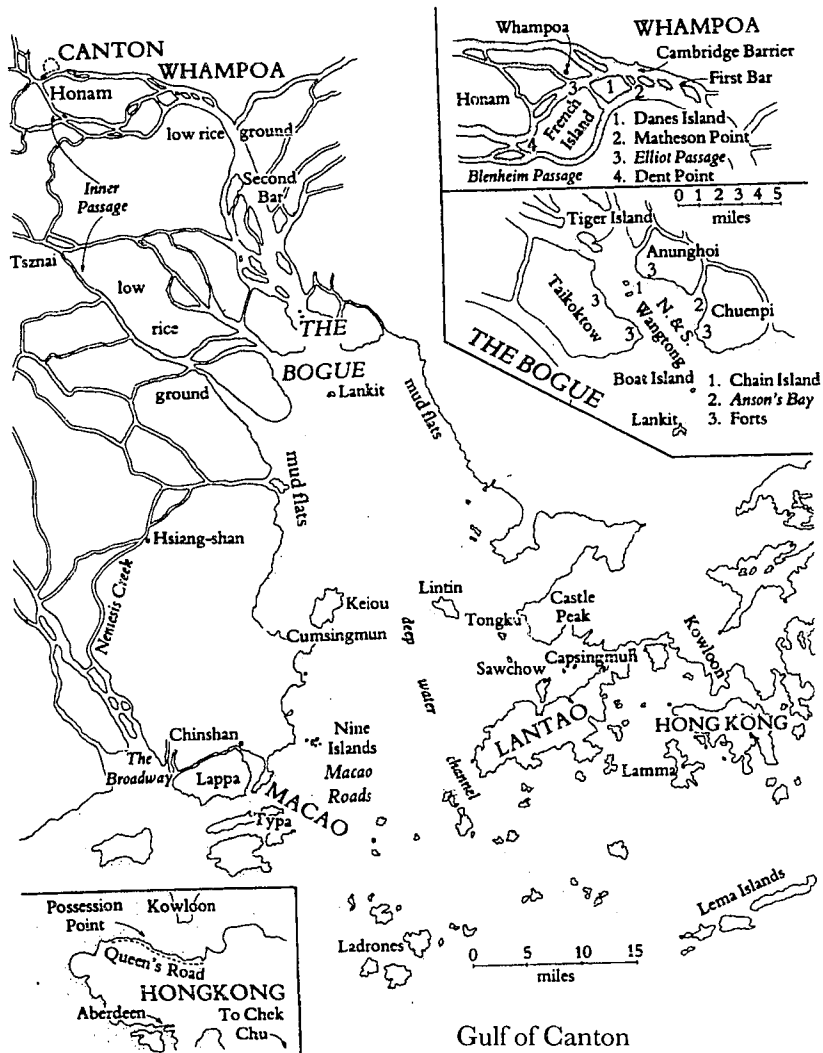
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
MAP 1	vi
MAP 2	vii
ABSTRACT	viii
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER	
1 THE GREAT REFORM ACT AND DEREGULATION OF THE CHINA TRADE	20
2 "CHINA BELONGS TO PALMERSTON"	44
3 INTERNAL DISSENSION	74
4 FAILURE TO TAKE HEED	103
5 CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE	134
6 THE DECISION TO WAGE WAR	166
7 "THE OPIUM AND THE CHINA QUESTION"	191
CONCLUSIONS: HISTORIANS AND THE OPIUM WAR	222
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	240
APPENDIXES	
A	256
B	258
VITA	261

MAP 1



China in the Early Nineteenth Century

MAP 2



ABSTRACT

"Palmerston, Parliament and Peking" is a revisionist work designed to challenge the prevailing economic interpretations of the first Opium War, 1839-1842. Orthodox historiography considers early nineteenth-century Britain as a modern, industrial society and argues that its Government needed to respond violently to the Chinese authorities' suppression of the opium trade in order to protect and expand a lucrative endeavor. Indian opium sales generated revenue for the British-run government in Bengal and paid for Chinese tea, a highly prized commodity in Great Britain. British industrialists demanded war to end the Chinese Government's restrictions on trade, known as the Canton system, thus opening China's market to goods produced by Britain's expanding industrial economy.

During the mid-1970s a new interpretation of British society began to emerge which challenges the centrality of modernization to the experience of life in early nineteenth-century Britain. Viewing Britain in the 1830s as a predominantly traditional society, these historians argue that the landed aristocracy remained the dominant order economically, socially and politically. Although Northern industrialists launched their challenge to this

aristocratic order in this period, the limited scope of industrial growth inhibited their ability to win approval for middle-class initiatives at the highest levels of government.

By revising the interpretation of the British Cabinet's decision to wage war on China, this dissertation supports these new interpretations of early nineteenth-century British society. Lord Melbourne's Whig Ministry (1835-1841) did not respond immediately to calls for a violent response to events in China. Several Ministers doubted the wisdom of confronting such a populous empire as China, and economic considerations shared center stage with the Government's domestic political interests. A political crisis in the Fall of 1839 created the opportunity for middle-class Radicals, whose constituent eagerly awaited the "opening" of China, to sway a cautious aristocratic government.

INTRODUCTION

In 1839 and 1840 the Government of Great Britain, the Melbourne Ministry (1835-1841), contemplated war with China. At home the Ministry faced growing political resistance. The Opposition stridently called the nation's attention to the Chartist riots, a deficit budget, colonial rebellions in Canada and Jamaica, Irish unrest, disestablishment of the Anglican Church and threats to British trade in Mexico, Buenos Aires and China.¹ This political crisis sets the scene for the Melbourne Ministry's decision to wage war in response to the Chinese government's seizure of £2,000,000 worth of British owned opium.

¹Appendix A; Viscount Powerscourt, "House of Commons Debate, January 30, 1840," *Times*, 31 January 1840, p. 3; See also Dorothy Thompson, *The Chartists: Popular Politics in the Industrial Revolution* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); Ged Martin, *The Durham Report and British Policy: A Critical Essay* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); Philip J. McLewin, *Power and Economic Change: The Response to Emancipation in Jamaica and British Guiana 1840-1865* (New York: Garland, 1987); John O. Ranelagh, *A Short History of Ireland* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); G.I.T. Machin, *Politics and the Churches in Great Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977); Iwan Wyn Morgan, "Anglo-French Confrontation and Cooperation in Spanish America, 1836-1848" (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1975); For China see footnote 2.

Although the opium crisis has certainly not been ignored, its relationship to the British domestic situation has not been fully explored. Current historiography on the subject focuses primarily on economic issues in the Far East.² Prevailing interpretations argue that the British Government needed to respond violently to the Chinese authorities' suppression of the opium trade in order to protect and to expand a lucrative endeavor. Indian opium sales generated revenue for the British-run government in Bengal and paid for Chinese tea, a highly prized commodity in Great Britain. Furthermore, British industrialists demanded war to end the Chinese Government's restrictions on trade, known as the Canton System, and to create an opportunity to sell mass-produced goods. The resulting war changed the economic relationship between Britain and China by opening the latter's vast market.

²Gerald S. Graham, *The China Station: War and Diplomacy, 1830-1869* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978); Tan Chung, *China and the Brave New World: A Study of the Origins of the Opium War (1840-42)* (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 1978); Peter Ward Fay, *The Opium War, 1840-1842: Barbarians in the Celestial Empire in the Early Part of the Nineteenth Century and the War by Which They Forced the Gates Ajar* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975); Hsin-pao Chang, *Commissioner Lin and The Opium War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964); Michael Greenberg, *British Trade and the Opening of China, 1800-1842* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951); Maurice Collis, *Foreign Mud: Being an Account of the Opium Imbroglia at Canton in the 1830's & the Anglo-Chinese War that Followed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947); David Owen, *British Opium Policy in China and India* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934; reprint, Archon Books, 1968).

Douglas North, winner of the 1993 Nobel prize for economics, argues that changes in economic institutions must be studied in the particular political context of the time rather than in isolation. Political institutions define and maintain economic relations based on property rights and contracts. Since economic, social and political institutions by their very nature are slow to adapt themselves, substantial economic changes will more likely occur when accompanied by either an internal or external threat to a political institution.³ North criticizes purely economic historical analyses that use simple "cost/benefit calculus." This methodology assumes that individuals weigh the cost of a particular economic system against the potential benefits of changing it. If the cost of change outweighs the benefits--economic growth--then individuals will act to preserve the system. If, on the other hand, the benefits outweigh the cost, then individuals will act to change the system.⁴

Historians of the Opium War have generally used cost/benefit calculus to explain the opening of China. They have argued that "the British" believed that the Chinese government's restrictions on foreign trade limited the potential for an exponential growth in sales of British

³Douglas North, *Structure and Change in Economic History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), 27-9.

⁴North, *Structure and Change*, 4-5.

manufactured goods. The benefits of change outweighed the cost of preserving the system. Because of the inhibiting trade environment, the "British" sought an excuse to change violently their economic relationship with China.

Two fundamental deficiencies limit the ability of these orthodox interpretations to explain the events which occurred in China and London at the end of the 1830s. First, most of the historians* who have dealt with the issue present a monolithic image of the "British." These scholars make few attempts to differentiate between the wishes of the merchants in China and the policies of Her Majesty's Government in London. They also assume that the British Government strove to meet the needs of the mercantile and manufacturing communities. The result of this methodological approach is an assumption that the historian can use the term "British" to mean merchants, manufacturers, Foreign Service Officers, the Foreign Office and the Government without differentiating among them. Such an oversight is not unique to the Opium War. Historian Ged Martin finds similar deficiencies in histories of British policy toward Canada during the same period (1835-1841). Martin notes that "The historians' shorthand may mislead in such terms as 'British' or 'the British Government.'" In the 1830s there was certainly

*The conclusion contains criticism of specific historians and their work.

little sign of 'the Official mind' and we must guard against the more workaday device of 'the Colonial Office view'."⁵

Second, assuming a convergence of desires among "the British" allows historians of the Opium War to ignore the complexity of British society and politics in the first half of the nineteenth century. They can consider members of the British Government in an economic rather than a political role. As Douglas North points out, however, most politicians concern themselves more with the preservation of their own power, rather than with seeking ways to expand the economy. Economic change occurs when a threat to a political institution combines with the desire for economic gain.⁶ Just as North does not reduce economic policies to the search for growth, he refuses to explain political action as a simple grab for power and control. A society's governing ideology, by providing guidelines for acceptable behavior, shapes the actions of both the rulers and the ruled.⁷ In order to place a particular historical event in context, one must examine the hegemonic values within a community.

⁵Ged Martin, "Confederation Rejected: The British Debate on Canada, 1837-1840," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 11 (October 1982): 35.

⁶North, *Structure and Change*, 27-9.

⁷North, *Structure and Change*, 45-58.

Until recently the orthodox interpretations in British history argued that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the English witnessed the final decay of traditional society and the emergence of a modern nation. As industry and commerce replaced agriculture as the most significant aspect of the economy, the rural, aristocratic community of the *ancien regime* gave way to the urban, middle class society of the Victorian period. Following the political and economic policies and values of the middle class, British imperial power reached its apogee. During the mid-1970s a new interpretation of nineteenth century British social structure began to emerge which challenged this standard interpretation. Denying the centrality of modernization to the experience of life in the first half of the nineteenth century, these historians view Britain in the 1830s as a predominantly traditional society. The landed aristocracy remained the dominant order economically, socially and politically. Although Northern industrialists began their challenge to Britain's aristocratic order in the this period, the limited scope of industrial growth inhibited their ability to win approval for middle-class initiatives at the highest levels of government.

One of the major points of contention between these two sets of interpretations is the nature of the nineteenth

century economy.⁸ The standard interpretation emphasizes the industrial revolution. Between 1760 and 1840 the English economy changed from hand production, using human or animal power to make unique goods in a family setting, to mass production, using machine-generated power to make standardized goods in factories. The change in production caused the economy to "take-off" as it moved beyond providing subsistence needs for a local community to providing consumer goods for the society at large and for export abroad. Displaced rural laborers left the familiar surroundings of the traditional family economy to work in the unsafe factory system, which concentrated all aspects of production around the steam engine. According to these interpretations, overseas trade performed an essential service in providing markets for Britain's expanding industrial economy.⁹

⁸For two comprehensive historiographical essays on the early nineteenth-century economy see: David Cannadine, "The Past and Present in the English Industrial Revolution," *Past and Present* no. 103 (May 1984): 131-72; Joel Mokyr, "Editor's Introduction: The New Economic History and the Industrial Revolution," *idem*, ed., *The British Industrial Revolution: An Economic Perspective* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 1-131.

⁹Walt Whitman Rostow, *British Economy of the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948; reprint, 1949; *idem*, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960); *idem*, *How It All Began: Origins of the Modern Economy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975); Phyllis Deane and W.A. Cole, *British Economic Growth, 1688-1959: Trends and Structure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962); Phyllis Deane, *The First Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge:

Critics of this interpretation argue that while industrialization began in the early nineteenth century, the change affected a relatively small percentage of the total economy. Only 10 to 12 per cent of the English labor force worked in modern factories; the remainder engaged in agriculture or in traditional trades. Textile production, the most widely used example of industrialization, centered around Lancashire. It employed one-half of the industrial work force, but represented 7 per cent of British national income.¹⁰ When iron and steel are added to textile production, total industrial output still only represented less than one-fourth of total manufacturing output in 1840. The results of these studies show a rate of growth considerably slower and more constant in the total economy than the rate advanced by advocates of an industrial take-off theory. Consequently, as historians downplay the importance of industrialization to the total economy, they similarly diminish the significance previously attributed to foreign markets for manufactured goods.¹¹

Cambridge University Press, 1965); David Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Ralph Davis, *The Industrial Revolution and Overseas Trade* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1979).

¹⁰Michael Fores, "The Myth of a British Industrial Revolution," *History* 66 (1981): 181-98.

¹¹C. Knick Harley, "British Industrialization Before 1841: Evidence of Slower Growth During the Industrial Revolution," *Journal of Economic History* 42 (June 1982): 267-89; N.F.R. Crafts, "British Economic Growth, 1700-1831:

The dominance of the industrial take-off theory has shaped the standard interpretation of early nineteenth century social structure. Social historians tend to find the origins of modern English social relationships in this period. National class divisions, based on the new urban industrial experience, replaced paternalistic social relationships derived from life in small rural communities. With the decline of traditional relationships the landed aristocracy abdicated responsibility to the rising capitalist middle class, which struggled to maintain its hegemonic position in society against the new industrial working class. Each class had unique values that necessarily produced conflict among the various social groups and their belief systems.¹²

Like their counterparts in economic history, some social historians have questioned the validity of viewing early nineteenth-century social relationships in modern terms.¹³ Revisionists downplay the division of English

A Review of the Evidence, *Economic History Review* 26 (May 1983): 177-99; *idem*, *British Economic Growth During the Industrial Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

¹²For the two most important presentations of this general interpretation, see: Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780-1880* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1969); Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963; New York: Vintage Books, 1966).

¹³Any of the most recent interpretations rest on what has been described as a "linguistic turn" in methodology. For the pros and cons of this approach see: David Mayfield

society along economic lines--land, capital and labor--and examine society in terms of governors and governed, idle and industrious orders, or privileged few and the people. Those with political power dominated those without, and a life of leisure commanded more prestige than did working for a living. In this type of society the traditional aristocracy still played the dominant role. Domination involved more than simply exploitation; it dictated a responsibility to the lower orders. Contemporaries thus did not view as natural the conflict among the various orders of society. Animositities grew out of the perceived abuse of political power and the failure to reconcile the various interests of the community, rather than the misuse of economic power.¹⁴

and Susan Throne, "Social History and Its Discontents: Gareth Stedman Jones and the Politics of Language," *Social History* 17 (May 1992): 165-88; John Lawrence and Miles Taylor, "The Poverty of Protest: Gareth Stedman Jones and the Politics of Language--A Reply," *Social History* 18 (January 1993): 1-15; Patrick Joyce, "The Imaginary Discontents of Social History: A Note of Response to Mayfield and Throne, and Lawrence and Taylor," *Social History* 18 (January 1993): 81-5; James Vernon, "Who's Afraid of the 'Linguistic Turn'? The Politics of Social History and Its Discontents," *Social History* 19 (January 1994): 81-97.

¹⁴Francis M.L. Thompson, *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963); *idem*, *The Rise of Respectable Society: A Social History of Victorian Britain, 1830-1900* (Cambridge University Press, 1988); Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1840-1914* (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Standard interpretations of domestic politics during the late 1830s contrast sharply with the revisions taking place in economic and social histories. Political histories commonly argue that in the second half of the 1830s the foundations of the modern British two-party system developed. They define a "party" as a structured organization with a clear ideology. The Liberal Party, according to this analysis, advocated progressive reform of the constitution and attracted its support from large urban and non-English (Irish, Scottish and Welsh) constituencies. The Conservative Party, drawing its support from small boroughs and English counties, opposed constitutional reform but admitted the necessity of practical reforms. Once party members entered the House of Commons, they seldom voted across party lines; party organization and ideology instilled this discipline.¹⁵

Such modern definitions of party organization and ideology have not stood unchallenged. Challengers to the

¹⁵ Norman Gash, *Reaction and Reconstruction in English Politics, 1832-1852* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965); *idem*, "The Organization of the Conservative Party, 1832-1846, Part I: The Parliamentary Organization," *Parliamentary History* 1 (1982): 137-59; *idem*, "The Organization of the Conservative Party, 1832-1846, Part II: The Electoral Organization," *Parliamentary History* 2 (1983): 131-52; D.E.D. Beales, "Parliamentary Parties and the 'Independent' Member, 1810-1860," *Ideas and Institutions of Victorian Britain: Essays in Honour of George Kitson Clark*, Robert Robson, ed., (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1967), 1-19; David Close, "The Formation of a Two-Party Alignment in the House of Commons," *English Historical Review* 84 (April 1969).

prevailing interpretation prefer a narrower, and more traditional, definition of party politics. Instead of two all-encompassing parties, revisionists focus on smaller groups of politicians held together by aristocrats through bonds of family and friendship. These historians also reject the artificial lines created by the yes-or-no nature of parliamentary divisions lists. By examining the ideological differences within the "Liberal" and "Conservative" parties, one finds that a combination of interests could produce the perception of a "two party system." Various blocs on both sides of parliament joined forces to gain divergent goals by the same means.¹⁶

The conventional interpretations of British imperial history reflect the standard versions of economic, social and political histories. Proponents of a "free trade imperialism" theory argue that British politicians favored

¹⁶R. Hugh Cameron, "Parties and Policies in Early Victorian Britain: A Suggestion for Revision," *Canadian Journal of History* 3 (December 1979): 257-77; Boyd Hilton, "Peel: A Reappraisal," *Historical Journal* 22 (1979): 585-614; Peter Mandler, *Aristocratic Government in the Age of Reform: Whigs and Liberals, 1830-1852* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Ian Newbould, "Whiggery and the Dilemma of Reform: Liberals, Radicals and the Melbourne Administration, 1835-9," *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 53 (1980): 229-41; *idem*, "Sir Robert Peel and the Conservative Party, 1832-1841: A Study in Failure?," *English Historical Review* 48 (July 1983): 529-57; *idem*, "The Emergence of a Two-Party system in England from 1830 to 1841: Roll Call and Reconsideration," *Parliaments, Estates and Representation* 5 (June 1985): 25-31; *idem*, *Whiggery and Reform, 1830-41: The Politics of Government* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

an aggressive overseas policy in order to expand foreign markets for the new industrial economy. Unlike their aristocratic predecessors, who sought a formal imperial structure, early- and mid-Victorian leaders followed a *laissez-faire* policy which favored informal economic control to accomplish their imperialistic goals. Events around the world drew British forces into areas whose political leaders refused to cooperate with the agents of the informal empire. This theory emphasizes the role of British officials and citizens abroad and their relationship to indigenous collaborators. It suggests that if overseas officials called for help, or got into trouble with native administrations, then the British Government sat ready to use force.¹⁷ Most critics of "free trade imperialism" do not challenge their antagonists' assumptions about the nature of early nineteenth century English society. They continue to set English overseas exploits within the context of an industrial middle-class society. An ideology based on *laissez-faire* economics,

¹⁷John Gallagher and Roland Robinson, "Imperialism of Free Trade," *Economic History Review* 6 (1953): 1-15; Roland Robinson, "Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Collaboration," *The Robinson and Gallagher Controversy*, Edited with an Introduction by Wm. Roger Louis (New York: New View Points, 1976), 128-151; David K. Fieldhouse, *Economics and Empire 1830-1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973); Bernard Semmel, *The Rise of Free Trade Imperialism: Classical Political Economy, the Empire of Free Trade and Imperialism, 1750-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

however, precluded the possibility of government intervention in order to advance foreign trade. Foreign wars represented an exception, not the rule.¹⁸

Currently, Peter Cain and Anthony Hopkins, recognizing the new work of economic and social historians, have begun to set imperial activity within the context of an aristocratic society. Rejecting the notion that the needs of Northern industrialists motivated economic expansion, Cain and Hopkins developed the idea of "Gentlemanly Capitalism." During the course of the eighteenth century, bankers and commercial capitalists, those who could best afford the lifestyle of gentlemen, entered into Britain's ruling elite by supporting the growth of a "Fiscal-Military State"--the apparatus needed to finance continental wars, to pay for government patronage and to collect excise taxes.¹⁹ These gentlemen, located in or near the City of London, exercised considerable influence in Whitehall and

¹⁸Desmond C.M. Platt, "The Imperialism of Free Trade: Some Reservations," *Economic History Review* 21 (1968): 296-306; *idem*, *Finance, Trade, and Politics in British Foreign Policy, 1815-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968); *idem*, "Further Objections to an 'Imperialism of Free Trade', 1830-60." *Economic History Review* 26 (February 1973): 77-91; Oliver MacDonagh, "The Anti-Imperialism of Free Trade," *Economic History Review* 14 (April 1962): 489-501; Britten Dean, "The British Informal Empire: The Case of China," *The Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 14 (March 1976): 64-81.

¹⁹The most developed presentation of this conception is John Brewer's *The Sinews of Power: War, Money, and the English State, 1688-1783* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1988).

led the drive toward imperialist expansion. Parliamentary leaders--landed aristocrats--took this advice, because "successful expansion, reinforced by colonial acquisitions, generated profits and revenues, helped to service the national debt, and contributed to employment and political stability."²⁰

While a reinterpretation of the British Cabinet's decision to wage the first Opium War (1839-1842) supports these new explanations of early nineteenth-century British society, an important anomaly needs to be explained. The evidence available shows that Northern merchants and industrialists provided the impetus behind the use of force, not the City, the Foreign Office, or the Cabinet. The question then becomes for the historian of the Opium War: why did a parliament and Cabinet, dominated by landed aristocrats, address so actively the economic needs of a political and social minority? The political crisis the Melbourne Ministry faced during this period provides the key to an answer.

In 1839, just six short years after the summoning of the first Reform Parliament, Lord Melbourne still struggled

²⁰Peter J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion 1688-1914* (New York: Longman, 1993), 103; See also their "The Political Economy of British Expansion Overseas, 1750-1914," *Economic History Review* 23 (November 1980):463-90, as well as, "Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Expansion Overseas I. The Old Colonial System, 1688-1850," *Economic History Review* 29 (December 1986): 501-25.

with the Great Reform Act's legacy. His Ministry had lost the confidence of the House of Commons and faced the possibility of losing office. On domestic issues the Opposition accused the Ministry of undermining the constitution of Great Britain, while Radicals claimed the Ministry supported the *status quo*. It fought back by pointing to the active participation of members of the Opposition and Radicals in passing controversial pieces of legislation. On foreign policy issues Her Majesty's Government did not have this luxury.

While normally foreign policy remained "free from effective interference by parliament,"²¹ freedom meant taking responsibility for real, or perceived, failed policies. In 1836 Melbourne wrote to Lord Palmerston, Foreign Minister, "From all I hear of the real temper of the House of Commons, We must be very careful what we do in foreign affairs."²² Palmerston was not careful enough. In 1839 the Opposition asserted that the Ministry's inaction in regard to overseas interests threatened the commercial position of British merchants. Her Majesty's Government thus needed strong, swift action to pacify the

²¹Bernard Porter, "British Foreign Policy in the Nineteenth Century," *The Historical Journal* 23 (1980), 194.

²²Viscount Melbourne to Viscount Palmerston, South Street, 10 February 1836. Palmerston Papers. Property of the Broadlands Trust. Deposited in Southampton University Library (Hereafter cited as PP). GC/ME/69.

commercial and manufacturing constituencies. The opium crisis, which had developed in China in March 1839, provided the best opportunity to act swiftly without risking a general European war. The political threat from the Opposition and the Radicals was a crucial factor in the Ministry's decision to send an expeditionary force to China.

Domestic politics then played an integral role in the decision to wage war. To focus primarily on economic issues in the Far East provides too simplistic an interpretation of events. Understanding the Melbourne Ministry's decision to send an expeditionary force to China in 1839 requires a discussion of the institutional changes that occurred both in Great Britain and in China during the early 1830s. In 1832 Great Britain experienced the sweeping changes of the Great Reform Bill; in 1834 the China trade lost both of its regulatory institutions--the British East India Company and the Canton System. These institutional changes contributed to the uncertainty of both parliamentary politics and Anglo-Chinese relations. Although half way around the world from each other, the deterioration of conditions in Britain and China resulted in two simultaneous crises that politicians in the British Parliament linked together.

Because the role the nineteenth-century British "state" falls so easily in and out of favor with scholars,²³ I feel compelled to explain my concentration on parliamentary politics. In the early nineteenth century parliament provided the recognized forum for discussing issues of national interest. Newspapers of every political inclination covered events in the capital with considerable attention. As one newspaper explained to its readers,

the conflicting interests and views which engage and direct the energies of the several classes forming the *community*--in the largest acceptance of the term--of this vast empire are concentrated, and placed as it were in the area of parliament for discussion in detail, and for adjustment in patches."²⁴

Parliament thus furnishes a legitimate setting for historical inquiry. A detailed examination of the issues that capture the attention of Parliament contributes to a better understanding of the reaction of that body and the British press to the news that the Chinese government had confiscated £2,000,000 worth of British owned opium.

Beginning in August of 1839 and lasting until the summer of 1840, the Opposition saw the opium crisis as another example of Ministerial incompetence. In this tense

²³For the changing fortunes of the "state" in historical scholarship see Martin J. Wiener, "The Unloved State: Twentieth-Century Politics in the Writing of Nineteenth-Century History," *Journal of British Studies* 33 (July 1994): 283-308.

²⁴"Meeting of Parliament," *The Charter* (London), 19 January 1840, p.8.

political atmosphere the Ministry met at Windsor Castle on 1 October 1839 to decide the fate of the China question. The following spring, while the political assault from the Opposition continued and rumors of war leaked out to the press, journalists and pamphleteers argued whether the Chinese actions justified a violent response; they failed to reach a consensus. The argument then shifted to the House of Commons where politicians debated whether or not Melbourne's Ministry had acted appropriately in the years leading up to the conflict. One can describe the policy which emerged from both the private Cabinet debate and the public debate as "British" only in the broadest terms. Individual members of the Cabinet doubted the wisdom of sending forces to China, the press remained divided over the issue and almost one-half of the M.P.s voted against the Ministry's China policy.

CHAPTER 1
THE GREAT REFORM ACT
AND
DEREGULATION OF THE CHINA TRADE

At the beginning of the nineteenth century an aristocratic elite dominated Great Britain. This elite saw land as the rudimentary source of wealth and the unwashed masses of society as a serious threat to the security of the realm. The "unreformed system" theoretically restricted the parliamentary franchise to men of independent status within the community; property, poor rates or income, each defined on a regional basis, determined independence. As these economic values changed at varying rates and as property changed owners over the centuries, the actual wealth and status of individual electors varied from region to region. No generalizations can adequately describe the incredible number of variations within the unreformed system.¹ These myriad methods for

¹Frank O'Gorman, *Voters, Patrons, and Parties: The Unreformed Electoral System of Hanoverian England, 1734-1832* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 27-105; Michael Brock, *The Great Reform Act* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1973), 18-24.

selecting Members of Parliament remained overwhelmingly under the influence of the local landed aristocracy.² Any fundamental change in the constitutional system seemed unlikely because the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars had solidified the aristocratic perception of reality.

Political circumstances, however, did not fully correspond to the changing economic and social realities. The industrial revolution had begun to shift the wealth of Great Britain from the agricultural sector of the economy to the industrial, and from the rural areas to the urban. This redistribution of wealth, and the population migration which followed a similar pattern, started a fundamental shift in the social structure. Great Britain saw the rise of an industrial capitalist class and the growth of the urban working classes. Denied the right to share in the political power, these groups began their challenge to the aristocratic government because they believed that the political monopoly encouraged monopolies of wealth. The

²Historians disagree about the precise meaning of "deference," or aristocratic influence: O'Gorman, *Voters, Patrons, and Parties*, 225-44; Richard Davis, "The Whigs and the Idea of Electoral Deference: Some Further Thoughts on the Great Reform Act," *Durham University Journal* 67 (December 1974): 79-91; *idem*, "Deference and Aristocracy in the Time of the Great Reform Act," *American Historical Review* 81 (June 1976): 532-39; J.G.A. Pocock, "The Classic Theory of Deference," *American Historical Review* 81 (June 1976): 516-23; David Spring, "Walter Bagehot and Deference," *American Historical Review* 81 (June 1976): 524-31; Alan Heesom, "'Legitimate' versus 'Illegitimate' Influences: Aristocratic Electioneering in Mid-Victorian Britain," *Parliamentary History* 7 (1988): 282-305.

demographic changes had left many rural areas unpopulated and created several new municipalities. While the old boroughs retained their representatives, however, the new urban centers such as Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds failed to gain a voice in Commons.³ This imbalance resulted in an unusual situation. Historians estimate that between 200 and 338 M.P.s owed their return to a single proprietor. Contemporary critics of the system, however, used the higher number to argue for reform.⁴ The undemocratic nature of this system meant that most Englishmen had no direct representation in the House of Commons.⁵

As information technology changed at the beginning of the nineteenth century, newspapers, transported by faster coaches on better roads, highlighted the inequities of the unreformed system.⁶ A limited number of merchants and

³Brock, *Great Reform Act*, 18.

⁴O'Gorman (*Voters, Patrons, and Parties*, 20-1) favors the lower estimate, while Brock (*Great Reform Act*, 34) places the number around 275.

⁵James Vernon disagrees with the above view altogether. He argues that "democracy" means more than formal participation in a political process; other forms of popular protest gave the masses a voice in the "unreformed system." The Reform process itself therefore was undemocratic because it eliminated more traditional forms of political participation. *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, c.1815-1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 7.

⁶Brock, *Great Reform Act*, 17.

manufacturers could manipulate the electoral process, but the money and time involved restricted participants to those with substantial wealth and prestige.⁷ The average composition of the unreformed House of Commons broke down as follows: 24% M.P.s had aristocratic connections; 25% gentry; 33% professional, law, army or navy; and 15-20% commercial, manufacturing or industrial. The largest numbers of M.P.s thus represented the landed interest, while the system allowed enough flexibility to include other established interests within English society.⁸ To many of the disfranchised the political situation was intolerable, and they demanded reform. Many others dreaded political reform because they feared it would open a Pandora's box, inviting anarchy.⁹ The American and French Revolutions reinforced the pathological fear that change would wipe out all of the existing system.

Edmund Burke (1729-1797) best articulated the English aristocratic outlook in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Written in the form of a letter to a Frenchman, *Reflections* contains Burke's argument that the French Revolution lacked legitimacy and stability because the revolutionaries sought to destroy French society and to

⁷Brock, *Great Reform Act*, 24-5; Thompson, *English Landed Society*, 7, 40-41, 63.

⁸O'Gorman, *Voters, Patrons, and Parties*, 119-20.

⁹Brock, *Great Reform Act*, 39-42.

recreate a new one based on untested philosophical speculations. Burke supported his position by comparing the French Revolution to the English Glorious Revolution of 1688. He contended that the Glorious Revolution sought to correct and conserve, not to destroy and recreate, English society.

The key to Burke's argument was his insistence that men must base their decisions on practice, not theory: "The circumstances are what render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind,"¹⁰ not some metaphysical quality. For example, the French revolutionaries claimed that liberty was a positive good, yet Burke asked if a madman should be set free? He concluded that societies should not make fundamental decisions about political rights founded on untested theories that lead to social unrest and violence. According to Burke, social stability depended upon respect for "inherited" principles. Much like a son inherits his father's physical characteristics and property rights, a society acquires the political system of its forefathers. Just as the son is not the father, yet retains his father's qualities, a society must only change slowly over time in order to avoid violence--as the English did in 1688. Rapid changes in political or social relationships invited social

¹⁰Edmund Burke. *Reflections on the French Revolution*. (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), 8.

unrest; gradual, or organic change, insured the preservation of order.¹¹

While Burke's *Reflections* offered a strong argument for the maintenance of the *status quo*, his earlier political career furnished support for reform. Burke had stood for Catholic emancipation and fought against the American Revolutionary war and the East India Company's imperialism in India.¹² Even in *Reflections* his arguments, based on practical necessity rather than theory, called for gradually changing institutions that precipitated disorder. Blind obedience to the past or to authority represented a threat just as serious as metaphysical theories: "A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation."¹³

Most parliamentary figures in Britain agreed with Burke's assessment of the French Revolution and sought to maintain the British system relatively unchanged. Labeling British post-war politics as a struggle between "conservatives" seeking to preserve the *status quo* and "liberals" hoping to invent a new system glosses over, however, important differences and similarities among

¹¹Burke, *Reflections*, 35-9.

¹²James J. Sack, "The Memory of Burke and the Memory of Pitt: English Conservatism Confronts its Past, 1806-1829," *Historical Journal* 30 (1987): 623-40.

¹³Burke, *Reflections*, 24.

political leaders and creates simplistic stereotypes.¹⁴

By referring to Burke's view of change, one can illuminate the political landscape in early nineteenth century England and define individuals within unique, yet overlapping, tendencies--Ultra-Tory, Liberal Tory, Whig and Radical.

Ultra-Tories manifested the most extreme adherence to the ideas explicated in Burke's *Reflections*.¹⁵ Ultra- or High Tories regarded any "Reform" in response to popular pressure as an invitation to violent revolution. They viewed the role of government within the framework of a "managerial philosophy, which thought that the best way to minimize social unhappiness was to control society."¹⁶ The central government should exercise its control through a variety of monopolies--political, religious and economic. Politically, the subjects of the realm should defer to the judgment of the landed aristocracy. Land gave the

¹⁴For the contrary view of early nineteenth-century political circumstances--"Thus the new differences between whig and tory, as distinct from the dead differences of the early eighteenth century, emerge as a broad distinction between a liberal and conservative attitude." Austin Mitchell, *The Whigs in Opposition, 1815-1830* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 13.

¹⁵In "The Memory of Burke and the Memory of Pitt," Sack argues that English "conservatives" made little or no use of Burke himself before the 1830s because of his statements regarding Catholic Emancipation, the American Revolution and the East India Company. Sack does not, however, establish that conservatives ignored the arguments within *Reflections*, only the author.

¹⁶Boyd Hilton, "Peel: A Reappraisal," *Historical Journal* 22 (1979): 607.

aristocracy a stake in community stability as well as the wealth needed to cultivate a political education. In terms of religion, Ultra-Tories clung steadfastly to the "catholic" claims of the Anglican Church, believing the Established Church essential to the survival of the state.¹⁷ Economically, they supported the monopolies of the Crown-chartered companies--the Bank of England, the East India and Levant Companies. This support helped to tie the older middle classes of the City, Shipping, East Indian and West Indian interests--those who could best afford seats in Commons--to the English *ancien regime*.¹⁸

Liberal Tories reflected a more moderate view of change than the High Tories. According to this political position, practical, gradual reform was a necessary evil. Liberal Tories believed that, "if one could only strip away monopolies and pensions and other manifestations of control, society would regulate itself and that it would do so in such a way as, not to eliminate, but at least make sense of pain and vice."¹⁹ They concluded that "social order would be restored only if individuals looked to their

¹⁷Jonathan D.C. Clark, *English Society 1688-1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice during the Ancien Regime* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 349-58.

¹⁸W.D. Rubenstein, *Capitalism, Culture, and Decline in Britain 1750-1990* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 140-2.

¹⁹Hilton, "Peel," 607.

own duties and relied on God's Providence to harmonize them."²⁰ Broadly speaking, contemporaries grouped the Ultra- and Liberal Tories under the rubric "conservative" or Tory. Both groups' commitment to an "Anglican spiritual basis for national life" provided the common cause for unity.²¹

The Whigs had a more positive view of reform. They believed that the central government should respond with positive measures to pressure for political, religious and economic change from out of doors because "agitation" was a sign of the people's loss of confidence in the constitutional system. This belief stemmed from an older eighteenth-century ideology of aristocratic responsibility held by Charles James Fox (1749-1806), the leading opponent to England's war against revolutionary France and to the "tyrannical" tendencies of George III and his ministers. Lord Holland, Henry Richard Fox (1773-1840), carried his uncle's ideas into the nineteenth century, transforming them in the process. He argued that since the British political systems rested on the concept of popular sovereignty, Parliament, acting as the trustees of the people's will, must respond to their needs. His opinion

²⁰Mandler, *Aristocratic Government*, 97.

²¹James Sack, *From Jacobite to Conservative: Reaction and Orthodoxy in Britain, c.1760-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 253.

went much further than the traditional view of Parliament as the balance against despotism and democracy; it also stood in sharp contrast to Tory authoritarianism as well as to the practical individualism of Liberal Tories.²²

Radicals, on the other hand, called for the immediate elimination of all political, religious and economic monopolies. They believed that the current artificial political system created all such monopolies, the source of inequality and distress, and their removal would then provide social stability.²³ Contrary to the assertions of either Burke or the Whigs, the study of history demonstrated a gradual erosion of free Englishmen's natural rights that could only be restored by enfranchising the "non-represented" interests.²⁴ To accomplish this goal, Parliament needed to expand the definition of property

²²Mandler, *Aristocratic Government*, 19-21; Newbould places more emphasis on the idea of the Whigs as a balance between the extremes of democracy and despotism. *Whiggery*, 7; See also Ellis Archer Wasson, "The Great Whigs and Parliamentary Reform, 1809-1830," *Journal of British Studies* 24 (October 1985): 434-464.

²³Jones, "Rethinking Chartism," 135; John Belchem, "Radical Language and Ideology in the Nineteenth-Century England: The Challenge of the Platform," *Albion* 20 (Summer 1988): 253; Iorwerth J. Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century London: John Gast and His Times* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 80.

²⁴T.M. Parssinen, "Association, Convention and Anti-Parliament in British Radical Politics, 1771-1848," *English Historical Review* no.88 (July 1973): 504-33.

beyond landed wealth to include industry, commerce and labor.

Because no one of these fluid tendencies--Ultra-Tory, Liberal Tory, Whig or Radical--could put together a majority of M.P.s in Commons, the Crown's ministers had to govern by coalition. After 1815 Liberal Tories held most of the key positions in the Government, while Ultra-Tories provided the needed support. The post-war ministries followed a program of retrenchment to eliminate the war debt, which grew from £238,000,000 in 1793 to £902,000,000 in 1816, and reduced the taxes required service it.²⁵ The Whigs, who furnished the majority of the Opposition, offered little resistance to such popular measures. Furthermore Lord Grey (Charles Grey), the only Parliamentary leader who could command the loyalty of the various factions within Whigs, refused to seek office.²⁶

In 1828 the Duke of Wellington (Arthur Wellesley), hero of the Battle of Waterloo, headed a ministry composed of Ultra- and Liberal Tories. The ministry first sought to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts, which excluded

²⁵Norman Gash, "After Waterloo: British Society and the Legacy of the Napoleonic Wars," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 28 (1978): 152; See also Boyd Hilton, *Corn, Cash and Commerce: The Economic Policies of the Tory Governments 1815-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

²⁶Mitchell, *Whigs in Opposition*, 26ff; Newbould, *Whiggery*, 44-5.

Catholics from holding public office, and then, in 1829 it put forth the Catholic Emancipation Bill (1829).

Wellington hoped to end the unrest in Catholic Ireland caused by the 1800 Act of Union, but both of his endeavors met stiff resistance from the ministerial benches because of the threat to the Established Church. Wellington finally succeeded in maneuvering these bills through Parliament with the help of the Opposition, but in the process the cooperation between Ultra-Tories and Liberal Tories ceased to exist.²⁷ After this episode the Duke abandoned any attempts at reform because he feared it would further weaken the Government's position, inviting public unrest.

In July and August 1830, as continental Europeans faced violent revolutions, England was in the middle of an election. Enthusiasm for reform gripped Great Britain. The unreformed system became a "scapegoat" for "people too ignorant to know how their trouble originated," and "many people saw Reform as a panacea."²⁸ The continental

²⁷George M. Trevelyan, *Lord Grey of the Reform Bill: Being the Life of Charles, Second Earl Grey* (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1929), 208-10; Brock shows that George Canning (Prime Minister 1827) had previously weakened the Tories by forming a coalition Government but then points out the Ultra-Tories' hatred of Wellington and Sir Robert Peel for "ratting" on the Protestant institutions of Britain. *Great Reform Act*, 55.

²⁸Brock, *Great Reform Act*, 64, 61; Newbould, *Whiggery*, 42.

revolutions had little direct effect on the British elections, but the unrest did influence the mindset of many Members of Parliament when they took their seats.²⁹

Following the election, Wellington's Government returned in a weakened position. The Whigs, led by Lord Grey, suddenly provided a considerable opposition after fifty years of marginal significance. They still hoped that the Duke would introduce at least a "sham Reform Bill."³⁰ Grey and the Whigs preferred government-sponsored reform over the violence a revolution would bring.³¹ Wellington quickly dashed their hopes for change, and the Whigs began to demand reform.

In the ensuing parliamentary debates Wellington's Ministry fell because several Ultra-Tories went into Opposition, believing Wellington had earlier betrayed the Protestant constitution. Lord Grey formed a Government composed of peers and territorial magnates, and had the support of Whigs, Radicals and Ultra-Tories. He began the push for reform, hoping to eliminate the threat to social order and property.³² Ironically, the Ultras felt the unreformed system allowed Wellington to ignore the true

²⁹Brock, *Great Reform Act*, 102-3.

³⁰Trevelyan, *Lord Grey*, 235-6; Newbould, *Whiggery*, 40, 51.

³¹Brock, *Great Reform Act*, 69; Newbould, *Whiggery*, 80.

³²Newbould, *Whiggery*, 45-54.

will of the English people, and reform meant restoring Protestant influence.³³ Because of the coalitional nature of its majority in Commons, Grey's Ministry hammered out a compromise without totally destroying the existing political system. The compromise did, however, introduce "sweeping changes" to the constitution to insure that further reform would not be needed for another thirty or forty years.³⁴

The Great Reform Act of 1832 formed the basis of this compromise. The act had two essential tenets, both of which were designed to limit the visibility of the "pocket"* or "rotten" boroughs. The bill gave the industrial and commercial capitalists the right to vote by extending the franchise to £10 households which equaled about 200,000 voters, or a 45% increase of the electorate.³⁵ The Reform Bill also changed the medieval form of territorial representation, which had excluded the new urban centers, to a form of proportional representation, which included them. These measures

³³D.C. Moore, "The Other Face of Reform," *Victorian Studies* 5 (September 1961): 7-34; Newbould, *Whiggery*, 48-52.

³⁴Brock, *Great Reform Act*, 146-8.

*The term "pocket borough" refers to a borough which had few, or no, constituents except the landlord. The term is used often because the proprietor had the Member of Parliament "in his pocket."

³⁵O'Gorman, *Voters, Patrons, and Parties*, 178-80.

eliminated a total of 143 seats, the majority of which were held by conservatives, and redistributed the seats to the new urban-industrial centers as well as English and Welsh counties. These changes gave the middle classes' concerns--trade and dissent--a wider and more obvious place in the political debate.³⁶ The Whigs believed that tying the new middle classes to rank and property would help to remove the threat to social stability posed by the lower orders.³⁷

The Great Reform Bill still denied the working classes the right to vote; they remained outside the formal political system. Anti-reformers felt that popular discontent with the constitution arose from material needs rather than from an intellectual commitment to reform. This argument complemented the Whig faithfulness to preserving the aristocratic government. To extend the franchise to the lower orders would invite future rifts in society.³⁸ The decision to exclude the working classes only delayed further agitation on their part; in 1839 the Chartist movement violently called for reform.

The Great Reform Bill also had immediate political ramifications. The bill diluted the power base of the conservatives and further destroyed cooperation among

³⁶Brock, *Great Reform Act*, 138-9, 335-6.

³⁷Newbould, *Whiggery*, 59.

³⁸Brock, *Great Reform Act*, 43-4.

Ultra- and Liberal Tories. As a result of the first reform election in 1832, the Tories only held 144 seats, while the Reformers claimed 476. The remaining 38 seats went to Irish Repealers who pushed for revocation of the Act of Union.³⁹ While in Opposition, the conservatives had no unified voice, but they were not helpless. One prominent spokesman stood out--Sir Robert Peel. Peel, leader of the Liberal Tories, gathered support in the House of Commons, advocating a policy of cooperation with the Whigs. Peel believed that cooperation would allow the conservatives enough time to regroup and pose a more serious political threat to the Whigs. He tried to offer a middle ground which promoted practical reform. He hoped to bring change under the control of the friends of the traditional constitution and prevent more radical reforms from taking place. In the Tamworth Manifesto Peel tried to paint himself as the leader of a moderate party committed to preserving the *status quo*, rather than the leader of a reactionary party. To accomplish his goal, he had to bring the Ultra-Tories to heel. Peel lacked, however, credibility with the Ultra-Tories, who wanted "to defend and preserve a paternalistic, hierarchical society" against

³⁹"The New Parliament," *The Guardian* (Manchester), 1 January 1833, p.2; Newbould breaks Grey's support into three categories: 91 Ministerial M.P.s, 267 Ministerial fringe, and 137 waverers. *Whiggery*, 21.

any changes in the establishment.⁴⁰ His participation in reform legislation had brought his faithfulness to the English constitution into question. Peel's weakness showed itself most apparently in the House of Lords, where he had virtually no influence among the Ultra-Tory Peers. He had to depend upon the cooperation of the Duke of Wellington in order to entice the Lords to acquiesce in the call for moderation.⁴¹ Peel gained strength because his message appealed to the small boroughs and English counties.⁴²

Peel did not attract a consistent enough following in Commons and lacked the political strength to challenge successfully the Whigs and the advocates of reform. Accordingly, from 1830 to 1841, except for a short five month period (December 1834 to April 1835), the Whigs managed the House of Commons with the help of Peel as well as the Radicals. The Radicals demanded an economic policy that favored commerce and industry and a religious policy that tolerated non-Anglican churches. As parliamentary leaders the Whigs followed a liberal platform. They moved beyond political reform to religious and economic reform. These modifications challenged the religious monopolies of the Anglican Church and the chartered trading companies,

⁴⁰Newbould, "Sir Robert Peel," 533.

⁴¹Newbould, "Sir Robert Peel," 536.

⁴²Gash, *Reaction and Reconstruction*, 134, 141-2.

such as the East India Company. In return for reform the Whigs won support from the constituents of the new industrial centers, as well as the more traditional commercial and manufacturing cities and their representatives--the Radicals.⁴³

One of the joint concerns of the Whigs and the Radicals was the East India Company's monopoly on trade with China. Whigs saw abolition of the monopoly as a way of removing a long standing symbol of corruption, while Radicals saw abolition as a means of economic liberalization. In 1600 Queen Elizabeth had granted the company a charter; one of its primary goals was to acquire the much desired luxury goods of "Cathay,"*--porcelains, silk, and satins. The Company failed to access directly Chinese goods until 1699, but between 1735 and 1795 trade began to thrive.

The East India Company located its Far East headquarters in India. India was more than just an economic center. The Company with its own army and navy gained political control over most of India. This control gave the Company a considerable power base from which to enforce its monopoly and gave the Company's Court of Directors a means of dispensing patronage. All British

⁴³Gash, *Reaction and Reconstruction*, 162-6

* Cathay is the Renaissance term for China and remained in use into the eighteenth century.

trade in the Far East had to be either in East India Company ships, or in private ships licensed by the Company. Accordingly, at the beginning of the 1800s the East India Company, because of its trade monopoly in the Far East, controlled British trade with China. The India Act of 1784 represented the political consequence of merchant imperialism in India. As the Company's use of force drew heavy criticism from the British Parliament, William Pitt (Prime Minister, 1783-1801, 1803-1806) brought the East India Company under the control of the British Government in London. He hoped to end continued expansion into the subcontinent by creating the Board of Control to oversee Indian affairs. The President of the Board served as a Cabinet member and set policy that the Company's Court of Directors in London and the Crown-appointed Governor General in India carried out.⁴⁴

The British Government's primary commercial concern was a steady supply of high quality tea from China.⁴⁵ The sale of tea, a highly prized commodity in Britain, generated a considerable amount of revenue for the

⁴⁴Cyril H. Philips, *The East India Company 1794-1834* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1940; 1961), 30-4. The publication date of Philip's study illustrates the dearth of recent scholarly research on the political aspects of the East India Company.

⁴⁵Hoh-cheung Mui and Lorna H. Mui, *The Management of Monopoly: A Study of the East India Company's Conduct of Its Tea Trade, 1784-1833* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984), 23.

Treasury. The tea tariff, which amounted to no less than £3 million, covered one-half the expenses of maintaining the best naval fleet in the world.⁴⁶ In the early 1830s China provided the only available source of tea. The East India Company had a monopoly on all tea imported into Britain. It also attempted to grow tea in Assam, a region in Northeast India. While the effort looked promising for the future, it remained a "young experiment" as late as 1837.⁴⁷

The Chinese, on the other hand, wanted nothing substantial from Britain except its bullion. British merchants bought tea from China, but the fragmented and self-sufficient nature of the Chinese economy made it difficult for the British merchants to sell their goods to the Chinese people.⁴⁸ China's hand-finished products were of a far superior quality to any of the mass produced goods which the British had to offer. A highly unfavorable

⁴⁶Fay, *Opium War*, 17-18.

⁴⁷Lord Auckland to John Cam Hobhouse, Calcutta, 9 April 1837, Broughton Papers. Letter Books. Oriental and India Office Collection, British Library, London (Hereafter cited as OIO). Mss.Eur.F213/6/150.

⁴⁸Madeleine Zelin, "The Economic Structure of the Chinese Economy during the Qing Period: Some Thoughts on the 150th Anniversary of the Opium War," Kenneth Lieberthal, et al. ed. *Perspectives on Modern China: Four Anniversaries* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1991), 37-8.

balance of trade emerged which the British constantly sought to remedy.⁴⁹

The Chinese Emperor in Peking limited the East India Company's commercial ventures by using the Canton System, which had two fundamental features.⁵⁰ The first limited all trade to the port of Canton, located in the far southeastern corner of the Chinese Empire.** Chinese authorities thought that this location was far enough away from most Chinese that "barbarian" contamination could be kept to a minimum. Any foreigner wishing to travel to Canton had to receive a passport prior to his arrival; the Chinese government refused to allow barbarian females into Canton. By restricting all foreign trade to a single port the Chinese also believed that they could more effectively control the foreigners by keeping them under the watchful eyes of the emperor's servants.

⁴⁹Earl H. Pritchard, *The Crucial Years Of Early Anglo-Chinese Relations, 1750-1800* (Pullman, WA: State College of Washington, 1936), 142-69; Both the more traditional mercantilist theories and the new *laissez-faire* theories saw a trade imbalance as a positive evil. An unfavorable balance of trade caused an outflow of bullion and weakened the nation's ability to compete with other European states.

⁵⁰Greenberg, *British Trade*, 46; Hosea Ballou Morse's *The Gilds of China with an Account of the Gild Merchant of Canton* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1909) offers a comprehensive, but dated, history of the Canton system.

**See above p.vi, MAP 1, "China in the Early Nineteenth Century,"; from Fay, *Opium War*, 28.

The Chinese government itself had little direct contact with foreign merchants. In the Chinese social structure merchants were at the bottom.⁵¹ Thus, only merchants should have contact with merchants. The second feature of the Canton system addressed this need. At Canton all foreign trade had to be carried on with twelve or thirteen merchants--the Co-hong, or Hong merchants. The Co-hong were Chinese wholesale merchants licensed by the emperor to trade with the foreigners. In return for the privilege of trading, the Co-hong collected imperial duties and signed a bond guaranteeing that no contraband was carried into China. They also had to make sure that the barbarians respected Chinese laws and customs.

Under these conditions the Anglo-Chinese relationship was very tense, but secure.⁵² Everyone involved had learned to work within the system, and the tea trade became highly profitable. The East India Company recognized the apprehension of the Chinese and did its best to follow Chinese custom and tradition. The Co-hong realized the East India Company's need for Chinese goods and did its best to smooth out differences between the barbarians and imperial officials.

⁵¹Pritchard, *Crucial Years*, 108.

⁵²Fay, *Opium War*, 35.

On 13 June 1833 Charles Grant, President of the Board of Control, introduced the Whigs' resolution abolishing the Company's monopoly with the hope of easing tensions caused by the Canton system. He blamed the Chinese trade restrictions on the Company's dual role as trader and sovereign. The Chinese "had heard of the Company's victories in many parts of India, and to a people so sensitive as they were as to the approach of any foreign power to their territory, such matters were great cause of jealousy."⁵³ Allowing private merchants to trade with China would entice the Chinese government to open gradually its huge market and remove the embarrassing possibility of war.

Grant also expressed a practical reason for abolition of the monopoly. Since 1815 the licensed private traders' share of the goods shipped to and from China out-paced the Company's trade. Between 1813 and 1830 the total value of the exports and imports carried to and from China in Company owned ships fell from £13,500,000 to £11,600,000, while in the same period the total value of goods carried in licensed private ships rose from £9,000,000 to £31,000,000.⁵⁴ To continue a *de jure* monopoly while it

⁵³Charles Grant, "East-India Company's Charter," House of Commons, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 18 (13 June 1833), col. 709.

⁵⁴Grant, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 18 (13 June 1833), col. 710.

did not exist in fact would be contrary to common sense. The resolution thus rested, not on the metaphysical principle of *laissez faire*, but on bringing institutions more in line with reality.

Abolition of the Company's monopoly excited little debate in Commons, or in the press.⁵⁵ After the fierce struggles over the Reform Bill, affairs in India and China seemed insignificant. Furthermore, the East Indian interests in Parliament had sided with the opponents of reform and lost a number of their rotten boroughs in the process.⁵⁶ The Whigs also compensated the Company's stock holders with an annuity of 10.5 percent of the revenues of India and left the Court of Directors in control of its India patronage network.⁵⁷ The Whigs' behavior during abolition of the trade monopoly demonstrates the Grey Ministry's ability to carry forth reforms that satisfied the needs of a variety of interests. The long-term significance of abolition rests less on the Whigs' purposes, however, than on its unintended consequences for Anglo-Chinese relations.

⁵⁵The *Manchester Guardian* merely noted that Grant introduced the bill. 15 June 1833, p.2.

⁵⁶Newbould, *Whiggery*, 60.

⁵⁷Philips, *East India Company*, 285-97.

CHAPTER 2

"CHINA BELONGS TO PALMERSTON"

In the 1830s two new factors began to change the context in which British merchants traded in China.¹ The first was Parliament's action in 1833 revoking the East India Company's monopoly in China, thus removing one half of the regulatory system that had guided the Anglo-Chinese relationship. The second factor was the rise of the opium trade, the topic of Chapter 4. The consequences resulting from the removal of the Company's monopoly on the China trade forms the basis for the present chapter. This deregulation, part of the Grey Ministry's attempt to further economic reform, had its price because of the power vacuum it created. As Foreign Secretary, Lord Palmerston set his policy to carry out the ministry's goal to open peacefully and gradually China's market while keeping British Governmental interference to a minimum.

When Parliament abolished the company's monopoly in 1834, it created a three-man trade commission headed by a Chief Superintendent of Trade, shifting responsibility for

¹Greenberg, *British Trade*, 215.

the affairs in China from the Board of Control to the Foreign Office. As John Cam Hobhouse, President of the Board of Control (1835-1841), explained to Lord Auckland (George Eden), Governor General of India (1835-1842), "China belongs to Palmerston."² Palmerston, an Irish peer, entered the Foreign Office when Grey formed his Ministry in 1830 and remained Foreign Secretary until 1841, except for a few short months in 1834/1835 when the conservatives formed a ministry. The third Viscount Palmerston's rise to the highest level of British Government contrasts sharply with the experience of his father who preferred renovating one of the family estates--Broadlands--located near Southampton in Romsey. The elder Palmerston had lived the life of leisure, collecting art, and even taking his family on the Grand Tour during the French Revolution. He had, however, insured that young "Harry" received the best classical education in Britain at the time. At age four he had a governess who taught him French, and at age six the second Viscount hired an Italian tutor, who, besides teaching his native language, probably taught Harry both Latin and Greek. These early experiences prepared him for public school at Harrow, and then the University of Edinburgh.³

²Hobhouse to Auckland, India House, 30 August 1837, OIO, Mss.Eur.F213/6/124.

³Bourne, *Palmerston*, 1-11.

While in Edinburgh the young aristocrat lived with and studied under Dugald Stewart, Professor of Moral Philosophy (1753-1828). Stewart's official title suggests, from the modern academic perspective, a rather limited scholarly field, but Professor Stewart had a large sphere of inquiry. His moral philosophy laid the foundation for the development of a course in political economy.⁴ Since Palmerston's most recent biographer believes that Stewart's course on political economy "must have been among the most significant experiences of his life,"⁵ a closer look at Stewart's philosophy might help to explain Palmerston's future policies as Foreign Secretary.

In his moral philosophy Stewart sought a middle path between Scottish skepticism and French rationalism.⁶ He belonged to a school of thought called "common sense" realism which held that the human mind had an *a priori* capacity, independent of both sense experience and logic, to know right from wrong. This position departed from the path carved out by Stewart's Scottish predecessors David

⁴Knud Haakonssen, "From Moral Philosophy to Political Economy: The Contribution of Dugald Stewart," in *Philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. V. Hope (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984), 212.

⁵Bourne, *Palmerston*, 25; Bourne mistakenly states, however, that Stewart merely provided a "simplified version of Adam Smith." *Palmerston*, 27.

⁶Haakonssen, "From Moral Philosophy to Political Economy," 212-14, 219.

Hume and Adam Smith. These men believed that morality depended upon a person viewing his own action from the position of an imaginary "impartial spectator"--the relative experiences of human reactions.⁷ Stewart concluded that the human mind's power to know that a correct moral answer exists, while it may not be grasped immediately, allowed for a confidence in society's eventual development into a natural system based on a divine imprint.⁸

Stewart's attempt to secure a middle ground in moral philosophy carried over into his political economy.⁹ He clearly delineated a difference between "what is *abstractly right* and *practically expedient*," cautioning his students not to apply theory in the face of strong opposition

⁷Dugald Stewart, *The Collected Works of Dugald Stewart*, ed. William Hamilton, vol. 10, *Biographical Memoirs of Adam Smith, LL.D., William Robertson, D.D., Thomas Reid, D.D.* [Hereafter cited as *Adam Smith*] (Edinburgh: Thomas Constable, 1858), 26-9; Mark Granquist, "The Role of 'Common Sense' in the Hermeneutics of Moses Stuart," *Harvard Theological Review* 83 (1990): 308-9; Russell Niehlei, "Spheres of Intimacy and the Adam Smith Problem," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47 (1986): 617.

⁸Haakonssen, "From Moral Philosophy to Political Economy," 226, 229.

⁹Donald Winch, "The System of the North: Dugald Stewart and His Pupils," in *That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History*, ed. Stefan Collini, Donald Winch, and John Burrow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 38.

because doing so threatened social stability.¹⁰ As a philosopher living during Europe's revolutionary turmoil, he took significant legal risks entering into debates that included the French *philosophes*, advocates of theoretical speculation. One of the ways Stewart overcame these hazards was by distinguishing between economic freedom and political equality. The former contributed to the cause of liberty, while the latter deteriorated into Jacobinism.¹¹ He repeated several times during his lectures that

"the happiness of mankind depends *immediately*, not on the *form of government*, but on the particular system of *law and policy* which that form introduces, and that the advantage which one form of government possesses over another, arises chiefly from the facility it affords to the introduction of such legislative improvements as the general interest of the community recommend."¹²

He also cautioned his students that any change in policy must be gradual so as not to disturb the public order.¹³

Stewart defined political economy as a science concerned with the general welfare of the community and

¹⁰Dugald Stewart, *The Collected Works of Dugald Stewart*, ed. William Hamilton, vol. 9, *Lectures on Political Economy*, vol.2, (Edinburgh: Thomas Constable, 1856), 85-6, 121, 223.

¹¹Emma Rothschild, "Adam Smith and Conservative Economics," *Economic History Review* 45 (1992): 80-81.

¹²Stewart, *Lectures on Political Economy*, vol.2, 376; See also Stewart, *Adam Smith*, 55-6.

¹³Stewart, *Lectures on Political Economy*, vol. 2, 210, 257, 419.

charged it with supplying actual legislators, rather than the multitude, with policy options. The end of all political economy--happiness--requires "laws which give security of the right of property, and check the inordinate inequality in its distribution."¹⁴ By "inordinate inequality" he meant unnatural inequality caused by unenlightened laws which favor a particular interests at the expense of the rest of society. Stewart, following Smith and the *physiocrats*, stated that agriculture held the primary position in the natural order of the economy, followed by manufacturing, and lastly, foreign trade.¹⁵

Mercantilism, a "false system of Political Economy propagated by merchants and manufacturers," reversed this order, allowing the towns to benefit inordinately from the labor of the countryside, the basis of all national wealth.¹⁶ As a political economist, Stewart recommended removing the mercantilist restrictions and subsidies that protected trade and manufacturing in order to restore the

¹⁴Dugald Stewart, *The Collected Works of Dugald Stewart*, ed. William Hamilton, vol. 8, *Lectures on Political Economy*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Thomas Constable, 1856), 16.

¹⁵Stewart, *Lectures on Political Economy*, vol. 1, 157.

¹⁶Stewart, *Lectures on Political Economy*, vol. 1, 14-15, 157, 256, 294; *idem*, *Lectures on Political Economy*, vol. 2, 195-6; *idem*, *Adam Smith*, 60-2.

natural balance within the community.¹⁷ Stewart further supported his belief in free trade by underscoring the primacy of internal commerce: "*the best customers of Britain* (according to an old observation) *being the people of Britain.*"¹⁸ Modern nations, unlike ancient states, depend upon "*internal cultivation*" rather than conquest for strength. Imports and exports in corn, for example, amount to a small portion of the commerce in any commodity and make only a minor contribution to the economy as a whole.¹⁹ Furthermore, exotic commodities such as tea and coffee divert the resources of the poor away from the nutritious food needed to survive; Britain's formal system of political economy thus contributed to the misery of the multitude.²⁰

Professor Stewart's emphasis on agriculture did not lead him to favor restrictions on trade and manufacturing in order to promote the cultivation of land. On the contrary, he believed such restrictions would disrupt the whole economy by retarding the "natural" growth of the subsidiary sectors of the economy. To encourage

¹⁷Stewart, *Lectures on Political Economy*, vol. 1, 179-80.

¹⁸Stewart, *Lectures on Political Economy*, vol. 1, 242.

¹⁹Stewart, *Lectures on Political Economy*, vol. 1, 43; *idem*, *Lectures on Political Economy*, vol. 2, 83.

²⁰Stewart, *Lectures on Political Economy*, vol. 2, 144-5.

agriculture only required the dissemination of useful knowledge concerning the science of agriculture and required "those who fill the higher stations in society, to instruct and animate their inferiors by influence of example."²¹ This position elucidates an important difference between Stewart and Smith; Stewart moved the focus from the individual to the "goodness of the over-all system."²² While Smith attributed the advances of the "modern" age to the rise of individuals pursuing their own self-interests in commerce,²³ Stewart emphasized the advent of printing and the freedom to exchange ideas.²⁴ Because printing gave people the means by which they could improve their own condition, he argued that social progress required a system of government-sponsored education beyond the mechanical arts to help individuals cultivate their moral capacity.²⁵

Besides disturbing the natural order within the community, mercantilism also contributed to the bellicose nature of the international order. Quoting extensively

²¹Stewart, *Lectures on Political Economy*, vol. 1, 181.

²²Haakonssen, "From Moral Philosophy to Political Economy," 228.

²³Winch, "The System of the North," 27-8.

²⁴Stewart, *Lectures on Political Economy*, vol. 2, 398.

²⁵Stewart, *Lectures on Political Economy*, vol. 2, 328-333, 341.

from Smith, Stewart explained that merchants and manufacturers encouraged nations to look with jealousy on the progress of the neighbors, producing "discord and animosity," rather than the natural result of trade, "union and friendship." Removing the unnatural influence of the "mean rapacity" of these men from governmental policy, would restore peace.²⁶ Merchants and manufacturers only focused on their own sectarian interest while neglecting the good of the community. Because the prosperity and stability of the community depended upon agriculture, only the ownership of land provided an individual with the means to see the common interests of all.²⁷

While the majority of Stewart's course on political economy focused on government economic policy, he did introduce his students to the theory of government. Careful to point out that "political wisdom is much more the result of experience than of speculation,"²⁸ he deviated from the customary treatment of the subject by concentrating on the simple forms of government--democracy, aristocracy and monarchy--rather than the functions--legislative, judicial, and executive. He recognized the need to separate these functions to reduce the chances for

²⁶Stewart, *Adam Smith*, 62.

²⁷Stewart, *Lectures on Political Economy*, vol. 1, 15-6.

²⁸Stewart, *Lectures on Political Economy*, vol. 2, 424.

an abuse of power, but he believed that this goal could best be accomplished by a "mixed government," one combining the three simple forms.²⁹ Stopping short of enunciating a general theory, he pointed to the "perfections of our system" to support his case. The British constitution checked the ability of either the monarch, the aristocracy or the people to ignore the interests of the community at large.³⁰ Stewart believed that the end of government simply required "wise and equitable laws, and a vigorous and effectual execution of them."³¹ To impose artificial conditions on a constitution, such as extending the franchise to the lower orders, would counteract the "obvious intentions of nature" by giving unenlightened people a voice in political decisions.³²

Stewart's course taught that enlightened economic policy contributed to a well-ordered society and that true statesmen should subordinate sectarian economic considerations to the needs of the state. He also stressed that good government was not only a practical necessity but also a moral responsibility of those in power to look after

²⁹Stewart, *Lectures on Political Economy*, vol. 2, 351-2.

³⁰Stewart, *Lectures on Political Economy*, vol. 2, 449-50.

³¹Stewart, *Lectures on Political Economy*, vol. 2, 362.

³²Stewart, *Lectures on Political Economy*, vol. 3, 378.

the general welfare of the community. The course provided the young Palmerston with a "liberal" economic education and a "conservative" political education. Free trade, or *laissez-faire*, would bolster traditional social institutions by restoring the primacy of land in the economy and the landowner in the political system. These lessons drawn from Adam Smith differed from those offered by the Radical David Ricardo. Ricardo believed free trade would benefit the new industrial sector of the economy and provide the basis for British domination of world trade.³³ Thus, while Palmerston's later beliefs in free trade coincided with those held by middle-class Radicals, his convictions stemmed from a vastly different source and furnished a basis for his early affiliation with the Liberal Tories.³⁴ Stewart's course also prepared Palmerston for a successful career lasting well into the Victorian period. One explanation for this success was Palmerston's ability to join social conservatism with economic innovation, "an underlying theme" of the nineteenth century.³⁵

When Palmerston left Edinburgh in 1803, he chose to continue his education at St. John's College, Cambridge,

³³Semmel, *Rise of Free Trade Imperialism*, 71.

³⁴Bourne, *Palmerston*, 29.

³⁵Thompson, *Rise of Respectable Society*, 30.

even though his father's death two years earlier had made the youth a peer of Ireland. He then entered the House of Commons in 1807 after his former guardian, the Earl of Malmesbury (James Harris), found an open seat for the young man representing the borough of Newport on the Isle of Wight. Palmerston bought the seat for £4,000 on the condition that "he never set foot in the place."³⁶ Sitting in Commons allowed Palmerston to take a job as Junior Lord of the Admiralty, and two years later, as Secretary at War, once again thanks to Malmesbury. The War Office came without a seat in the Cabinet and had a peculiar function. Instead of directing military operations, hiring personnel, setting financial policy or planning the overall organization of the army, Palmerston acted as an intermediary relaying to the Commons the army's needs and supervising the workings of the army for the Commons. In neither capacity did he have any authority to enforce decisions. He had the burden of responsibility without the power to follow through and faced the wrath of the army and Parliament for failures.³⁷

Although Liberal Tory ministries rose and fell, Palmerston remained in the War Office for nineteen years. His years in office generated neither high praise nor grave

³⁶Bourne, *Palmerston*, 79.

³⁷Bourne, *Palmerston*, 80-97.

rebuke from his contemporaries. His duties remained rather tedious, even though he performed them with skill and energy.³⁸ It came as a surprise when Lord Grey chose Palmerston to enter the Whig Cabinet as Foreign Secretary in 1830. Prime Ministers in the nineteenth century usually sought to fill the office with the most capable men. Palmerston was, however, the exception. When he first joined the Whigs, he was a "second-rate politician," and only after several years in office did he gain the respect of his peers.³⁹

Grey had trouble finding a Foreign Secretary and even considered keeping the position for himself. After two other prominent politicians refused the office for personal reasons, Grey turned to Palmerston. As a Liberal Tory, Palmerston, and his companion Lord Melbourne (Home Secretary, 1830-34), provided the Whigs with the wide Parliamentary base needed to govern after fifty years of Tory domination.⁴⁰ Palmerston's friendship with Melbourne serves further to explain the Irish peer's elevation to the Cabinet. While A.J.P. Taylor's statement that Melbourne

³⁸Bourne, *Palmerston*, Chs. 3, 4 & 6.

³⁹Charles R. Middleton, *The Administration of British Foreign Policy 1782-1846* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1977), 98.

⁴⁰Bourne, *Palmerston*, 328-9.

"carried his illegitimate brother-in-law with him"⁴¹ is certainly an exaggeration, Palmerston's "secret" affair with Lady Cowper, Melbourne's married sister, helped to change his fortunes. Lady Cowper moved in the highest social circles in England and secured for Palmerston invitations to dinners at Holland House, a center for Whig politics and society.⁴²

In 1828 Palmerston resigned his office after a misunderstanding with the Duke of Wellington, and then further separated himself by attacking the Duke's foreign policy. These attacks gained him respect at Holland House and set out his foreign policy priorities.⁴³ Palmerston criticized his former colleagues for reversing British policy by abandoning Donna Maria, Queen of Portugal, to her uncle Don Miguel's attempt to usurp the throne. Such an undignified move threatened to bring about an unjust war and put Britain in league with the "oppressor . . . trampling upon the oppressed."⁴⁴ Britain had pledged itself, and received from Don Miguel a similiar pledge, to

⁴¹A.J.P. Taylor, "Lord Palmerston," *History Today*, 41 (January 1991), 16.

⁴²Bourne, *Palmerston*, 308-9.

⁴³John W. Rooney, "Palmerston and the Revolutions of 1830-1833," *The Consortium on Revolutionary Europe 1750-1850: Proceedings* 14 (1984): 406-13.

⁴⁴Lord Palmerston, "Affairs of Portugal," *Hansard*, 2d ser., vol. 21 (10 March 1829), col. 99.

support Donna Maria as the constitutional sovereign of Portugal. By breaking his oath Miguel insulted the British crown, and "if the insulted honour of our sovereign, is a legitimate ground for national quarrel, we are intitled [sic] to demand and extort, reparation from Don Miguel."⁴⁵

While Palmerston did have a commitment to "liberalism" as one of his foreign policy goals,⁴⁶ the term needs to be qualified and put into context. As his quarrel with the Wellington administration shows, Palmerston favored constitutional regimes. Dugald Stewart taught him that constitutions were not the laws themselves, but the general spirit which animated a whole system of government.⁴⁷ Liberalism depended upon the security of property, a strong executive and a free exchange of ideas. By failing to support the rightful executive of Portugal and honor Britain's pledge, Wellington contributed to the undermining of the spirit of the agreement between Donna Maria and Don Miguel. These attacks on Wellington demonstrated, however, that constitutional principles followed behind national honor as a foreign policy priority.⁴⁸ Honor refers to an

⁴⁵Palmerston, "Portugal," *Hansard*, 2d ser., vol. 21 (1 June 1829), cols. 1651-2.

⁴⁶Bourne, *Palmerston*, Ch. 8.

⁴⁷Stewart, *Lectures on Political Economy*, vol. 2, 376, 422.

⁴⁸Rooney, "Palmerston and the Revolutions of 1830-1833," 409.

inner feeling of self-worth that the community recognizes by lauding valor and honesty. Conversely, shame refers to an inner feeling of humiliation that the community fosters by admonishing cowardice and deception.⁴⁹ In the aristocratic world of international relations a nation without honor warranted the scorn and contempt of its neighbors, thus weakening its position. Wellington's policy had brought shame to Britain, contributing to deterioration of national honor.

After the revolutions of 1830 Palmerston faced a plethora of foreign policy problems. He decided that British interests required him to support constitutional movements on the continent and to defend the Ottoman Empire from European interference.⁵⁰ These endeavors demanded constant attention. His policies drew sharp criticism, not only from foreign governments, but also from within the governments he served. Compared to European affairs China was a mere side show. The Foreign Secretary delegated

⁴⁹Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 14; Jonathan Powis, *Aristocracy* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 8-14.

⁵⁰See Charles Webster's *The Foreign Policy of Palmerston, 1830-1841: Britain, the Liberal Movement and the Eastern Question* (2 Vols. London: G. Bell & Sons, 1951.) for the standard interpretation of Palmerston's early career as guided by liberalism; See also Rooney, "Palmerston and the Revolutions of 1830-1833" for the beginnings of a reinterpretation focusing instead on national interests.

responsibility for overseeing the detailed operations of the newly created trade commission to a senior clerk in the Foreign Office,⁵¹ while retaining for himself the authority to make all final decisions.

To adjust to the changes brought on by the abolition of the East India Company's monopoly, Parliament legislated several institutional modifications. While the East India Company had controlled the China trade, supercargoes, the company's representatives, exercised considerable authority over British merchants trading in China. In the eighteenth century supercargoes traveled aboard each ship and carried out all cargo and commercial transactions. By the nineteenth century the function of the supercargoes had changed. Supercargoes no longer attached themselves to specific ships; they remained in Canton throughout the trading season and supervised the transactions of a greater number of vessels. Once the season ended, the supercargoes left Canton for Macao, a peninsula under Portuguese control, extending out of the mainland into the Gulf of Canton about seventy-five miles from the city of Canton.* Of twelve Company supercargoes in Canton, three or four of the senior agents formed the Presidency and Select

⁵¹Middleton, *Administration of British Foreign Policy*, 75, 191, 323.

*See above p.vii, MAP 2, "Gulf of Canton," p.ii; from Fay, *Opium War*, 16.

Committee. The Select had the authority to expel non-licensed merchants from Canton.⁵²

The original plans for the new trade commission called for the Chief Superintendent to have the same powers as the Company's supercargoes, but, fearing the concentration of power in the hands of one man, Parliament limited his power. The Chief Superintendent lacked the authority to demand obedience from British subjects in China, and the merchants were aware of this incapacity. British merchants felt that they were not accountable to anyone for their trade actions in the Far East. The superintendent was there to serve the needs of the merchants, not to control them.⁵³

The Chinese, both the Hong Merchants and the imperial authorities, were also uneasy about the abolition of the East India Company's monopoly. For over one hundred years trade had flourished under the existing system; they saw no need for change. The first Chief Superintendent, Lord William Napier, reinforced their concerns when he arrived in China on 15 July 1834. Lord Napier had no respect for Chinese custom or protocol. He had his orders, and by God,

⁵²Greenberg, *British Trade*, 18.

⁵³Hosea Ballou Morse, *The International Relations of the Chinese Empire* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1910), vol. 1, *The Period of Conflict: 1834-1860*, 169; Lord Palmerston to Lord William Napier, 25 January 1834, *Correspondence Relating to China* (Great Britain: Parliament, 1840), 5.

nothing was going to stop him.* Hoping to extend British trading privileges beyond a single port, Palmerston instructed the Chief Superintendent to proceed to Canton and take up residence there. Upon his arrival he was to communicate directly with the Governor-General (or Viceroy) of Kwangtung and Kwangsi provinces. Napier took these orders literally. He proceeded to Canton without receiving a passport from Chinese officials and only then sent a letter to Governor-General Lu K'un.**

Napier's unannounced arrival in Canton greatly disturbed the provincial government and the Co-hong. In several letters to the Hong merchants dating from 21 July to 31 July (designed to be passed on to the foreign community), Lu expressed his dissatisfaction with Napier's presence. He stated that it was a well-known fact that all foreigners must receive a passport before proceeding to Canton.⁵⁴ The Governor-General could not understand

*General accounts of Napier's mission to China can be found in most works concerning the Opium War. One cannot truly understand his arrogance, however, until reading the despatches found in the *Correspondence Relating to China* (7-41).

**There are two major styles of transliteration from the Chinese characters to Roman letters: Wade-Giles and pinyin. I am following James Polachek's usage in *The Inner Opium War--Wade-Giles*.

⁵⁴Inclosures 2, 3, 4, and 5, Governor of Canton to Hong Merchants, in Napier to Palmerston, 14 August 1834, (The Foreign Office received this letter on 31 January 1835.) *Correspondence*, 17-21.

Napier's total disregard for protocol and his lack of respect for Chinese custom.

Napier's letter further annoyed Governor Lu because Chinese law forbade barbarians to send "personal letters" to Chinese officials. Foreign correspondence had to be in the form of a "petition" from inferior to superior; the use of the Chinese character "Pin" on the correspondence signified a petition. Chinese custom also prohibited the transmission of petitions directly to the official. A petition must be delivered by the Co-hong.

Additionally, Lu refused to recognize Napier's official position as an agent of the British Government. The Chinese had never allowed an official of a foreign government to reside within its territory. They were not about to change thousands of years of tradition for one obnoxious man. The Chinese Viceroy ordered Napier to leave Canton until he received permission to return and until he was willing to follow Chinese practices.⁵⁵

Napier refused to accept the Chinese demands because he failed to understand the Chinese government's position. He felt that it should, and would, give in to his demands for recognition as an official representative of the British Crown and for direct communication with Chinese officials. He based this assumption on a misconception

⁵⁵Napier to Palmerston, 9 August 1834, *Correspondence*, 7-11.

about the importance of trade to the Chinese government.

In a letter to Lord Palmerston, Napier wrote the following:

The house of every Chinaman in these extensive suburbs, is a shop of one sort or another. Every man is constantly at work; nobody seen loitering about and idle; and, in fact, every man is a merchant; yet does one of these same Edicts [ordering Napier to obey Chinese customs and traditions] speak of the 'petty affairs of commerce,'--as if commerce were a matter of no concern to the empire!⁵⁶

Napier concluded that the Chinese government needed British trade and it was just putting up an elaborate front to extract unreasonable demands from the foreigners. To rectify the situation, Napier recommended reminding the Emperor of his Tartar heritage by pointing out that "he is only an intruder; and that it will be his good policy to secure himself upon the throne by gratifying the wishes of his people."⁵⁷ If the British put the Tartar rulers in their place by means of military force, then the Chinese people would welcome British goods.⁵⁸

Napier was wrong. The Governor-General threatened to stop all trade because of "the fault of one man, Lord Napier." Following this threat from Lu, the Hong merchants, who were anxious to get things back to normal,

⁵⁶Napier to Palmerston, 14 August 1834, *Correspondence*, 12.

⁵⁷Napier to Palmerston, 14 August 1834, *Correspondence*, 13.

⁵⁸Napier to Lord Grey, 21 August 1834, *Correspondence*, 26-28.

stopped trade on 16 August until Napier complied with the Viceroy's wishes. This action was succeeded by rumors that Chinese officials were circulating derogatory stories about the English delegation. Napier responded by posting his own account of the "Present state of relations between China and Great Britain," translated into Chinese for all in Canton to read. In the document, an arrogant statement of the British position, Napier called Governor-General Lu a liar. The Chinese authorities replied with a quick and pointed response, stating that "According to the Laws of the nation, the Royal Warrant should be respectfully requested to behead you; and openly expose [your head] to the multitude, as a terror to preserve dispositions."⁵⁹

Following this incident Governor-General Lu, on 2 September 1834, reaffirmed the Hong's decision to stop trade. He also intensified the standoff by closing Napier and the foreign community off from the outside world. Demanding Napier's departure, Lu denied the foreign community access to communication, servants and provisions,* and surrounded its factories with troops on

⁵⁹Memorandum, Foreign Office, February, 1840 [based on the "Records of Proceedings" kept by the superintendents at Canton], *Correspondence*, 34.

*According to K. N. Chaudhuri this action was the typical response to European threats by indigenous Asian states. *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 125.

land and sea.⁶⁰ Napier instantly responded by calling in two British Navy frigates and landing a contingent of marines in Canton. In a letter to the Hong merchants Napier justified his actions by claiming that the Chinese "have opened the preliminaries of war." He stated that "His Imperial Majesty will not permit such folly, wickedness, and cruelty as they have been guilty of, since my arrival here, to go unpunished; therefore tremble Governor Loo, intensely tremble."⁶¹

Once again, Napier was wrong. The crisis drained him of his strength, and he fell ill. After the Viceroy threatened to use force, Napier decided to withdraw from Canton on 21 September, just two short months after his arrival. Napier knew the damage his actions had wrought would not be tolerated by the Foreign Office. Palmerston's original instructions had ordered Napier not to lose any of the trading privileges already obtained and to "abstain from all unnecessary use of menacing language."⁶² The Chinese added insult to injury by delaying Napier's journey as he left Canton. A trip that usually took less than a

⁶⁰The Agents of the East India Company in China to the Honourable the Court of Directors in London, 29 September 1834, *Correspondence*, 42.

⁶¹Napier to the Hong Merchants and Chinese authorities, 8 September 1834, *Correspondence*, 36.

⁶²Palmerston to Napier, 25 January 1834, *Correspondence*, 3-4.

day required one week. This delay prevented Napier from receiving proper medical care. He died on 11 October 1834.

As a result of the Napier mission the Chinese authorities became more suspicious than ever of the British in Canton. British merchants in Canton called for forceful action, but Sir John Francis Davis, Second Superintendent of Trade under Napier, disagreed. He assumed the position of Chief Superintendent of Trade and was determined to follow a policy of quiescence. Davis, a former President of the Select Committee and resident of China for twenty-one years, removed himself and the commission to Macao. These changes succeeded in putting British trade back on the road to success. The British merchants immediately resumed trade on the same footing as though Napier had never arrived.

The merchants objected to Davis's new policy, because they feared that another unfortunate incident might be repeated under different circumstances. Accordingly, the British merchants at Canton sent a petition "TO THE KING'S MOST EXCELLENT MAJESTY IN COUNCIL," encouraging the Council to take measures to "maintain the honour of our country, and preserve the advantages . . . [of] safe and uninterrupted commerce with China." Calling "the insults wantonly heaped upon" Lord Napier to the attention of the King's council, the merchants stated that the the Chief Superintendent Office's impotence compounded the problem.

They wanted the King to send a Plenipotentiary with full authority to deal with any situation that might arise. The merchants also called for an extension of trading rights to Amoy, Ningpo, and Chusan. The merchants took a dim view of the proceedings of the past few months. According to them, Napier tried his best, but he lacked the authority to demand change. The British merchants in Canton wanted a guarantee that similiar insults would not recur. They thought that the best way to prevent a recurrence would be to redress forcefully the insult and extend trading rights.⁶³

In England, James Matheson, partner in the largest British firm in China, Jardine, Matheson & Company, gained the support of the commercial and manufacturing lobbies of Manchester, Glasgow and Liverpool for a new "forward policy" in regard to China.⁶⁴ He argued that the government needed to protect the "new individual system of enterprise"⁶⁵ because British merchants were "daily subjected to injuries and insults."⁶⁶ The Napier mission

⁶³British Merchants at Canton to the King's Most Excellent Majesty in Council, 9 December 1834, Correspondence, 68-70.

⁶⁴Greenberg, *British Trade*, 193-4.

⁶⁵James Matheson, *The Present Position and Prospects of the British Trade with China; Together with an Outline of Some of the Leading Occurrences in its Past History* (London: Smith, Elder, 1836), 7.

⁶⁶Matheson, *Present Position*, 5.

provided Matheson with the perfect example of Chinese governments "imbecility, avarice, conceit, and obstinacy" and of the need for British governmental action to counter the humiliating results of Napier's failure. Protection thus meant more than defending the *status quo*; it meant extending British commercial privileges to ports beyond Canton, if necessary, with force. Matheson even received the patronage of Lord Napier's widow. In a letter to Lord Palmerston she urged him to meet with Matheson and to consider his recommendations for extracting retribution for the insults heaped upon her husband and for opening China's market.⁶⁷ There is no evidence that this proposed meeting ever took place, or that Palmerston even took Matheson's suggestions seriously. British merchants in Canton, however, fully supported Matheson's proposals.

Hugh Hamilton Lindsay, former East India Company Supercargo, agreed with Matheson's evaluation of British relations with China. In a public letter to Lord Palmerston, Lindsay argued forcefully for "armed interference." He believed that a small naval force of "one line-of-battle ship, two frigates, six corvettes, and three or four armed steamers, having on board a land force of about six hundred men, chiefly artillery, in order to

⁶⁷Lady Napier to Palmerston, 14 April 1835, Foreign Office, General Correspondence: China. Public Record Office, Kew (Hereafter cited as FO17), FO17/12/346-7.

protect any land operation which might be necessary" could secure a more stable trading relationship.⁶⁸ The goal of this force would be to disrupt the Chinese coastal trade in grain on which some parts of China were "entirely dependant" for the "necessaries of life." Lindsay believed that such an operation would cause great anxiety in Peking and force the Emperor to open several Northern ports, to define import and export duties, and to abolish the Co-hong.⁶⁹ The time needed for the armed intervention would be no more than seven months, and in all probability, perhaps half that time; it could take place between March and September while the China trade was at its seasonal stand-still. The use of force would cause no interruption in the British trade with China.⁷⁰

Karl Gutzlaff, German protestant missionary, foremost expert on China and joint-translator for the trade commission, agreed with Lindsay's assessment of the situation. In an essay secretly commissioned by the Foreign Office, Gutzlaff stated that "the moment the [Chinese] Government is persuaded that Great Britain will take no notice of the late, most lamentable occurrences, it

⁶⁸Hugh Hamilton Lindsay, *Letter to the Right Honourable Viscount Palmerston on British Relations with China*, 2d. (London: Saunders and Otley, 1836. vol. 1140, Wellington Pamphlets), 12-13.

⁶⁹Lindsay, *Letter to . . . Palmerston*, 10-11.

⁷⁰Lindsay, *Letter to . . . Palmerston*, 18.

will grow bolder, glory in the impunity with which it can carry it's [sic] measures into effect and become more troublesome than it was before."⁷¹ To stem this deplorable turn of events, he suggested seizing one of the Chusan islands and using it as a base to blockade China's coastal trade. This threat to the economic vitality of six or eight maritime cities would force the Chinese officials to negotiate a more agreeable trade relationship.⁷² As a contributing writer to the *Chinese Repository*, a monthly established by protestant missionaries in China, Gutzlaff may have had an ulterior motive for making these suggestions. The *Chinese Repository* hoped to convince the British and American general public that the opening of the China trade would have the added benefit of creating an opportunity to convert the Chinese population to Christianity. By presenting China as a weak and wicked empire, the editors believed that they made the decision to wage war more likely.⁷³

Such belligerent attitudes did not go unopposed. George Thomas Staunton, also a former East India Company

⁷¹Karl Gutzlaff, "Present State of our Relations with China," Separate Inclosure, Robinson to Palmerston, 26 March 1835, FO17/9/131.

⁷²Gutzlaff, "Present State," FO17/9/148-50.

⁷³Murray A. Rubinstein, "The Wars They Wanted: American Missionaries' Use of *The Chinese Repository* Before the Opium War," *The American Neptune* 48 (Fall 1988): 271-82.

Supercargo and now M.P. for Hampshire borough (1832-1835), disagreed with Lindsay and Matheson. Staunton acknowledged that Lindsay's proposals had the support of the great majority of British merchants in Canton, yet the M.P. regarded those suggestions as unjustified in seeking redress for the Chinese treatment of Napier. The British were, "in a national point of view, totally and entirely in the wrong in all our proceedings upon this occasion."⁷⁴ The expedition, far from succeeding, would increase the fear and hostility of the Chinese toward the British and would hurt the existing trade.

Despite Staunton's common sense argument, the whole Napier incident provided a wonderful opportunity for the British Government to go to war. Not only had the Chinese stopped trade, but the Emperor's Viceroy had threatened to behead an officer of the crown. The Chinese had insulted British life, liberty, and property. The demands of the majority of British merchants at Canton and in Britain provided a splendid excuse for military action.

The reaction to the episode among British officials was, however, quite mild. The Duke of Wellington, who temporarily replaced Lord Palmerston in 1835 when the Grey Ministry fell, responded immediately with a succinct note

⁷⁴George Thomas Staunton, *Remarks on the British Relations with China, and Plans for Improving Them* (London: Edmond Lloyd, 1836. vol. 1141 Wellington Pamphlets), 12.

reminding Lord Napier of British policy: commercial privileges were to be obtained by peaceable means, not force.⁷⁵ Palmerston did not deem it necessary to change this policy when he returned to the Foreign Office later in 1835. Considering Dugald Stewart's warnings about avoiding the counsel of merchants and manufacturers, this decision should come as no surprise. To open violently China's market would have disrupted the natural economic order just as surely as granting the East India Company a monopoly did. For the next three years Palmerston continued to let the British trade with China follow its natural course, neither protecting nor restricting it.

⁷⁵Duke of Wellington to Napier, 2 February 1835, *Correspondence*, 5.

CHAPTER 3

INTERNAL DISSENTION

The abolition of the East India Company's monopoly produced uncertainty in Anglo-Chinese relations. The British Trade Commission in China needed clear guidance from London, but Palmerston's *laissez-faire* policy left His Majesty's servants in China without definite instructions. The Chief Superintendents had to decide on their own the most prudent course of action, and the commission fell into internal turmoil. Junior members of the commission had their own ideas about what ought to be done. Clashes over policies within the commission dominated the management of Chinese trade for the whole of 1835 and 1836. When Palmerston put an end to the dispute, he did so without restating his own policy. In 1837 and 1838 the Foreign Secretary finally stated, in unequivocal language, that the British Government had no intention of taking an active role in opening the Chinese market.

On 19 January 1835 John Davis officially resigned his position as Chief Superintendent because of "personal reasons." Privately, however, he made his reasons known. "If I find that I have nothing to do but *sit still* until

the Government at home have made up their minds, I shall probably accompany Mrs. Davis home."¹ Davis was frustrated because he had begged his superior in London for instructions, but none were forthcoming. Davis believed that the government should take a firm and consistent stance in regard to China in order to offset the embarrassments caused by Napier's miserable failure to force the Chinese to bow to his wishes. In the second and third chapters of the first volume of his *The Chinese: A General Description of the Empire of China and Its Inhabitants*, Davis provided a short history of "British Intercourse" with China. Beginning with the arrival of the first British ship in 1637, he chronicled the "frequent interruptions" of the China trade. He argued that every time the British had submitted to the Chinese government's demands, the latter responded by pressing for more concessions. If, on the other hand, the British merchants had refused to back down, Chinese authorities always retreated to their previous position.²

Davis's argument should not be confused with the "crude and ill-digested" program set forth by the British

¹Davis to John Barrow, Macao, 8 November 1834, First Enclosure, Barrow to John Backhouse, 13 March 1835, FO17/12/175.

²Sir John Francis Davis, *The Chinese: A General Description of the Empire of China and Its Inhabitants*, vol. 1 (London: Charles Knight, 1836), Ch. 2 & 3.

Merchants in Canton after the Napier episode.³ Davis believed that the British should take no violent steps that might disrupt the *status quo*. Firmness required a clear diplomatic strategy that would gradually put the British trade with China on a more secure footing. When he resigned, Davis instructed Sir George Best Robinson, who moved up from Second Superintendent to Chief Superintendent, to continue the quiescent policy that Davis had established until the Foreign Office instructed the new Chief Superintendent otherwise.⁴ Captain Charles Elliot, R.N., appointed Third Superintendent on the Departure of Davis, disagreed and argued for a more forward approach. Elliot believed that the commission should open communications with the Chinese Viceroy through the Hong Merchants using the Chinese character "Pin," signifying a petition.⁵

Robinson, a former East India Company Supercargo, had lived in China for fifteen years, while Elliot had only arrived with Lord Napier in 1834. Robinson refused to take Elliot's advice but then relented at his first opportunity as leader of the British trade delegation to have contact

³Davis to Palmerston, Macao, 19 January 1835, *Correspondence*, 80.

⁴Extract from the "Records of Proceedings," 19 January 1835, *Correspondence*, 80.

⁵Elliot, "Minute," Enclosure, Robinson to Wellington, Macao, 26 April 1835, FO17/18/30.

with the Chinese authorities. On 21 January the *Argyle*, a British merchant vessel, dropped anchor off the coast of China to repair the damage done to the ship by a fierce tempest. While attempting to make the repairs, the captain, Mr. Alexander MacDonald, sent a small boat with a twelve-man party ashore for the purpose of finding a pilot to guide the ship to Canton. The group never returned. The twelve sailors had been kidnapped by a band of lawless Chinese who demanded a \$500 ransom.*

Not having the money on board, MacDonald decided to proceed to Macao and there informed Robinson of the incident. Robinson thought the episode could be handled without any official contact between himself and the Chinese authorities. Elliot pressed Robinson for action. The Third Superintendent wanted Robinson to open communications with the Chinese and ask for their assistance. Robinson gave in to Elliot "less from an idea that there existed a chance of its [the communication] being received, than from a wish to convince that gentleman he had formed an erroneous opinion in anticipating, that on

*The Spanish dollar from Mexico was the currency of choice for Chinese foreign commerce. "The tael (T. or Tls.), the basic unit of Chinese currency at Canton, was a hypothetical coin of pure silver weighing 1.208 oz. The only circulating Chinese coin was the copper cash [1000 cash = T.1]. The basic coin in foreign commerce was the Spanish dollar [\$1 = T. 0.72], with an intrinsic value of 4s. 2d. (4/2), and an exchange value ranging from 5s. 2d. upwards." Pritchard, *Crucial Years*, 103.

any pretext or under any circumstances, would the Canton authorities be induced to communicate with an officer of this commission."⁶

On 1 February 1835 Elliot proceeded to Canton with a formal request that the Viceroy investigate the matter. Robinson avoided putting the request in the form of a letter by adapting the same mode of communication used "by public officers in their reports to each other" in an attempt to avoid Lord Napier's mistakes. Like Napier's, this attempt at communication failed, and the Chinese, once again, insulted one of His Britannic Majesty's officers.

Accompanied by Karl Gutzlaff and Captain MacDonald, Captain Elliot arrived at Canton in full uniform. The expedition did not go to the foreign factories as Lord Napier had done, but to a small gate a few miles away, where in 1831 another naval captain had successfully transmitted a letter to the Viceroy. After entering the gate, the group proceeded a "few houses" into Canton, where without provocation, a group of Chinese soldiers, led by a "second lieutenant," attacked Elliot and threw him to the ground. Gutzlaff tried to protest this action and to explain the purpose of their visit. The soldiers, however, continued to push the party forcibly back through the city

⁶Robinson to Palmerston, Private and Confidential, Macao, 13 April 1835, Foreign Office, Embassy and Consular Archives: China. Public Record Office, Kew (Hereafter cited as FO228), FO228/2/123.

gates. Once this had occurred, a mandarin of higher rank arrived and Captain Elliot tried to present Robinson's request for assistance. The mandarin "sneered contemptuously" at the document and laughed at Elliot when he requested that the Chinese lieutenant be punished.⁷

The mandarin then withdrew. Captain Elliot remained and continued to plead for an official to come and receive the report. After over half an hour had passed, Mowqua, a senior member of the Co-hong, arrived with several Mandarins. Elliot beseeched the mandarins to accept the document, but they continually replied that only petitions were acceptable. Their rigidity forced Elliot to leave Canton, having failed miserably at his self-imposed task. One month later, however, the Chinese authorities obtained the release of the twelve sailors and the unfortunate incident came to an end.⁸

Once again an excuse for war had presented itself. Chinese renegades held twelve British subjects for ransom. The Chinese authorities responded by assaulting an officer of the crown. The fact that the British Government did not respond to this incident is striking and significant. No reference to the incident can be found in any document sent

⁷Charles Gutzlaff's report, in an extract from the "Records of Proceedings," 1 February 1835 (received 7 July 1835), *Correspondence*, 84-85.

⁸Gutzlaff's report, *Correspondence*, 85.

out by the Foreign Office. Lord Palmerston completely overlooked it.

As a result of Elliot's experience, Robinson embarked on the same policy Davis had chosen to follow--quiescence. Robinson informed Lord Palmerston that no further contact with the Chinese would be attempted unless it was necessary and that the commission awaited "definite instructions."⁹ Those instructions never arrived; Robinson was left without instructions from the Foreign Office for almost two years. The last despatch concerned Lord Napier's troubles and told the superintendents to avoid any further disturbances. This forced Robinson to set his own policy, while continuing to appeal for advice. Even after considering the six months it took for despatches to travel from China to London, and then back again, the absence of instructions implies that Palmerston had only a minimal interest in British commercial and diplomatic affairs in China.

Without instructions from England Robinson's quiescent policy continued to draw sharp criticism from Elliot. The next internal conflict over policy arose in August 1835 over the behavior of a British merchant named James Innes. Innes believed that the Chinese authorities had acted illegally when they seized one of his cargoes. It was under the care of a Chinese pilot who had proceeded up the

⁹Robinson to Palmerston, 16 October 1835, *Correspondence*, 101.

river to Canton without a passport. Innes demanded redress for this outrage and threatened to attack Chinese trade in order to get compensation.¹⁰ Robinson persuaded Innes that violence was not the best course of action. The Chief Superintendent told Innes that the commission would bring the matter to the attention of the Chinese at the first opportunity. Innes agreed, but Elliot vigorously opposed this line of action. He believed that the commission should "forcibly" expel Innes from China for his threats and deny him the right to trade.¹¹ The Chief Superintendent decided against such strong action and referred the matter to England for further instructions.

Another quarrel broke out between Robinson and Elliot in late 1835 when the steam-boat *Jardine* arrived from London. The owner hoped to use the steamer as a ferry between Macao and Canton and Lintin. After observing the *Jardine* in the Gulf of Canton, the Chinese authorities ordered it out of Chinese waters.¹² Ignoring these orders, the captain of the vessel continued to prepare for a trip up the river to Canton. Elliot demanded that the commission should exert its authority by ordering the ship

¹⁰Palmerston to Robinson, Foreign Office, 6 June 1836, *Correspondence*, 111-2.

¹¹Elliot, "Memorandum," Enclosure, Robinson to Palmerston, Macao, 20 November 1835, FO17/18/86.

¹²Alan Reid, "The Smoke Ship," *Mariner's Mirror* 72 (1986): 69.

to leave. Robinson believed that he had no authority to stop the *Jardine*, while Elliot felt that the commission had both the authority and the obligation to order the *Jardine* not to proceed with its plans. He reasoned that the presence of the steamer would cause the Chinese government to stop all trade and would increase the animosity of the commercial community toward the commission.¹³

Once again Robinson chose to ignore Elliot's advice. On 1 January the steamer proceeded up the river, but the Chinese military halted its progress by firing its cannons. Six days later an Imperial Edict announced that any further attempt to use the "smoke ship" would be met with equal fury and that it should leave Chinese waters immediately. Seeing little chance for a successful business in Canton, the captain left for Singapore.¹⁴ The incident had no effect on the rest of British trade with China, but it added to the dissention within the trade commission.

The internal turmoil caused by the *Jardine* incident was exacerbated by a larger conflict between Robinson and his subordinates. On 1 December 1835 Robinson moved his base of operations from Macao to a forty ton cutter named the *Louisa*, anchored off Lintin, a small island in the Gulf of Canton. He moved because the Portuguese felt he

¹³Elliot, "Minute," Macao, 27 December 1835, *Correspondence*, 122.

¹⁴Reid, "Smoke Ship," 70.

threatened their jurisdiction and because he wanted to be at the heart of British mercantile interests.¹⁵ Lintin was the anchorage for mercantile vessels both waiting to proceed to Canton and depositing opium on receiving ships, floating opium warehouses. Robinson also took this move to avoid putting himself and British trade at the mercy of the Chinese authorities. He prophetically warned that residing at Canton would be troublesome in times of confrontation. If a conflict arose, and the Superintendent failed to submit to Chinese demands, the British could have "their servants taken away; their provisions stopped; and houses unroofed."¹⁶ Robinson concluded that in such a situation the British community, led by the Superintendent, would have no alternative but total submission to the Chinese demands.

Robinson followed this policy for a year, and trade continued on its peaceful course. His new residence also won the approval of the British Chamber of Commerce at Canton, because the commission's residence at Macao had been a great inconvenience to them.¹⁷ As Robinson explained to Lord Palmerston, large ships could not

¹⁵Costin, *Great Britain and China*, 30-31.

¹⁶Robinson to Palmerston, 1 December 1836, *Correspondence*, 106.

¹⁷Sprott Boyd, Secretary of the Chamber of Commerce at Canton, 8 December 1835, *Correspondence*, 109.

approach Macao's harbor due to physical constraints, and thus lay open to sudden winds while waiting for port clearance into Canton.¹⁸ A residence at Lintin, on the other hand, provided the British ships with a safe and speedy place to take care of official business.

Captain Elliot, now Second Superintendent and supported by Third Superintendent Alexander R. Johnston, energetically disapproved of Robinson's move. In memorandums enclosed in Robinson's despatches Elliot criticized Robinson's policies. The Second Superintendent felt that Robinson's actions violated the instructions given to the trade commission and broke English law.¹⁹ The instructions called for the commission to reside at Canton. He believed that until new instructions arrived in China the commission should attempt to receive permission from the Chinese authorities to proceed from Macao directly to Canton. Elliot also maintained that Robinson put the legitimate trade at risk by residing among the receiving vessels. He assumed that the Chinese officials would see the residence as *de facto* approval by the British Government of the illicit trade and that an incident involving the opium traffickers and the Chinese would bring

¹⁸Robinson to Palmerston, H.M. Cutter Louisa, Lintin, February 1836, FO228/3/79.

¹⁹Elliot to Robinson, Macao, 23 November 1835, Enclosure No. 1, Robinson to Palmerston, Macao, 16 January 1836, FO228/3/24.

the wrath of the Canton authorities down upon the commission.²⁰ Both Elliot and Johnston refused, therefore, to move with Robinson to Lintin and refused to sign any official documents.²¹

Robinson defended his decision, referring to the fact that the China trade continued unmolested. Contrary to the assertions of Elliot and Johnston, the Chinese authorities ignored his residence at Lintin, even though one or two war junks maintained watch over the anchorage.²² Robinson told Palmerston that the commission had nothing to do with the opium trade and argued that if a residence at Lintin was illegal, then residing at Macao "must be equally illegal."²³ Historian Chang Hsin-pao states that these defensive despatches "must have bored Palmerston considerably,"²⁴ but it was Elliot whom the Foreign office

²⁰Elliot, "Minute," 30 November 1835, Enclosure No. 1, Robinson to Palmerston, Lintin, 29 February 1836, FO228/3/124.

²¹Robinson to Palmerston, Lintin, 5 January 1836, FO228/3/1.

²²Robinson to Palmerston, H.M. Cutter Louisa, Lintin, 25 February 1836, FO228/3/101-2.

²³Robinson to Palmerston, H.M. Cutter Louisa, Lintin, 29 February 1836, FO228/3/119.

²⁴Chang, *Commissioner Lin*, 68.

chastised for sending home "such voluminous records of matters of small amount."²⁵

The internal dissension became so serious that Elliot accused Robinson of suspending him from office, a deed the Captain considered a violation of the "King's Instructions."²⁶ Elliot felt that he had the right to see all despatches sent to and from the Foreign Office. Robinson's residence deprived him of this right. Robinson responded by telling Elliot that he had formed an inaccurate opinion. The Chief Superintendent explained that he would let Elliot see the despatches if he agreed to perform his duties for the commission.²⁷

The conflict among the members of the commission continued throughout the trading season. During this nine-month period Robinson continued to report the tranquil state of affairs which existed between the merchants and the Canton authorities and waited with "regret and anxiety" for instructions from England. He wanted to know what to do but refused to listen to the opinions of Elliot and Johnston. Chief Superintendent Robinson believed that his colleagues' views differed "in idea only from those which

²⁵William Fox-Strangways to Elliot, Foreign Office, 14 September 1836, FO228/4/49.

²⁶Elliot to Robinson, Macao, 9 January 1836, Enclosure No. 3, Robinson to Palmerston, Macao, 16 January 1836, FO228/3/30.

²⁷Robinson to Elliot, 9 January 1836, Enclosure No. 3A, Robinson to Palmerston, 16 January 1836, FO228/3/20-46.

dictated the early proceedings of this Commission [under Lord Napier] and if adopted, I predict their results would be equally disastrous."²⁸ Even though Robinson received no instructions, he felt secure with his position. He finally decided to break his connections with the East India Company in November 1835.²⁹ Thus, when rumors of the abolition of the Office of Chief Superintendent and the promotion of Captain Elliot to head the trade commission surfaced in Canton one year later, Robinson felt frustrated that his authority had been undermined.³⁰ These feelings could not possibly have matched the feelings of abandonment when he learned that the rumors were true.

The reasons for Palmerston's actions are not clear because of the contradictory nature of the evidence. At first glance one might assume that Palmerston disapproved of Robinson's policies, but the Foreign Secretary had originally approved of the Lintin station. He stated that

HIS Majesty's Government approve of the proposal contained in your despatch, of December 1, 1835 [detailing the move]; and they are of the opinion that it would be desirable to extend the limits of the power of the Superintendents of British

²⁸Robinson to Palmerston, Macao, 12 October 1836, FO228/3/206.

²⁹Robinson to Palmerston, Private and Confidential, Macao, 23 November 1835, FO228/2/148-9.

³⁰Robinson to Palmerston, H.M. Cutter Louisa, Lintin, 28 November 1836, FO228/3/212.

Trade in China . . . to include Lintin and Macao.³¹

Just ten days later Palmerston was less decisive about the Lintin residence. He had sent Robinson's despatches to both the India Board and the Board of Trade and had asked those two agencies to submit their opinions on the establishment of permanent residence at Lintin.³² On 7 June 1836 the India Board reported that it could not form an opinion until Robinson provided further information.³³ That same day Palmerston wrote a letter that mimicked the letter from the India Board.

As to the advantages which you [Robinson] anticipate would result to British commerce from the formation of a permanent establishment at Lintin, of the nature of that which you suggest in your despatch of December 1st, 1835, I have to say that, after duly considering what you have said yourself in favour of such an establishment, and the reasons against it, His Majesty's Government do not feel that they have yet been put sufficiently in possession of the means of forming any final opinion upon this suggestion; and I, therefore, cannot authorize the permanent residence of the Commission at Lintin, until I have received further information upon the subject.³⁴

³¹Palmerston to Robinson, 28 May, 1836, *Correspondence*, 111.

³²Backhouse to R. Vernon Smith, Foreign Office, 2 May 1836, FO17/16/116-7; Backhouse to Denis Le Merchant, Foreign Office, 2 May 1826, FO17/16/118-9.

³³Smith to Backhouse, India Board, 7 June 1836, FO17/16/134.

³⁴Palmerston to Robinson, Foreign Office, 7 June 1836, *Correspondence*, 113-4.

That information would never be provided. In the same letter in which Palmerston withdrew his outright approval, he dismissed Robinson from his post as Chief Superintendent of Trade in China. He gave no foreign policy reason for doing so. He merely stated that His Majesty's Government had abolished the office of Chief Superintendent in order to reduce the size and expenses of the commission. Robinson should turn over all official documents to Charles Elliot.

Social differences might have played a role in this personnel change. After his return to England in 1835, Sir John Davis urged John Backhouse, Permanent Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs, to bring to the attention of Lord Palmerston the immediate necessity of removing Robinson in favor of Elliot. Davis believed that "such a man as Elliot should not remain below such a man as Robinson."³⁵ Charles Elliot was the cousin of Lord Minto (Gilbert Elliot-Murray-Kynymound), First Lord of the Admiralty. Lord Minto had been a friend of Palmerston since childhood. Their fathers had been close associates and the youths spent a considerable amount of time together.³⁶ Robinson was a mere merchant. Whether Davis' pleading had the desired effect is hard to determine.

³⁵Davis to Backhouse, Portland Place, London, 26 June 1835, FO17/12/341-2.

³⁶Bourne, *Palmerston*, 1-16.

Backhouse responded by writing that Lord Palmerston did not have the time to consider the request,³⁷ and the Foreign Secretary did not replace Robinson for another year. When the promotion of Elliot over Robinson did take place, however, it had less to do with any modern "rational" notions of merit than with traditional conceptions of status based on aristocratic family ties.³⁸

The lack of an explanation for the change is symptomatic of a larger uncertainty surrounding the change because Palmerston did not specify Elliot's new role. When the despatch informing Elliot of the decision reached China on 14 December 1836, he took over as ranking officer of the British trade commission at Canton without receiving any definite instructions from the Government. The Foreign Secretary told Elliot to consider himself "Chief of the Commission," but this title lacked any clear meaning. In a book on the British Consular Services abroad Desmond C.M. Platt does not even consider Elliot's office as worthy of consideration.³⁹ Elliot's new office was an administrative aberration.

³⁷Backhouse to Davis, Draft, Foreign Office, 30 June 1835, FO17/12/343.

³⁸W.D. Rubinstein, "The End of 'Old Corruption' in Britain 1780-1860," *Past and Present* 101 (November 1983): 65.

³⁹Desmond C.M. Platt. *The Cinderella Service: British Consuls since 1825* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1971) 182.

In regard to the conflict of opinion that existed between Robinson and Elliot, Palmerston was equally vague. He wrote to Elliot on 15 June, stating that he did not wish to go into any details.

But I think it due to you to assure you that His Majesty's Government entirely exonerate you from any imputation of having been 'factiously disposed' in your proceedings with regard to Sir George Robinson; or of having been influenced in your conduct by any other motive than the good of the Service. The decision of His Majesty's Government which I communicate to you will afford you the most satisfactory answer to your letter upon this subject.⁴⁰

To Elliot this despatch must have seemed like a full endorsement of his proposal for a more active trade commission.

The vagueness of his instructions to Elliot came back to haunt Lord Palmerston during the course of the next four years. Palmerston's blank check allowed Elliot to experiment with a new China policy which lacked the explicit approval of the Government in London. Palmerston had to spend the next several years clarifying his policy. In the course of the correspondence from London to China Palmerston sided with the opinion that Robinson had expressed during his tenure as Chief Superintendent more often than he declared approval for Elliot's propositions.

Upon receiving the June 15 despatch from Lord Palmerston, Elliot immediately decided to change course and

⁴⁰Palmerston to Elliot, Foreign Office, 15 June 1836, FO228/3/18-19.

to put into effect ideas that he had contemplated in the years preceding his appointment. He wanted to reopen communication with the Viceroy and to reside at Canton, maintaining that these changes would bring advantages to the merchant community. After establishing himself in Canton, Elliot had proposed aiding the Chinese authorities in their attempts to control trade, which would cause them to "court direct communication."⁴¹

Elliot regarded his appointment as head of the British trade delegation as the perfect opportunity to put his plan into action. Elliot also thought the newly appointed Governor-General, Teng T'ing-chen, might be amenable to the new course and open a dialogue. Accordingly, on 14 December, the very same day he received his appointment, Elliot asked the Hong merchants to deliver a petition to the Viceroy. The petition announced Elliot's appointment and his desire to reside at Canton.⁴² Teng responded by ordering an investigation into Elliot's intentions and into the nature of his mission. He sent the Hong merchants to question the Captain. Elliot informed them that his "duty at Canton will be to conduct the public business of my

⁴¹Elliot to Foreign Office, 14 March 1836, *Correspondence*, 137.

⁴²Inclosure 1, Elliot to Governor of Canton, 14 December 1836, in Elliot to Palmerston, 30 December 1836, *Correspondence*, 142.

nation, and by all possible means to preserve the peace which so happily subsists between the two countries."⁴³

Elliot's proposal appealed to Governor-General Teng. In a memorial to the Emperor, he recommended allowing Elliot to proceed to Canton. Elliot considered this a major break-through in Anglo-Chinese relations, but the Viceroy deemed it only a minor readjustment.⁴⁴ He stated that since the termination of the East India Company's monopoly, the British merchants in Canton had been without guidance. The Viceroy judged it prudent to grant Captain Elliot permission to reside in Canton in order

to controul [sic] the merchants and seamen . . . and . . . in case of any disturbances, he alone is answerable. . . . [T]hough he is not precisely the same as the Chief Supracargo [sic] hitherto appointed, yet the difference is but in name, for in reality he is the same. And after all he is a⁴⁵ foreigner to hold the reins of foreigners.

Hence, Elliot received permission from the Emperor to reside in Canton under the same restrictions as the Supercargoes. The Chinese expected Elliot to control the merchants during the trading season, and then, to retreat

⁴³Inclosure 8, Elliot to Hong Merchants, 28 December, 1836, in Elliot to Palmerston, 30 December 1836, *Correspondence*, 146.

⁴⁴Inclosure 1, Edict from the Governor of Canton, in Elliot to Palmerston, 18 March 1837, *Correspondence*, 193.

⁴⁵Inclosure 2, Extract of a Memorial from the Governor of Canton to the Emperor of China, in Elliot to Palmerston, 27 January 1837, *Correspondence*, 152.

to Macao. Neither Governor-General Teng nor the Emperor considered Elliot a diplomatic officer.

Elliot expected his news to be received in England with jubilation, but his resumption of communications with the Viceroy through the Hong Merchants had been premature. One month after promoting Elliot to his post, Palmerston finally got around to responding to Elliot's proposals. The Foreign Secretary informed Elliot that it had been acceptable for merchants of the East India Company to send petitions through the Hong Merchants, but now it was improper for an agent of the crown to submit to such restrictions.⁴⁶ By the time Elliot received these instructions, his plan was already well under way. He decided to ignore Palmerston's instructions and to stay the course. He told Palmerston that it "would be exceeding injudicious, and perhaps prejudicial to the tranquil course of trade" to turn back.⁴⁷

Palmerston was livid when he read Elliot's despatch. The Foreign Secretary instructed Elliot to take steps immediately to rectify the situation--to discontinue the use of the Chinese character "pin" and of the Hong Merchants. Palmerston could not believe Elliot's persistence in his course even after being given specific

⁴⁶Palmerston to Elliot, Foreign Office, 22 July 1836, FO228/4/49-50.

⁴⁷Elliot to Palmerston, Macao, 12 January 1837, FO228/5/6.

instructions to the contrary. The Foreign Secretary chastised Elliot for his insubordination and concluded by reminding him

that it is the duty of an Officer of the Crown on a foreign Station to take no important steps without Instructions; and to obey promptly and punctually the Instructions which he may receive; and the greater the distance which separates such officer from England, the more incumbent upon him it is, to attend to these Rules; because so much longer will be the interval of time which must elapse before the Government at home can repair any inconvenience which may be produced by his unauthorized acts,⁴⁸ or by his neglect to execute his Instructions.

Palmerston set foreign policy. He did not expect Elliot to make decisions on his own. Even with the year it took for letters to travel to and from China Palmerston wanted his instructions to be followed with as little deviation as possible.

In regard to trade policy Palmerston made it clear that Elliot was to exert no pressure on the Canton authorities for changing the present system. He had John Backhouse forward to Elliot a petition from the Glasgow East India Association which called for a more active role for the British Government in improving trade relations with China and the Foreign Office's response. The memorial stated that British Government should protect trade by seeking authorization from the Chinese for Admiralty Jurisdiction in China, communications with the Court at

⁴⁸Palmerston to Elliot, Foreign Office, 12 June 1837, FO228/6/30.

Peking, living quarters for merchants and their families in Canton, new British owned warehouses, the protection of Chinese Laws, access to northern ports, freedom to trade with all Chinese and an island off the coast.⁴⁹ Backhouse responded to these suggestions in no uncertain terms. He stated that the Government would not put the trade in danger in order to press for these changes.⁵⁰ With this set of letters Palmerston demonstrated to Elliot that the British Government did not favor an active role for itself in opening up the Chinese market.

During the course of 1836 Palmerston also clarified his position in regard to two other disputes between Elliot and Robinson. Responding to Elliot's desire to stop the advance of the steam-ship *Jardine*, Palmerston stated that Elliot possessed limited authority when interfering with the undertakings of British merchants in China. Palmerston told Elliot that he had no authority to stop the *Jardine*. In the future Elliot should be "very careful not to assume a greater degree of authority over British subjects in

⁴⁹Glasgow East India Association to Palmerston, Enclosure No. 1, Backhouse to Elliot, Foreign Office, 22 July 1836, FO228/3/42-4.

⁵⁰Backhouse to Glasgow East India Association, Foreign Office, 16 July 1836, Enclosure No. 2, Backhouse to Elliot, Foreign Office, 22 July 1836, FO228/3/45.

China than that which you [Captain Elliot] in reality possess."⁵¹

In regard to the case of James Innes the Foreign Secretary informed Elliot that the British Government would consider violent acts against the Chinese as acts of "piracy." Innes would be left to the mercy of the Chinese if he carried out his threats.⁵² In a second letter dated the same day, however, Palmerston went on to say that it was a "misconception" for Elliot to believe that he had the power to expel any one from China. The East India Company Supercargoes had possessed the authority to expel *unlicensed* merchants from China. Since a license was no longer needed to trade in China, the power had also ceased to exist.⁵³

The Foreign Secretary knew that such limitations on Elliot's powers affected the status of the trade commission. He wrote:

His Majesty's Government are fully aware of the inconvenience arising both from the undefined state of Jurisdiction of the Superintendents in China, and from their want of power to enforce their decisions to which they may come, on

⁵¹Palmerston to Elliot, Foreign Office, 22 July 1836, FO228/3/48.

⁵²Palmerston to Elliot, Foreign Office, 8 November 1836, FO228/4/58.

⁵³Palmerston to Elliot, Foreign Office, 8 November 1836, FO228/4/69-70.

matters submitted to them by members of the commercial body in China.⁵⁴

He added that the Government was deliberating on the nature of the trade commission in China. Clarification of the role of the Superintendents would be forthcoming. He concluded, "In the meantime, I recommend to you to confine your interference, when called for, as much as possible to friendly suggestions and advice to the parties concerned."⁵⁵ If Elliot had any questions about the limits of his authority, Palmerston's instructions should have answered them. In two instances the Foreign Secretary rebuked his subordinate for wanting to take a more active role in controlling the China trade. Captain Elliot possessed no real power or authority to act.

Another concern of Lord Palmerston was the expenses of the commission. A "mystical faith in 'Cheap Government'" dominated political debates in the first half of the nineteenth century. Since the Liberal Tory Government's retrenchment measures left the Whigs with only £5,000,000 to cut from the budget, they experienced difficulties finding areas in which to reduce fiscal outlays.⁵⁶ The trade commission in China was one area that they could

⁵⁴Palmerston to Elliot, Foreign Office, 8 November 1836, FO228/4/67.

⁵⁵Palmerston to Elliot, Foreign Office, 8 November 1836, FO228/4/67-8

⁵⁶Gash, "After Waterloo," 156-7.

reduce without hurting their policy objectives. In November 1836 reduction of the commission's expenses followed the reduction of commission staff itself in June. The Foreign Secretary abolished several minor offices, and slashed the salaries for each of the remaining offices by £500 per annum. Finally he cut the clerical and contingent expenses from £5000 to £2500. Palmerston then instructed Elliot that "the above amount shall, under no circumstances, in future be exceeded."⁵⁷ In another letter dated the same day Palmerston reprimanded Elliot for the commission's decision to pay £1014.15 for the creation of a seamen's hospital. Palmerston recognized the need for the hospital but thought the amount appropriated was too high. He also disapproved any allocation of funds without prior approval from London. He considered such allocations a violation of English law.⁵⁸

China absorbed Palmerston's attention on 8 November 1836, for on that same day he dealt with another instance of inappropriate distribution of public capital. In a dispute between Messrs. Turner & Co. and Mr. Arthur Launders Keating over Spanish \$300, the British trade commission in China had paid the sum to Mr. Keating in order to avoid a more general disruption of trade in

⁵⁷Palmerston to Elliot, Foreign Office, 8 November 1836, FO228/4/73.

⁵⁸Palmerston to Elliot, Foreign Office, 8 November 1836, FO228/4/76.

Canton. Although Palmerston did not intend to hold the members of the commission personally responsible, he did not want Elliot to make this type of mistake again.⁵⁹

Once more Palmerston's instructions came too late. Elliot had already undertaken on his own authority to spend public funds. The main reason for the disbursement was Elliot's move to Canton. In Canton Elliot had to rent additional residential and office space for the commission during the season. These expenses amounted to \$5765.⁶⁰ Elliot also spent money on H.M. Cutter *Louisa*, which he found badly in need of repairs. He thought that the vessel was unseaworthy. He "furnished [it] with new decks and topside, recoppered and thoroughly re-equipped in spars, sails, boats and rigging" at a cost of \$6500.⁶¹ He suggested raising the contingent expenses of the commission by £1000 per annum in order to pay for the upkeep and manning of the vessel. He argued that the vessel provided the best means of traveling from Macao to Canton because the Chinese authorities allowed it to move unmolested.

⁵⁹Palmerston to Elliot, Foreign Office, 8 November 1836, FO228/4/65.

⁶⁰"A Statement of the disbursements made by Captain Elliot since his assumption of the Office of Chief Superintendent . . .," Enclosure No. 1, Elliot to Palmerston, 17 September 1837, FO228/5/324.

⁶¹"A Statement of the disbursements . . .," FO228/5/329.

When Palmerston received the news of Elliot's expenditures, the Foreign Secretary decided to allow them. He raised the contingent expenses by £750, less than the £1000 Elliot had requested. Here Palmerston's flexibility stopped.

While I communicate to you a very liberal provision which Her Majesty's Government have made for this Service, I must again impress on you the necessity of exercising the most rigid control over the Contingent Expenditure of the Commission; and of making from time to time any reductions therein which may be compatible with the due execution of the public Service.⁶²

Neither Palmerston's policy of reducing the commission nor Elliot's policy indulging the Chinese authorities pleased the British merchants in Canton. John Slade, editor of the *Canton Register*, wrote to Palmerston, "every measure for the protection and promotion of the British trade to China, originating with the government of which your lordship is a member, has failed utterly, and disgracefully."⁶³

The Trade Commission's internal conflict provided Palmerston with an opportunity to delineate a clear China policy, but he had acted before clarifying his intentions. This mistake led to tensions between Palmerston and Elliot. The Foreign Secretary was finally forced to define British

⁶²Palmerston to Elliot, Foreign Office, 2 June 1838, FO228/8/8.

⁶³Slade to Palmerston, Canton, 9 October 1838, FO17/28/212.

policy. He did not wish Crown representatives in China to direct a new forward commercial policy. In the face of opposition from the merchants in China the Foreign Secretary wanted to reduce the British Government's involvement in China rather than expand it. As Chief of the Commission, Elliot was a minor official with little voice in policy decisions and with limited authority over British subjects. He also had few financial resources at his disposal. The steps Elliot would take during the opium crisis of March 1839 greatly exceeded his role as Palmerston had defined it.

CHAPTER 4

FAILURE TO TAKE HEED

Elliot's inability to follow simple instructions was extremely unfortunate for the Foreign Minister because of crises that developed in Britain and China. Although stemming from unrelated causes, they created tense atmospheres in both imperial capitals, leading to a deterioration in Anglo-Chinese relations. The crisis in London, the topic of Chapter 5, resulted from a backlash against the reform measures of the Whigs. In Peking the crisis arose out of the Chinese Emperor's desire to revitalize his dynasty. The Emperor's decision to suppress the illegal opium trade provided a link between the two crises, when the British Foreign Office failed to respect the Superintendent's warnings about the increasing risk the opium trade posed to legitimate British commerce.

During the late 1820s and early 1830s a danger to the Anglo-Chinese relationship arose. This threat came about because the British merchants finally found a product which the Chinese were willing to buy *en masse*--opium. The sale of opium successfully altered the balance of trade in the British favor, but this shift too had its price. During

the early 1800s raw cotton exports from India to China had closed the trade gap. Indian cotton remained, however, an uncertain venture. Its price depended upon the size of China's own domestic crop. The problems in the Chinese cotton market became serious in the 1820s when trade in the commodity came to a standstill, leaving the trade imbalance as an irritation.¹ Opium provided relief.

The East India Company grew and processed the drug in India for consumption in China. The laborers on Company plantations sowed the seeds for the poppy in autumn, and the flower bloomed in the spring. The poppy flower varied in color from white to deep violet, and the plant stood no higher than five feet tall. Once the spherical seed pod developed on the end of the stem some time between July and August, the flower fell off. Laborers then walked the fields in the evening, making shallow incisions using hooked knives around the sphere. During the course of the night, a white milky liquid exuded from the interior of the pod and built up on the outside of it. The next day workers reentered the fields in order to collect the raw opium, now a dark brown mass because of the heat of the sun. The field hands repeated this process of cutting the capsules and collecting the opium for several days until

¹Greenberg, *British Trade*, 9-10, 80-94.

the plant no longer produced the liquid.² Processing the substance was simple. Opium was boiled in open vats for several days in order to remove as much of the moisture as possible. Workers then took the processed opium and rolled it into balls. They covered these balls with poppy leaves and placed them into chests that held two layers of twenty balls each.³

The Company did not directly engage in the sale of opium in China because in 1792 a Chinese imperial edict forbade its importation. The Company felt the trade was too much of a risk, so during December or January it held a public auction in Calcutta. There, the Company sold the opium in lots of five chests to private speculators, who then hired merchants to deliver the product to China.⁴ These merchants, called country traders, had to obtain a license from the Company in order to participate in the legal trade in China. They brought in the opium along with their legitimate merchandise.⁵

After the Honorable Company's monopoly ended in 1833, the country traders continued to trade in China but without

²"Cultivation of the Poppy," *Documents Relating to Opium, &c.* (Canton: Chinese Repository, 1837), 45. FO17/28/155.

³"The Traffic in Opium carried on with China," *Documents Relating to Opium*, 69. FO17/28/167.

⁴"Traffic in Opium," 69. FO17/28/167.

⁵Greenberg, *British Trade*, 14-15.

a license. The traders also could legally engage in the tea trade, without any competition from the East India Company. In order to finance this new endeavor British merchants increasingly turned to Anglo-American merchant bankers in New York and London.⁶ Since American merchants engaged in the China trade continued to run a trade deficit, it was more efficient for them to draw a bill of exchange from one of the Anglo-American Houses to pay for Chinese merchandise than to continue to ship silver. The Chinese merchants in turn used the bills to purchase British goods--opium. These financial arrangements caused credit to replace bullion as the mechanism for exchange and linked the Canton markets to those in London and New York.⁷

Once in Chinese waters the merchants transferred the opium to receiving ships. The British merchants brought these vessels to China but the ships never left Chinese waters; they were floating warehouses whose only purpose was to house illegal goods. Local authorities knew of their presence, but did not have the naval capability to drive them away.⁸ As a result, Chinese opium dealers

⁶Weng Eang Cheong, *Mandarins and Merchants: Jardine Matheson & Co., a China Agency of the Early Nineteenth Century* (London: Curzon Press, 1978), 228-9.

⁷Peter Temin, *The Jacksonian Economy* (New York: Norton, 1969), 81-82.

⁸Fay, *Opium War*, 46.

purchased opium directly from the receiving ships, paying in silver.

The Chinese were responsible for transporting the opium on shore, which usually meant bribing a local official. Boats of various sizes came alongside the receiving ships, loaded up with opium and then took the illegal substance ashore. This arrangement allowed the country traders to claim both that they did not smuggle opium into China and that the Chinese officials sanctioned the trade.⁹

The private merchants felt no threat from Imperial authorities. They even held them in contempt by publishing a newspaper, called the *Canton Register*, that contained the current prices of opium, and specified the names of those participating in the illicit trade.¹⁰ Those participants were the same individuals and merchant houses that conducted the legal trade after the abolition of the East India Company's monopoly.

While historians have an abundance of evidence concerning the opium trade itself, the material needed to paint an accurate picture of the drug's consumption in early nineteenth-century China is scarce. Unlike most European and Middle Eastern consumers who either chewed

⁹Select Committee on the Trade with China. *Report*, 1840. 72.

¹⁰*Report*, 1840, 49-50, 73, 94.

opium or mixed it with a liquid, the Chinese smoked it. They would place a small portion of opium on the end of a thin skewer and heat it above a lamp. Once the opium reached the point of turning into a vapor, the addict placed the skewer within a shallow bowl at the end of a pipe and inhaled. This method of taking the drug greatly increased the narcotic effect.¹¹

Neither the British nor the Chinese lacked knowledge about the long-term consequences of using opium. Both realized the escape it provided and the destruction of the body that inevitably followed.

('The opium eater') soon after having taken the opium perceives an unusual exhilaration and activity of the spirits; his imagination revels in luxurious images, and he enjoys a feeling of more than common strength and courage; but this pleasing intoxication soon leaves him, and in its stead follow laziness, disgust at all kinds of occupation, and a certain imbecility of the senses, closely bordering upon insanity. To avoid the duration of this insufferable state, opium must again be taken, thus continually changing between the highest excitement and the lowest state of despondency, the consequence of which is an early derangement of the functions of the body, and premature death.¹²

Chinese descriptions of the narcotic's effects are no more heartening.

¹¹Jonathan Spence, "Opium Smoking in Ch'ing China," Frederic Wakeman Jr. and Carolyn Grant eds., *Conflict and Control in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 146-50; Fay, *Opium War*, 8-9.

¹²"Testimony as to the effects of using opium," *Documents Relating to Opium*, 70. FO17/28/167.

When any one is long habituated to inhaling it, [opium], it becomes necessary to resort to it at regular intervals, and the habit of using it, being inveterate, is destructive of time, injurious to property, and yet dear to one even as life. Of those who use it to great excess, the breath becomes feeble, the body wasted, the face sallow, the teeth black: the individuals themselves clearly see the evil effects of it, yet cannot refrain from it.¹³

Confucian officials, courtiers, merchants and soldiers were the first to use the drug. Not until the 1870s did the habitual use of opium spread to the peasants, the vast majority of the Chinese population. Although the devitalizing effects of the drug remained relatively isolated in the upper echelons of Chinese society, they were highly visible to the Court in Peking.¹⁴

As early as 2 January 1835, John Davis warned Lord Palmerston that a sudden increase in opium smuggling was taking place and that this increase might bring on the wrath of the Imperial government at Peking.¹⁵ This expansion occurred as a result of increased competition. At the turn of the century territories under the East India Company's control provided the only source of opium. The Company made a sizable profit selling relatively small

¹³"Memorial from Heu-Naetse to the Emperor, proposing to legalize the importation of Opium," Inclosure No. 1, Elliot to Palmerston, Macao, 2 February 1837, *Correspondence*, 156.

¹⁴Spence, "Opium Smoking," 150-3.

¹⁵Davis to Palmerston, 2 January 1835, *Correspondence*, 76.

quantities of opium by keeping prices high. In the 1820s this situation began to change when Indian princes, who were outside of the East India Company's jurisdiction, started growing opium and selling it at a much cheaper price. In order to retain its market share, the Company slashed prices and increased production. The urban markets in China seemed easily to accept this increase.¹⁶

By the end of the 1830s the country traders, the East India Company and the British Government had become dependent on an illegal trade without effective controls.¹⁷ The profits from opium paid for the tea. At first country traders exchanged the bullion they received from the Chinese for bills of remittance from the East India Company. The Company then used the bullion to buy tea, which it shipped to England. With the abolition of the company's monopoly, the country traders used the profits from selling Company opium to buy tea for themselves, or their clients. Once the tea reached England, the revenue generated from the tea tariff paid one half of the expenses of maintaining the best naval fleet in the world.¹⁸

¹⁶Fay, *Opium War*, 58-59.

¹⁷Greenberg, *British Trade*, 215; Morse, *International Relations*, 168.

¹⁸Fay, *Opium War*, 18.

The increase in the illicit trade occurred simultaneously with policy and personnel changes in the Chinese imperial government at Peking. In 1835 the Tao-kuang emperor (r.1821-1850) appointed P'an Shih-en to replace the recently deceased Ts'ao Chen-yung as Grand Councilor. This administrative change marked the ascendancy of a minority faction within the imperial bureaucracy. For the previous hundred years, the examination system, by which mandarins advanced in government, favored scholars of the *k'ao-cheng* school.¹⁹ This branch of Confucian scholarship advocated philological textual studies of ancient manuscripts. By the nineteenth century these scholars were immersed in technical debates, neglecting the social and moral concerns present in Confucian literature.²⁰ P'an used his position as Grand

¹⁹For an in depth study of the school see Benjamin A. Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University Press, 1984).

²⁰Hao Chang, *Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and the Intellectual Transition in China, 1890-1907* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 13; Chang's first chapter provides an excellent introduction to the competing philosophical traditions within Confucianism.

Councilor to support members of the literati* who preferred the T'ung ch'eng school.²¹

The T'ung ch'eng School, opposing k'ao-cheng scholasticism, emphasized the use of the Confucian classics for the moral cultivation of China's elite. If the examination system favored adherence to these principles, according to the T'ung ch'eng School, then advancing statesman would possess a "moral charisma" which would morally transform the Chinese people.²² Within the literati the Spring Purification Circle, whose members adhered to the T'ung ch'eng school, organized a network of families and friends to gain the patronage of important officials such as P'an. Sympathetic to this faction's cause, P'an appointed its members to key positions within the empire in order to tilt the balance within the bureaucracy toward the moral cultivation school.²³

Frightened by recent rebellions in Southeastern China and the military's inability to put down the rebellions, the Tao-kung emperor sanctioned his new Grand Councilor's

*The term literati refers to the one-half percent of the male population who passed one of the three levels of the imperial examination system. Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 20.

²¹Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 83.

²²Chang, *Liang Ch'i-ch'ao*, 16-7; Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 89.

²³Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 63-83.

changes.²⁴ The emperor attributed the military's failure to opium use and a great debate ensued about how best to control the importation of an article that both sides acknowledged as a destructive toxin. Two methods of dealing with the opium trade emerged out of the debate-- legalization and prohibition. The advocates of legalization considered opium an ordinary commodity. They posited that the best way to control and regulate its importation was to use the Canton system. This change would limit the market, which had been continuously expanding, and would stop the flow of silver out of the empire. Proponents of prohibition argued that opium destroyed the hearts and minds of innocent Chinese. The Son of Heaven should never sanction such a decadent trade. The only way to control the spread of the dreadful habit was to eliminate the supply brought to China by greedy barbarians. The prohibition of opium would also have the added benefit of eliminating the exportation of silver.²⁵

The legalization initiative found support within the bureaucratic establishment. Provincial governors and governor-generals, realizing the weakness of the Ch'ing state in the face of rising organized crime, believed that

²⁴Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 114-15.

²⁵Captain Elliot provided Lord Palmerston with a series of Chinese memorials (received 17 July 1837) detailing the nature of the debate over opium. *Correspondence*, 153-181; Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 103-19.

relaxation of restrictions on the drug provided the only solution available without increasing the police capacity of the state. The Spring Purification Circle emerged as the major proponent of suppression. Its members saw the opium trade as a symptom of a larger problem of dynastic decline. They thought that effective management of the barbarians in this instance would lead to greater domestic political rewards for themselves and their cause.²⁶

Elliot began informing Lord Palmerston of the Court's debate on 27 July 1836. He told the Foreign Minister that the Peking authorities would choose legalization because they "cannot do without our opium."²⁷ He went on to say that Peking's decision to regulate the trade, when it came, would be too late to avoid an international incident. The local authorities in Canton, after such a long period of independence, would not tolerate interference from Peking.

[This] will lead to grave difficulties. A long course of impunity will beget hardihood, at last some gross insult will be perpetrated, that the Chinese authorities will be constrained to resent; they will be terrified and irritated, and probably commit some act of cruel violence that will make any choice but armed interference, impossible to our own Government.²⁸

²⁶Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 135.

²⁷Elliot to Palmerston, 27 July 1836 (received 15 February 1837), *Correspondence*, 138.

²⁸*Ibid.*

In Elliot's opinion the legalization of opium, the best possible short-term solution the British could hope to achieve, would only increase the possibility of future violence. Legalization would, in fact, lead to war between Great Britain and China by overthrowing the corrupt local officials and the opium smugglers too quickly.

The opium crisis began to take shape at the end of 1836 when the Tao-kuang emperor decided against legalization and for prohibition.²⁹ In October 1836 Teng T'ing-chen, Governor-General of Kwangtung and Kwangsi provinces, commenced a crack-down on the illicit trade by issuing a decree ordering several foreign merchants out of China. Most notably, the Chinese authorities expelled William Jardine (called "old iron-headed rat" by the Chinese) and Lancelot Dent, two of the most prestigious British merchants and most notorious opium smugglers in China, along with six other merchants.³⁰ Elliot warned Lord Palmerston of the seriousness of this move and asked for a man-of-war to proceed to China in order to protect British interests.* Elliot also stressed the need for

²⁹Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 125.

³⁰Inclosure 1, Edict from the Heads of the Provincial Government, 28 October 1836, in Elliot to Palmerston, 7 February 1837, *Correspondence*, 183.

*Jardine did not leave China until February 1839, and Dent remained in China throughout the crisis in March 1839. They repeatedly received temporary stays of Teng's order.

regular correspondence between himself and the provincial authorities. He believed that if difficulties arose, he could place himself in his official station between the opium merchants and the Chinese authorities and avert an interruption of trade.³¹ Elliot's confidence in his own ability to influence the decisions of the Chinese authorities was unrealistic, indeed almost laughable. They considered him a mere "foreigner to hold the reins of foreigners,"³² not a diplomatic officer who negotiates between equals.

Even as the local authorities increased the pressure on the opium trade, Elliot held to his belief that the legalization of opium was just around the corner. Moreover, if the Chinese legalized the importation of opium, they would also legalize the growth of opium in their own empire. This change, Elliot claimed, would cut into the market share of the British. The British merchants must gradually begin to shift away from their dependence upon opium. According to Elliot, "any abrupt interruption of this traffic involves a very nearly

³¹Elliot to Palmerston, Macao, 7 February 1837, FO228/5/72.

³²Inclosure 2, Extract of a Memorial from the Governor of Canton to the Emperor of China, in Elliot to Palmerston, 27 January 1837, *Correspondence*, 152.

complete interruption of the whole commerce with the country [China]."³³

Elliot was right only on this last point. Like Napier before him, he was not a very good judge of the intentions of the Chinese government. The situation continued to deteriorate. The Chinese authorities in Canton decided to call upon Elliot to stop the prohibited trade. In two decrees in August of 1837 the provincial authorities, acting on the emperor's orders to suppress the opium trade, instructed the British Superintendent to send away all of the receiving ships from the China coast. The decrees also warned Elliot that if the smuggling of opium continued, it would "lead to the entire stoppage of commercial intercourse."³⁴

A month passed, and the receiving ships remained on the China coast. The Chinese provincial authorities issued another decree ordering the dispersal of the ships. ~~Moreover, they attacked Elliot's inaction directly. They~~ noted that although Elliot claimed that he resided in Canton to control the British merchants, he refused to move against the despicable enterprise. The Chinese authorities

³³Elliot to Palmerston, 21 February 1837, *Correspondence*, 190.

³⁴Inclosure 1, Abstract of an Edict from the Governor and Lieutenant Governor of Canton, 17 August 1837, in Elliot to Palmerston, 18 November 1837 (received 15 May 1838), *Correspondence*, 234.

concluded that "he is unfit for the situation as Superintendent."³⁵ In the ensuing dialogue between the imperial officials in Canton, Captain Elliot merely bided for time, intensifying the crisis. Elliot told the Chinese that his commission only covered the legal trade at the port of Canton. He claimed to have no official knowledge of the opium trade, because the ships outside of the port did not present their papers to him. Elliot informed Governor-General Teng that he should relay a formal request from his Emperor to the King of England asking for assistance. This request would enable Elliot to respond to the allegations and to appeal to his Sovereign for advice.³⁶

The Chinese officials recognized Elliot's ploy for what it was--a hopeless attempt to avoid responsibility. Governor-General Teng could not understand how Elliot could make an appeal to ignorance, but he decided to take Elliot up on his offer. Teng directed the prefect of the department of Canton to make a formal declaration of the Chinese government's intentions. Elliot notified Teng that the information had been transmitted to the British

³⁵Inclosure 1, Abstract of an Edict from the Governor and Lieutenant Governor, 18 September 1837, in Elliot to Palmerston, 18 November 1837, *Correspondence*, 235.

³⁶Inclosure 2, Elliot to the Governor of Canton, 25 September 1837, in Elliot to Palmerston, 18 November 1837, *Correspondence*, 236-7.

Government. Elliot claimed that he would act on his Government's instructions as soon as he received them.³⁷

Along with the Chinese decrees and his own responses, Elliot dispatched further alarming information to the Foreign Office. While the Chinese waited for Elliot's response, they had not sat idly by. Recognizing the role that the Chinese subjects played in smuggling the opium ashore, the authorities moved against the natives. Burning the boats used to carry opium from the receiving ships, the Chinese officials successfully disrupted the smuggling operations. Elliot reported to Lord Palmerston that this disruption produced a "very hazardous change" in the opium trade. "European passage-boats belonging to British owners, slenderly manned with Lascar seamen," now smuggled the opium on shore. Lightly armed, these vessels operated side by side with the legitimate trade and increased the possibility of a violent confrontation between British merchants and the Chinese government.³⁸

³⁷Inclosure 3, Governor and Lieutenant Governor to Elliot, 28 September 1837, in Elliot to Palmerston, 18 November 1837, *Correspondence*, 237; Inclosure 4, The Prefect and Commandant of Canton to Elliot, 29 September 1837, in Elliot to Palmerston 18 November 1837, *Correspondence*, 237-40; Inclosure 5, Elliot to Governor of Canton, 17 November 1837, in Elliot to Palmerston, 18 November 1837, *Correspondence*, 240.

³⁸Elliot to Palmerston, Canton, 19 November 1837, FO228/6/141-43.

The Chinese thus began a two-pronged assault on the opium trade--against the foreigners and against the Chinese. Elliot believed the situation could not be tolerated. He recommended that Palmerston authorize the dispatch of a Special Commissioner to China to negotiate a commercial treaty and station several ships in the seas off the China coast to protect the legitimate trade.³⁹ Palmerston failed to address any of Elliot's concerns. He had already agreed to send one naval vessel to China in order to protect British property, but not to extract commercial benefits. He commanded the ship's commander and crew to be very careful not to offend the Chinese. The ship was to protect British interests and to control the rowdy crews of British merchantmen.⁴⁰ Palmerston's instructions were not what Elliot or the British merchants had in mind, but the Foreign Secretary deemed them adequate.

In regard to the question of opium Palmerston clearly articulated his position. In the only despatch mentioning opium and in response to Elliot's proposal to place himself between the merchants and the Chinese, Palmerston wrote in no uncertain terms:

³⁹Elliot to Palmerston, Canton, 19 November 1837, FO288/6/144-54.

⁴⁰Inclosure, Palmerston to the Lords of the Admiralty, 20 September 1837, in Palmerston to Elliot, 2 November 1837, *Correspondence*, 193-4.

With respect to the smuggling of opium . . . Her Majesty's Government cannot interfere for the purpose of enabling British subjects to violate the laws of the country to which they trade. Any loss, therefore, which such persons may suffer in consequence of more effectual execution of Chinese laws on this, must be borne by the parties who have brought that loss on themselves by their own acts.⁴¹

Elliot was not in China to protect the opium merchants. His duty was to the legitimate trade alone. Beyond this statement Palmerston refused to venture. He declined to give Elliot either the power to suppress the trade or advice on how to deal with the Chinese government. Palmerston either did not recognize the opium trade's connections to British revenue and to international money markets or he did not deem them as important as historians have in hindsight.

Palmerston's response forced Elliot to follow a policy of inaction, while the Chinese tolerance of the illicit trade reached its limit. On 8 December 1838 Elliot wrote to Palmerston "that the trade is at this moment cast into a state of critical difficulty."⁴² Peking decided that the time had come for more decisive action against the importation of opium, and Governor-General Teng inaugurated a policy of enforcing the existing opium laws against the

⁴¹Palmerston to Elliot, Foreign Office, 15 June 1838, FO228/8/18-19.

⁴²Elliot to Palmerston, HM Cutter Louisa, Whampoa, 8 December 1838, FO228/8/351; Received 18 April 1838, *Correspondence*, 323.

foreigners importing opium into China. This strengthening of resolve led to the breach of Anglo-Chinese relations.

Four days later, on 12 December, the Governor-General's attempt to enforce the law produced a direct confrontation between the foreign community and the provincial authorities. The Chinese decided to execute a native opium dealer in an attempt to demonstrate the seriousness of the new campaign. They directed the threat directly toward the foreigners by ordering the execution to take place in front of the foreign factories at Canton. The foreign community considered this a barbarous act and physically foiled the plans of the Chinese. Several European merchants dismantled the execution apparatus without any opposition from the Chinese "police" assigned to carry out the death penalty. After several hours the crowd, which had gathered to watch the spectacle, increased in numbers to reach almost 6,000 persons. Some of the foreign merchants who had grown weary of the multitude marched into the Chinese crowd and began swinging sticks. The Chinese responded by throwing stones at the Europeans, and the ensuing riot lasted for several hours.⁴³

Palmerston's response to Elliot's description of the 12 December incident, although not received until the latter part of 1839, should be noted. Palmerston told

⁴³Elliot to Palmerston, Canton, 13 December 1838, FO228/8/355-7.

Elliot that he did not have enough information to form an opinion about the matter and wanted to know if any of the foreigners were British subjects. More importantly, Palmerston wished "to know upon what alleged ground of right these persons considered themselves entitled to interfere with the arrangements made by the Chinese officers of justice for carrying into effect, in a Chinese town, the orders of their superior authorities."⁴⁴

Palmerston's response did not concern the actions of the Chinese, but the actions of the foreigners. Elliot warned Palmerston that the situation was degenerating, but Palmerston failed to take heed. Apparently, he blamed the breakdown of Anglo-Chinese relations on the British merchants rather than the Chinese government; the merchants would have to bear any loss in trade.

For the moment Elliot had no use for Palmerston's response, even had the Foreign Secretary encouraged stronger action against the Chinese. The Hong merchants, fearing reprisals from their own government, decided to terminate all trade until the foreigners did something about the opium problem. Elliot judged that it was time for him to act. On 17 December 1838 Elliot made his first public statement regarding the importation of opium. At a meeting of the entire foreign community, Elliot announced

⁴⁴Palmerston to Elliot, 15 April 1839, *Correspondence*, 325.

Palmerston's policy that British ships engaged in the illicit traffic would receive no protection from Her Majesty's Government. This declaration meant that British merchants would be held accountable for their actions under Chinese law--capital punishment for opium smuggling--and that resisting arrest also would not be tolerated. He then went further and ordered all British opium boats out of the Canton river estuary.⁴⁵ British merchants strongly objected to this action because they believed that the Chinese government would conclude that Elliot possessed the power to order all of the opium trade stopped.⁴⁶ Elliot also decided on his own to reopen communications with the provincial authorities. He conceded to the Chinese demands that he use the character "pin" and that he transmit the petition through the Hong merchants. To support his unauthorized move, Elliot used the same arguments that failed to convince Palmerston earlier. Now, Elliot also claimed that the closure of trade necessitated communications.⁴⁷

⁴⁵Inclosure 7, Address by Elliot to a General Meeting of all Foreign Residents at Canton, 17 December 1838, in Elliot to Palmerston, 2 January 1839, *Correspondence*, 331-2.

⁴⁶John Slade, *Narrative of the Late Proceedings and Events in China* (Canton: Canton Press, 1839; Reprint, Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1972), 5.

⁴⁷Elliot to Palmerston, Canton, 2 January 1839, FO228/9/9.

Elliot's action accomplished its immediate goal. The Hong reopened trade, but the threat to commercial activities did not terminate. As 1839 began, Elliot still felt that the British merchants' behavior in China threatened Anglo-Chinese trade relations. He asked Lord Palmerston for "defined and adequate powers," something Palmerston had promised in October of 1836. Elliot also made an unusual request.

I humbly hope that Her Majesty's Government (taking into it's [sic] consideration the novel, responsible and undefined station I fill and casting a thought upon the embarrassing circumstances which have beset me) would be pleased to determine whether I have a claim to such an expression of support, as I might be permitted to publish to the Queen's Subjects in this Empire."⁴⁸

Such a plea for support does not illustrate a man confident in his own decisions or his superior's foreign policy.

Once again, Palmerston ignored Elliot's pleas and gave neither advice, nor powers. He simply wrote in private to express the "entire Approbation of Her Majesty's Government" regarding Elliot's actions in December.⁴⁹ This letter, even though it reached China after the opium crisis in March, demonstrates that Palmerston approved of Elliot's decision to take a more active role against the opium trade.

⁴⁸Elliot to Palmerston, Private, Canton, 2 January 1839, FO17/30/61.

⁴⁹Palmerston to Elliot, Foreign Office, 13 May 1839, FO228/11/29.

The time for Palmerston to act had come to an end. The Emperor decided that the money-hungry barbarians must know the power of the Celestial Empire and that the decadent opium trade must end. The campaign to suppress the traffic had succeeded. Trade in the drug had remained at a standstill for the previous four months,⁵⁰ but the opium merchants had not left Chinese waters. To eradicate the trade altogether, the Emperor appointed a special commissioner, Lin Tse-hsü.⁵¹

On 10 March 1839 High Commissioner Lin, a headstrong civil servant and an associate of the Spring Purification Circle, arrived in Canton. Eight days later he issued the infamous edict requiring that all opium be turned over to him and that the foreign community guarantee the cessation of the opium trade. Lin reminded the foreign community of the generosity of the Emperor in allowing them the privilege of trading with the Middle Kingdom. Lately, the opium trade had tested the limits of that generosity and would no longer be tolerated. The High Commissioner gave the foreign community three days to comply with his demands. If it did so, then he would forget the

⁵⁰ Elliot to Palmerston, Canton, 30 January 1839, FO17/30/240.

⁵¹ Arthur Waley's *The Opium War Through Chinese Eyes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968) is based on Lin's diary and contains a developed account of the Commissioner's activities during the crisis.

barbarians' past abuses and allow legitimate trade to continue as before.⁵²

The foreign community delayed taking action. To make the merchants comply with Commissioner Lin's orders, the Hoppo, the administrator of Canton Customs, quarantined the whole foreign community. He surrounded the foreign factories with troops and refused to allow any one to leave, or to communicate with those outside of Canton. The action taken against the entire foreign community was thoroughly consistent with what the British knew of Chinese law and established precedent. From the British point of view, the Chinese "doctrine of responsibility made it necessary that someone must suffer, whether the guilty person or not, whenever a crime was committed."⁵³ Furthermore, Chinese law held to the principle of collective responsibility--the community must be held accountable for the actions of its members.⁵⁴

The Hoppo's orders caught the attention of Elliot, who was in Macao at the time. The Chief of the British trade commission decided to force his way into the foreign factories at Canton and to demand passports for the entire

⁵²Inclosure 1, Edict from the Imperial Commissioner Lin to the Foreigners of all Nations, 18 March 1839, in Elliot to Palmerston, 22 March 1839, *Correspondence*, 350-2.

⁵³Pritchard, *Crucial Years*, 109.

⁵⁴Fay, *Opium War*, 38.

community. Before leaving for Canton, Elliot clothed himself in his dress uniform, the symbol of his authority, and publicly ordered the British ships in the Gulf of Canton to hoist "their national colours, [and] be prepared to resist every act of aggression on the part of the Chinese Government."⁵⁵ Immediately upon his arrival in Canton, Elliot directed the foreign community there to follow a similar course. In his despatches to Lord Palmerston, Elliot wrote as though the world was about to fall in on the whole foreign community and that only his actions saved them from starvation and the threat of violence.⁵⁶

Elliot was wrong. He even contradicted himself in his letters to Lord Palmerston. It was Elliot's decision to place himself between the opium merchants and the Chinese government that inflamed the situation; the Hoppo, taking the same steps that forced Lord Napier's departure, increased the number of troops around the factories and cut off the barbarian's supplies and servants. Robert Inglis, who testified before the Select Committee on Trade with China in May of 1840, stated that the threat did not arise

⁵⁵Inclosure 10, Public Notice to Her Majesty's Subjects, 22 March 1839, in Elliot to Palmerston, 30 March 1839 (received 29 August 1839), *Correspondence*, 363.

⁵⁶Elliot to Palmerston, Canton, 30 March 1839 (received 29 August 1839), FO17/31/5-14.

until after Captain Elliot arrived in Canton.⁵⁷ William Jardine, who resided in China from 1820 to 1839, also told the committee that no threat to British life or property existed at the time Lin issued the edict.⁵⁸ The merchant community never believed that the Chinese would carry out their threats; indeed, the merchants felt certain the Chinese would settle for a partial solution.⁵⁹

What might have happened if Elliot had not arrived is not clear. It is clear that Elliot's actions provoked the Chinese to become more rigid. The Chinese believed the foreign community had made arrangements to cooperate, but the captain's intervention frustrated these plans.⁶⁰ According to the Chinese, Elliot claimed he occupied a post of authority, but only used that post to protect the opium smugglers.⁶¹ Elliot's earlier appeals to impotence and ignorance concerning the opium trade failed to carry any weight. Lin continued to demand the opium.

On 27 March 1839, fearing the worst, Elliot reversed course and ceased standing up to the Chinese. He commanded

⁵⁷*Report, 1840, 8.*

⁵⁸*Report, 1840, 91.*

⁵⁹*Slade, Narrative, 42-6.*

⁶⁰Inclosure 17, The Prefect of Canton to Elliot, 26 March 1839, in Elliot to Palmerston, 30 March 1839, *Correspondence, 372.*

⁶¹*Waley, Opium War Through Chinese Eyes, 35.*

the British opium merchants in China to hand over their merchandise to Lin. At first the merchants resisted turning over the opium, but they agreed after receiving a guarantee from Captain Elliot that the British Government would reimburse them.⁶² The merchants released to Elliot over £2,000,000 worth of opium. Since 1836 the British merchants had found it difficult to sell their commodity in China. As a result several thousand chests of opium remained unsold year after year.⁶³ Elliot's offer to pay gave the merchants what they wanted--a market for their goods and the official involvement of the British Government in the dispute.⁶⁴ Elliot expected that the pledge to deliver the opium would be enough to lift the restrictions, but the Chinese did not trust the barbarians. The quarantine continued for six weeks. As a sign of good faith, however, Lin "sent the foreigners a present of beef, mutton, and other food."⁶⁵ The Imperial Commissioner also agreed to lift gradually the restriction as the opium came into his possession. On 5 May he allowed all of the foreigners, except sixteen notorious opium merchants, to leave the factories.

⁶²Morse, *International Relations*, 214-30.

⁶³Cheong, *Manderins and Merchants*, 134-6.

⁶⁴Greenberg, *British Trade*, 203-4.

⁶⁵As quoted in Waley, *Opium War Through Chinese Eyes*, 39.

When all of the opium had been delivered on 24 May, the Chinese released the remaining foreigners. The provincial authorities then proceeded to destroy the opium. They also agreed to reopen trade on the condition that the foreign community guarantee that the opium trade would cease. To guarantee cessation Lin demanded that all foreigners sign a bond stating that they would not import opium into China. Beginning in the autumn of 1839 anyone caught breaking the bond would "suffer death at the hands of the Celestial court."⁶⁶ Elliot felt that this demand was unreasonable. He stated that he had no authority to bind future merchants without their knowledge and pleaded with Commissioner Lin to accept a compromise bond. The foreign merchants pledged themselves "not to deal in opium, nor to attempt to introduce it into the Chinese Empire."⁶⁷ The Commissioner refused to compromise. Elliot even proposed a five month grace period for merchants coming from India and a ten month grace period for merchants coming from England before the new law went into effect.⁶⁸ Lin again refused to compromise.

⁶⁶Inclosure 1, "Proposed Bond Regarding Opium," in Elliot to Palmerston, 6 April to 4 May 1839 (received 21 September 1839), FO17/31/144-6.

⁶⁷Inclosure 7, The Foreign Merchants to the Imperial Commissioner, Canton, 25 March 1839, Elliot to Palmerston, Canton, 6 April to 4 May 1839, FO17/31/31/169-70.

⁶⁸Inclosure 6, Elliot to Lin, Canton, 10 April 1839, Elliot to Palmerston, Canton, 6 April to 4 May 1839, FO17/31/166-70.

Believing that the Chinese government needed foreign trade, Elliot warned Lin that if he continued to demand the bonds, then "there would be no alternative but for the men and vessels of his [Elliot's] country to depart."⁶⁹

Elliot never carried out his threat. He did recommend a cessation of British trade until the matter was settled. The merchants complied. Elliot hoped to gain protection against what he considered the arbitrary actions of the Chinese government. His actions did not produce the desired effects. The Chinese refused to grant British merchants any special protection. American, German, Danish, and Spanish traders, who all signed Lin's bond, moved in to fill the vacuum created by Elliot's refusal to reopen British trade with China.⁷⁰

It is essential here to consider the reaction in Britain. The Opposition, not the Ministry, responded first. After reading a newspaper report on 1 August 1839, Lord Ellenborough (Edward Law), former President of the Board of Control, introduced the subject into Parliament with a question to the Prime Minister that same day. The most startling aspect of the question was the theme. One would assume that Ellenborough would have questioned the

⁶⁹Inclosure 12, Elliot to Lin, Canton, 20 April 1839, Elliot to Palmerston, Canton, 6 April to 4 May 1839, FO17/31/182.

⁷⁰Morse, *International Relations*, 227-36.

action of the Chinese authorities, but he did not. The lord questioned the actions of Elliot and the Government that he represented--the Melbourne Ministry. The Ministry had allowed the China trade to be almost totally dependent upon opium, and with the cession of the opium trade all of Britain's China trade was threatened, including the lucrative tea trade. Ellenborough concluded with a call for papers relating to the incident, but Melbourne, denying any official knowledge of the incident, declined any further comment.⁷¹

Even without access to the documents elucidating the conflict in China, the conservatives began their attack on the Ministry. They asserted that the incompetency of the Ministry had lost one of Britain's most prized trading partners and that the Government had to be held responsible. The weakness of the Ministry in Commons amplified these charges.

⁷¹Appendix B; Lord Ellenborough. *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 49 (1 August 1839), cols. 1052-55.

CHAPTER 5

CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE

In 1834 Lord Grey's Government fell, and Sir Robert Peel formed a Ministry. The political right had not recovered, however, from the devastation of the Great Reform Act, and Peel led a minority Government. Accordingly, his term in office was short-lived; he resigned in five months. The Whigs quickly regained control of Commons, allowing Lord Melbourne to forge a new Ministry. His Government ruled Great Britain from 1835 to 1841. During this extended period, the Whigs saw their majority in the House of Commons slowly decline. In the summer months of 1839, before news from China reached Great Britain, the Liberal Tories joined the Ultra-Tories in their attacks on the Whigs. At the same time parliamentary Radicals, frustrated by the slow pace of reform, seized upon the vulnerability of the Government and pressed their own agenda.¹ This crisis of confidence intensified Lord

¹"Resignation of the Ministry," *Leeds Mercury*, 11 May 1839, p.4; "Position of the Ministry," *The Guardian* (Manchester), 27 March 1839; "Position of the Ministry.-- State of Public Opinion," *The Guardian* (Manchester), 30 March 1839; Newbould, *Whiggery*, 231-41.

Ellenborough's charges that Lord Melbourne's Whig Ministry neglected British interests in the Far East.

While Elliot tried to pacify the Chinese, the conflict between the Whigs and the conservative Opposition began to take shape. On 7 May 1839 Lord Melbourne resigned his position as Prime Minister after winning a crucial vote in Commons by only five votes. Even though his Ministry won this contest, the Prime Minister felt that the vote indicated "with sufficient clearness and distinctness . . . a want of confidence on the part of a great proportion of that House of Parliament."² Melbourne believed that for a ministry to continue in office it must have the support of both the Monarch and the House of Commons; support from a mere majority of Members in Commons was not enough. Writing to Queen Victoria in March, he stated that the Ministry "must resign" if it should carry the House of Commons by a "small majority."³ The Prime Minister's views of the constitution were in line with contemporary theorist J.J. Park. In *Dogmas of the Constitution* (1832) Park asserts that "It would be esteemed politically

²Lord Melbourne, "Resignation of the Ministers," House of Lords, *Hansard*, 3d ser., 46 (7 May 1839), col. 974; George K. Clark, *Peel and the Conservative Party: A Study in Party Politics, 1832-1841*, 2d ed., (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1964), 417-23.

³Melbourne to Queen Victoria, South Street, 22 March 1839, "Cabinet Reports by the Prime Minister to the Crown, 1837-1867" (Microfilmed by Harvester Press, 1973), Reel 1.

dishonourable and improper, if [the government] were to retain office after the support and adhesion of a majority in the House of Commons should have been unequivocally withdrawn from them."⁴ His resignation thus resulted less from mechanistic, or rational, constitutional principles than from aristocratic notions of the honor needed to command respect.

According to his own political principles then, Melbourne had no choice but to advise Queen Victoria, who was in the second year of her reign, to invite the conservatives under the leadership of the Duke of Wellington to form a ministry. The Duke declined the invitation, stating that the Prime Minister should sit in the House of Commons, the more troublesome of the two Houses of Parliament, and that Sir Robert Peel was a better choice.⁵ Peel accepted the offer reluctantly, because he did not believe the conservatives sufficiently strong. He almost succeeded in forming a government. In fact all of the plans had been made, but the Queen refused to accept Peel's intention to replace some of the Ladies of the Bedchamber with women from conservative families. Peel thought it would be difficult to gain the confidence of the

⁴As Quoted in Angus Hawkins, "'Parliamentary Government' and Early Victorian Political Parties, c.1830-c.1880," *English Historical Review* 104 (July 1989): 641.

⁵Robert Peel, "Ministerial Explanations," House of Commons, 3d ser., 46 (13 May 1839), col. 981.

young Queen with the wives of leading Whig politicians acting as Ladies of the Bedchamber.

In rejecting Peel's proposal, Queen Victoria stated that she liked her companions and that any attempt to remove them infringed on her prerogative. She considered Peel's request as part of a general conservative attack on the moral integrity of her household. Giving in to Peel's demand would have been tantamount to admitting that conservative allegations of moral misconduct were true.⁶ Her rejection denied Peel his wish for "public proof" of Her Majesty's "entire support and confidence"⁷ and forced him to resign his commission. The Queen willingly turned back to Melbourne, who reconstructed his Ministry.

The result of the Bedchamber Crisis was that it appeared as if the Melbourne Ministry's position of authority rested outside the current constitutional system. The prerogative of the Queen, not the will of Commons, had determined who would govern Great Britain. To their opponents the hypocrisy of the Whig Ministry was self-evident. *The Charter*, a newspaper "established by the working classes," observed that "An overweening respect for

⁶Richard Spall, "The Bedchamber Crisis and the Hasting Scandal: Morals, Politics, and the Press at the beginning of Victoria's Reign," *Canadian Journal of History* 22 (December 1987): 37; For the details of the story see James Clark, "The Late Flora Hastings," *The Charter* (London), 13 October 1839, p.587.

⁷Peel to Victoria, Copy, 10 May 1839, PP, GC/ME/292/1.

prerogative was not at one time a Whig doctrine," while the conservative *Quarterly Review* wrote that the principles of "parliamentary government" were the "doctrines, which the old Whigs affected to monopolise, and which the present Whigs are equally zealous to repudiate."⁸

In the House of Lords the Earl of Winchilsea (George William Finch-Hatton) asked Lord Melbourne to state the principle by which he planned to govern since the Bedchamber Crisis brought those principles into question. Melbourne replied that he was not "a very great friend to declarations of general principles on the part of the Government."⁹ He would govern as any other Government by the prudence, wisdom and firmness of Parliament. Such a broad statement brought Lord Brougham (Henry Brougham), former Lord Chancellor under Lord Grey and advocate of further reform, to his feet. He "never heard a question, that was more plain or more easily to be answered, if an answer was to be given, but he had never yet heard an answer that answered so little."¹⁰ Melbourne's statement

⁸"Farcical Demonstrations of the Whigs," *The Charter* (London), 26 May 1839, p.288; "The Household and the Ministry," *Quarterly Review* 64 (June 1839): 270; See also "Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine for June," *The Northern Star and Leeds General Advertiser* (Leeds), 22 June 1839, p.4.

⁹Melbourne, "The Ministry," House of Lords, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 46 (31 May 1839), col. 1162.

¹⁰Lord Brougham, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 46 (31 May 1839), col. 1167.

of "principles" pleased neither the Opposition nor some on his own side of Parliament.

The memory of the Bedchamber Crisis had not faded by the time Lord Ellenborough questioned the Prime Minister in Parliament on 1 August 1839 regarding Captain Elliot's action in Canton. The crisis would be a source of constant irritation for the Ministry. Melbourne's position worsened as Peel continued to withhold his cooperation. The Ministry depended more than ever on the support of the Radicals to stay in office. The Radicals realized that their strength was disproportionately larger than their small numbers and pushed for further political reform.¹¹

Probably the most immediate problem facing the Melbourne Ministry and Great Britain in 1839 was Chartism. The Chartist movement, composed of the disenfranchised, had six demands in its national petition: universal suffrage, vote by secret ballot, annual Parliaments, equal electoral districts, pay for M.P.s, and abolition of property qualifications for Members.¹² The Chartists wanted the process begun by the Great Reform Act continued by extending formal political participation beyond the middle classes to the working classes. Chartist rhetoric

¹¹Newbould, *Whiggery and Reform*, 300.

¹²"Six Points," *Leeds Mercury*, 6 October 1838, p.4; Thomas Atwood, "National Petition--The Chartists," House of Commons, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 47 (14 June 1839), col. 225.

chastised the parliamentary reformers for ending black slavery in the colonies, while supporting the slavery of freeborn Englishmen.¹³ By maintaining the *status quo* Whigs and Radicals betrayed the people and joined the Tories as political oppressors.¹⁴ While the conservatives provided the most vocal opposition to the Chartist demands, many supporters of the Government shared their fears.¹⁵ The conservatives believed that further revolutionary changes of the constitution would weaken the stability of Great Britain by giving power to the unwashed masses; that England would follow the same path that France had traversed after 1789.¹⁶

The issue of the secret ballot, one of the six Chartist demands, divided the Melbourne Ministry itself. The members decided to make the proposition an "open question." This decision meant that the Ministry as a whole did not support the ballot, but individual members of

¹³Richard Oastler, "To the People of Yorkshire," *Northern Star* (Leeds), 4 April 1840, p.1.

¹⁴"Beware of the Whigs," *The Charter* (London), 17 March 1839, p. 113; Feargus O'Connor, "To the Working Men and Women of Birmingham," *Northern Star* (Leeds), 20 March 1839, p.4; Dorothy Thompson, *The Chartists* (London: Temple Smith, 1984), 7, 40.

¹⁵"Six Points," *Leeds Mercury*, 6 October 1838, p.4; "Six Points," *Leeds Mercury*, 13 October 1838, p.4; "The Chartists and Their Proceedings," *The Guardian* (Manchester), 4 May 1839, p.2.

¹⁶"The Chartist and Universal Suffrage," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 46 (September 1839), 289-303.

the Cabinet could. Conservatives charged that the move proved the weakness of the Ministry, demonstrated the disunity of the Cabinet and illustrated the Whigs' support for further constitutional reform. Lord Howick, Secretary of War, countered these charges by stating that he personally supported making the ballot an open question in order to defeat it.¹⁷ Howick's candid remark caused an uproar among the Radicals. The Ministry had to reiterate that Howick expressed his personal opinion, not the opinion of Her Majesty's Government. The damage had been done.

Chartism represented more than a simple political threat to the Ministry. In the Winter of 1838/1839 the Chartists lost hope in the ability of the Reformed parliament to satisfy their demands and rejected appeals by parliamentary Radicals to petition for redress of grievances. The agitation before the Great Reform Act taught the Chartists that the threat of violence provided a powerful incentive for political change.¹⁸ The Ministry experienced the repercussions of this change in tactics when the manufacturing city of Birmingham exploded into open revolt on 15 July. Following ten days of unrest, the Chartists completely destroyed two houses, gutted several others and burned furniture in the streets, while the city

¹⁷Lord Howick, "The Ballot," *The House of Commons, Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 48 (18 June 1839), col. 500.

¹⁸Thompson, *Chartist*, 12, 17.

magistrates delayed calling on the military or police for several hours.¹⁹ The Duke of Wellington stated that the city appeared as if it had been taken by storm. When questioned on the events the next day, Lord Melbourne stated that he knew no more concerning the matter than what had been reported in the newspapers. He accused Wellington of exaggerating the effects of the riot.

The Duke of Wellington quickly challenged Melbourne's competence.

I am rather surprised that the noble Viscount should bring a charge against me of having indulged in exaggerated statements; but I am still more surprised that the noble Viscount, considering the station he holds, should only have known the state of things in Birmingham by the public accounts This is not the way in which a country should be governed.²⁰

The decision of Lord John Russell, Home Secretary and leader of the Whigs in Commons, to grant the city of Birmingham a charter contributed to some of the Ministry's political problems stemming from the Chartist riots. According to the Municipal Corporation Act of 1835, the Ministry could dismantle the old oligarchical city governments and replace them with elective councils and

¹⁹"Another Serious Riot in Birmingham: Several Houses Guttred," *The Guardian* (Manchester), 17 July 1839, p.2; "Another Chartist Riot: Attempt to Fire Birmingham," *Leeds Mercury*, 20 July 1839, p.4.

²⁰Duke of Wellington, "Riots at Birmingham," House of Lords, "Hansard, 3d ser., vol. 49 (16 July 1839), cols. 377-8.

magistrates appointed by the Home Office. In the selection of magistrates for Birmingham, Russell had chosen several members of the Chartist movement. The conservatives attributed the delay in calling for police intervention to the magistrates being sympathetic to the rioters. The Opposition wondered how the Ministry expected the working classes to respect magistrates who had once called for public agitation.²¹

Such an open threat to property and to social order was bad enough, but the conservative Opposition also accused the Ministry of undermining the moral fiber of the nation and maligning the constitution by threatening the Church of England through the Irish Tithe Act of 1835 and educational reforms. The Tithe Act threatened the financial integrity of the Church. The appropriation clause constituted the most controversial aspect of the bill. The clause, ultimately struck from the act, would have allowed a district to reallocate surplus money to secular projects if the majority of those living in the district chose to do so. The conservatives viewed this move as one step in a plan of total dismemberment and confiscation of Church property.²²

²¹Lord Wharncliffe, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 49 (16 July 1839), col. 381.

²²G.I.T. Machin, *Politics and the Churches in Great Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 33-9, 51-4.

The conservatives' concerns about the threat to the Church gained added strength when Russell, another pupil of Dugald Stewart,²³ announced on 12 February 1839 the Government's proposal for reforming the nation's educational system. The Whig reform program had three main goals. The first reform would replace the Church's domination of education with a committee of the Privy Council, a board appointed by the Prime Minister. The second reform would enable the committee to distribute educational grants to organizations other than the Anglican National Society and the Dissenters' British and Foreign Society. The Ministry wanted to distribute educational grants according to the needs of the community instead of merely matching the funds raised by the two educational societies. This change, if implemented, would remove the need for schools to depend solely on "voluntary local contributions" and eliminate Anglican control of funding. The final goal would establish a set of Normal Schools (teacher training colleges) designed to standardize teacher education. These schools would also design a nonsectarian religious curriculum. The educational reforms would have

²³John Prest, *Lord John Russell* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1972), 12.

drastically reduced the role of the Church in educating the nation's youth.²⁴

The conservatives again accused the Ministry of undermining the constitution. The Church was a part of the state; to alter it was the same as altering England itself. Both the Tithe Act and the educational reforms were seen by the Opposition as a deliberate attempt by the Ministry to put its own political gain before the good of the state. There could be no state without the Anglican Church.²⁵ Vocal opposition of High Churchmen and Wesleyan Methodists arose throughout the kingdoms to Russell's plans and forced the Ministry to scale back the proposed change.²⁶ The conservatives objected to the subordination of education to the Privy Council. They asserted that this would make education a tool of party politics. When it finally brought the matter up for a vote in June, Melbourne's Government introduced the measure as a simple money bill. The bill would authorise the Privy council to allocate £30,000 as it saw fit. This parliamentary maneuver allowed

²⁴Ian Newbould, "The Whigs, the Church, and Education, 1839," *Journal of British Studies* 26 (July 1987): 332-46; Machin, *Politics and the Churches*, 64-8; Gash, *Reaction and Reconstruction*, 76.

²⁵Newbould, *Whiggery and Reform*, 269-83.

²⁶"National Education," *The Guardian* (Manchester), 1 June 1839, p.2; "National Education," *Leeds Mercury*, 25 May 1839.

the Ministry to avoid a defeat in Lords since only Commons decided the fate of money bills.

The revised bill still pleased neither the conservatives nor the Radicals. Lord Stanley, former Colonial Secretary under Lord Grey, now sitting in Opposition, stated the conservative case. Objecting to the "unlimited and irresponsible powers" the bill gave to the the committee of the Privy Council, he blasted the proposal as "despotic." To place funds at the discretion of such a committee, backed by a weak Government, invited tyranny and partisanship.²⁷ To the Radicals the new plan abandoned real reform. It bowed to Church pressure for the maintenance of the "present state of ignorance throughout the country."²⁸ Benjamin Hawes stated that one need only examine the rising crime rates and their correlation to illiteracy figures to understand the necessity for real educational reform. He admitted that educational reform threatened the old Tory constitution. Education provided the means to replace "that old consitution by something

²⁷Lord Stanley, "National Education," House of Commons, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 47 (14 June 1839), col. 232.

²⁸Joseph Hume, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 47 (4 June 1839), col. 1383; See also "National Education and Its Opponents," *The Charter* (London), 2 June 1839, p.296; "Education for the People," *Norther Star* (Leeds), 22 June 1839, p.4.

much better and more substantial."²⁹ The house voted on the proposal after four nights of debate. The bill passed by only two votes, not a very strong sign of support. Such an anemic showing did not bode well for the future of the Ministry.

Events in Ireland further reinforced fears of violent opposition to the established order. By the late 1830s Ireland faced severe economic distress. The Irish blamed their problems on the Act of Union of 1800 and demanded its repeal. Daniel O'Connell, leader of the Irish repeal movement in Commons, supported the Ministry on many controversial pieces of legislation. Conservatives believed O'Connell's cooperation proved that the Government sanctioned reversing the Act of Union and encouraging rebellion.³⁰

The Earl of Roden (Robert Jocelyn), a leader of the Protestant Orange Society, considered the Government's response to the violence in Ireland woefully inadequate. He moved that the House of Lords establish a commission to investigate the administration of the island. The Earl attributed the unparalleled state of unrest in Ireland to an official tolerance of Ribbonism, a Catholic conspiracy

²⁹Benjamin Hawes, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 47 (14 June 1839), col. 289-90.

³⁰John O. Ranelagh, *A Short History of Ireland* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 102; Newbould, *Whiggery and Reform*, 283-98.

designed to threaten Protestant life and property. Although he claimed that he imputed no blame to Lord Normanby (Constantine Henry Phipps), Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland (1835-1839), Roden stated that Normanby must accept responsibility for the "tears of sorrow and streams of blood that had marked the career of his vice regal authority."³¹

Normanby, who left his post as Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland in February 1839 to take on the job of Colonial Secretary, defended his administration against what he considered an act of censure by demonstrating that Ireland in the past had seen unrest that paralleled, if not exceeded, the present level of violence. He went so far as to claim that the Ireland "was in a state of progressive improvement."³² If any unrest did exist, then it arose from the "harsher" rule of the Tories. The upper house of Parliament disagreed with Normanby's assessment. It voted to approve the creation of the commission.

Ireland was not the only part of the Empire in a state of rebellion. Violence had swept across Canada and Jamaica. To put down the rebellions the Ministry maneuvered through Parliament measures which suspended the

³¹Earl of Roden, "Government of Ireland," House of Lords, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 46 (21 March 1839), col. 956.

³²Marquess of Normanby, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 46 (21 March 1839), col. 977.

Canadian and Jamaican constitutions.³³ Of the two rebellions the Canadian presented a far greater threat to the honor of the Ministry. Palmerston considered it more vital to the domestic interests of the Ministry than any other problem overseas.³⁴

The Canadian Rebellion resulted from the demands of French Radicals for control over expenditures and for an elective upper legislative chamber in Lower Canada. Tensions between the Radicals and the colonial Governor, appointed by the Colonial Office, reached their peak in the summer of 1837. The colonial administration attempted to arrest the leader of the radicals, Louis Papineau. In Lower Canada French radicals rose up in response to the tyranny, and an uprising in Upper Canada followed.³⁵ The Melbourne Ministry responded by suspending the Canadian constitution and by sending a proponent of radical reform, Lord Durham (John George Lambton), to Canada. Durham viewed himself as a viceroy and acted accordingly. He issued a proclamation pardoning all the participants in the

³³Albert H. Imlah, *Lord Ellenborough: A Biography of Edward Law, Earl of Ellenborough, Governor General of India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939), 73.

³⁴Palmerston to Russell, Windsor, 20 October 1839, Lord John Russell Papers. Public Record Office, Kew. PRO30/22/134.

³⁵Ged Martin, *The Durham Report and British Policy: A Critical Essay* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 11.

rebellion except the leaders. He ordered these men transported to Barbados and threatened capital punishment if they returned.³⁶

The Ministry's response to events in Canada illuminates its priorities. Upon hearing news of Durham's proceedings, Parliament abrogated his proclamation. The Parliament stated that Durham had no legal authority outside of Canada and could not order the men to remain on Barbados. Feeling betrayed because the Melbourne Ministry did not support his decision, Durham resigned his commission.³⁷ After returning to England at the end of 1838, Durham wrote his recommendations for solving the problems of Canada in what became known as the Durham Report. It called for the unification of Upper and Lower Canada into a single state. The Melbourne Ministry professed support for this plan but delayed taking action until 1840.³⁸ Traditionally, historians view the report and the Melbourne Ministry's decision to implement it as an enlightened colonial policy and a conscious decision to improve the conditions in Canada. Historian Ged Martin disagrees. He concludes that domestic political concerns

³⁶J.L. Morison, "The Mission of the Earl of Durham," *The Cambridge History of the British Empire*, vol. 6, *Canada and Newfoundland*, eds. J. Holland Rose, et al, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), 290-2.

³⁷Morison, "Mission of the Earl of Durham," 294-5.

³⁸Morison, "Mission of the Earl of Durham," 299-307.

motivated the Ministry: "The immediate concern of the Melbourne government, then, was not to save Canada but to save themselves."³⁹

Even though the Ministry considered Canada more important, the Jamaican rebellion also played a key role in its troubles. Parliament's vote on the Whig's Jamaican policy directly precipitated the Bedchamber Crisis. The trouble for the Whigs began in 1833 when the Grey Ministry sponsored legislation in Parliament for the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies. The Parliament decided to compensate former slave owners for their slaves by allocating £20,000,000 and requiring former slaves to serve as apprentices "for a period of four years in the case of domestic servants and six years in that of fieldhands."⁴⁰

Like the Southern planters after the United States Civil War, the Jamaican elite used the judicial system to negate the gains of emancipation. Parliament responded by passing the Act for the Better Government of Prisons in the West Indies. The Jamaican House of Assembly viewed this act as undue interference in its internal matters by the

³⁹Martin, *Durham Report*, 12.

⁴⁰Izahak Gross, "Parliament and the Abolition of the Negro Apprenticeship, 1835-1838," *English Historical Review* 96 (July 1981): 560.

Imperial Parliament and "simply refused to function."⁴¹
 The colonial legislature had to approve all money bills; otherwise the Jamaican Governor, appointed by the Colonial Office, could not execute the laws of the colony.

The Melbourne Ministry proposed following a course similar to that pursued in Canada--suspending the constitution. During the Parliamentary debate Peel accused the Ministry of bypassing the existing constitutional framework, and thus threatening the established order. The leader of the conservative Opposition stated that he had previously agreed to suspend the Canadian constitution, but now the Ministry was setting a dangerous precedent. He viewed the Government's Jamaican policy as a manifestation of a weak Government and a sign of the future demise of English liberty if the present Ministry should remain in power.⁴² Ten Radicals voted with the conservatives, compelling Melbourne to resign.⁴³

⁴¹Philip J. McLewin, *Power and Economic Change: The Response to Emancipation in Jamaica and British Guiana 1840-1865* (New York: Garland, 1987), 73.

⁴²Peel, "Jamaica Government Bill," House of Commons, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 46 (3 May 1839), cols. 79-5; Philip McLewin demonstrates the imperial historian's typical neglect of domestic affairs by stating that "Details of how the dispute was finally resolved is of less interest here than the conciliatory attitude the Home Government took toward Jamaica." *Power and Economic Change*, 74.

⁴³"Resignation of Lord Melbourne's Ministry," *The Guardian* (Manchester), 11 May 1839, p.2; "Resignation of Ministers," *Northern Star* (Leeds), 11 May 1839, p.4; "The 'Shabbies' Adrift at Last," *The Charter* (London), 12 May

Financially, according to the conservatives and the Radicals, the Ministry also proved incapable of managing the financial affairs of Britain. The Chancellor of the Exchequer had presented a deficit budget for the past two years. During 1837 the deficit soared to over £2,000,000 and only fell to £400,000 in 1838.⁴⁴ The Government, however, continued to spend money without increasing revenues. Thomas Spring Rice, Chancellor of the Exchequer, blamed the deficits on extraordinary expenses related to the Canadian rebellion. The conservative Henry Goulburn pointed out that an "early application of our military resources" could have prevented the large expenditure; the Radical Joseph Hume stated that "If the Government had given Canada a representative government, he was confident that in two months the expense of their military establishment there might be saved."⁴⁵ Even without such attacks from the conservatives and Radicals, the Ministry's domestic and foreign policies made the prospects for a bright fiscal future dim.

1839, p.248.

⁴⁴Lucy Brown, *The Board of Trade and the Free Trade Movement, 1830-1842* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 483.

⁴⁵Henry Goulburn, "The Budget--Postage Duties," House of Commons, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 48 (5 July 1839), col. 1367; Joseph Hume, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 48 (5 July 1839) col. 1379.

Domestically, the conservatives accused the Ministry of fiscal mismanagement because of its handling of the Penny Post. The Penny Post gave the lower classes access to the postal system by creating a uniform postal rate for the entire United Kingdom. The plan called for a decrease in postal fees in order to increase volume. Proponents argued that the increase in volume would compensate for the decrease in rates and produce a surplus in the long run. In the short run, however, they expected a deficit until new customers began to use the service.⁴⁶ The Ministry decided to back the proposal in order to appease the Radicals and to "keep the government alive."⁴⁷ The postal bill went into effect on 10 January 1840, but had not been put into the budget. The budget deficit had no hope of getting better. The conservatives accused the Ministry of putting the nation's financial security at risk for partisan gain.

On these domestic and colonial issues the Melbourne Ministry refused to accept all of the blame for the country's problems because Opposition and Radical members had played a role in helping get the controversial pieces of legislation through Parliament. Foreign policy was

⁴⁶"Uniform Penny Postage," House of Commons, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 49 (12 July 1839), cols. 277-308; Howard Robinson, *The British Post Office: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), 244-302.

⁴⁷Newbould, *Whiggery and Reform*, 300.

another matter. The Ministry's almost exclusive control over foreign policy left the Government wide open for attack. Additionally, commerce, the central concern of the industrial and commercial capitalists, greatly depended on British foreign policy for safe and secure markets. If foreign commerce was threatened, then the Ministry could be held directly responsible and risked losing the support of the Radicals and their constituencies--the new urban-industrial centers.⁴⁸

Commerce was threatened in three areas. The first threat occurred in the Gulf of Mexico. In 1838 the French had imposed a naval blockade on Mexico,⁴⁹ an act endangering British investment. Since Mexican independence, British merchants had been buying Mexican government bonds. The blockade hindered the Mexican government's ability to pay them off.⁵⁰ This act was a direct threat to British interests, yet the Ministry chose to do nothing. Palmerston had proposed sending a naval force to Mexico in order "to induce the French to negotiate

⁴⁸Greenberg argues in *British Trade and the Opening of China 1800-42* that pressure from the British manufacturing interest forced the government to take decisive action.

⁴⁹Nancy Barker, *The French Experience in Mexico, 1821-1861: A History of Constant Misunderstanding* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 53-88.

⁵⁰Robert Lacrete, *Great Britain and Mexico in the Age of Juarez, 1854-1876* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1975), 1-27.

with the Mexicans before they begin hostilities."⁵¹

Palmerston's inducement included placing a British squadron between the Mexican castle at San Juan d'Ulua and the French fleet. Melbourne refused to approve such a bold move which risked a European war and ordered Palmerston to pursue a more conciliatory policy toward France.⁵²

French intervention in Mexico caused another point of contention between the British and the French. On 27 November 1838 a French man-of-war stopped a British merchant vessel by shooting across its bow. The French commander boarded the British vessel and forcibly removed the Mexican pilot who was under the protection of the British flag.⁵³ The conservatives considered this act an "Insult to the Flag." The French later publicly apologized, claiming they had made a mistake. The apology did not pacify the Opposition. They felt that the Ministry had failed to protect British commerce by not taking decisive action. Lord Palmerston responded by stating that

⁵¹Palmerston to Melbourne, Windsor, 14 September 1838, PP, GC/ME/531/1.

⁵²Iwan Wyn Morgan, "Anglo-French Confrontation and Cooperation in Spanish America, 1836-1848" (Ph.D. diss. University of London, 1975), 102.

⁵³Lt. Croke to Capt. H. Plumridge, Copy, 9 March 1839, Enclosed in Minto to Palmerston, Admiralty, 15 March 1839, PP, GC/MI/378 enc 1.

he was "satisfied" with the apology; the Opposition and the commercial interests were far from satisfied.⁵⁴

The French also closed the port of Buenos Aires to British trade. The closure represented an extraordinary turn of events. During the three decades following the separation of the viceroyalty of Rio de La Plata from Spain at the beginning of the nineteenth century, British trade grew until it dominated the region. In return for formal recognition of independence, Argentina guaranteed British commercial supremacy by treaty in 1825. The treaty acknowledged the rights of the British merchants in Argentina and insured that the merchants would not be drafted into the service of Argentina's military.⁵⁵

Britain's privileged position was threatened when the Government of Argentina drafted French merchants into its military service. The Argentines claimed that after a foreigner resided in their country for three years, he automatically became an Argentine citizen, susceptible to

⁵⁴"Insult to the British Flag," House of Lords, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 45 (21 February 1839), cols. 700-3; "Insult to the British Flag, House of Commons, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 45 (25 February 1839), cols. 844-6; "Insult to the Flag," House of Lords, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 46 (8 March 1839), cols. 132-45; Morgan, "Anglo-French Confrontation and Cooperation in Spanish America," 114.

⁵⁵John Cady, *Foreign Intervention in the Rio De La Plata, 1838-50* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1929), 17-18.

the draft.⁵⁶ As a result of Argentina's actions, France imposed a naval blockade on Buenos Aires on 28 March 1838. It hoped to gain the same privileges which had been granted to Great Britain.

British merchants called for action. They wanted the Melbourne Ministry to protect their interests abroad from a wanton attack by the French on their supremacy in Spanish America.⁵⁷ Although the blockade had little effect,⁵⁸ at the time the prospects for continued prosperity appeared bleak. In 1839 Sir Woodbine Parish, former British Chargé d'affaires at Buenos Aires, believed that the French blockade fell heaviest "upon those neutral parties who have established an extensive commercial intercourse" with Argentina. The "calamitous consequences" of the hostilities would be "difficult to estimate."⁵⁹

The British Government did nothing. Palmerston chose not to take forceful action in the face of considerable

⁵⁶"Memorandum: Quarrel between France and Buenos Ayres," 2 March 1839, "The Papers of William Lamb, second Viscount Melbourne," EP Microfilm Limited, 1975. Manuscript Collection. British Library, London (Hereafter cited as Lamb Papers). M859/4: Box 81/36; Morgan, "Anglo-French Confrontation and Cooperation," 126-7.

⁵⁷Morgan, "Anglo-French Confrontation and Cooperation," 98.

⁵⁸Henry S. Ferns, *Britain and Argentina in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 243.

⁵⁹Woodbine Parish, *Buenos Ayres, and the Provinces of the Río de la Plata; Their Present State, Trade, and Debt* (London: John Murray, 1839), 388-9.

opposition from British commercial interests. He recognized France's right to protect its citizens abroad, even though he questioned the use of military force to gain commercial privileges.⁶⁰ Once again, British commercial interests perceived a direct threat; the Ministry failed to act.

In all of these cases Palmerston and the Melbourne Ministry consciously chose not to take forceful action. One must ask why. The answer lay in the Middle East: during the 1830s Russian expansion and Mehemet Ali's rebellion in Egypt threatened the stability of the Ottoman Empire, more importantly, Britain's life line to India. Great Britain needed France's help to off-set Russian aggression and to control Mehemet's rebellion, which had provided Czar Nicholas I with an opportunity to extend Russian influence in the Ottoman Empire.⁶¹ The details of what happened in the Levant not only help to explain Palmerston's policy in Spanish America but also why he had so little time for Anglo-Chinese relations.

In 1832 Mehemet Ali, Pasha of Egypt (1805-1849), tried to break away from his Ottoman master, Sultan Mahmud II (1808-1839). The Pasha ordered his son, Ibrahim, to

⁶⁰Cady, *Foreign Intervention*, 22-55, 62; "Memorial: Quarrel between France and Buenos Ayres," 2 March 1839, Lamb Papers, M859/4 Box 81/36.

⁶¹Roger Bullen, *Palmerston, Guizot and the Collapse of the Entente Cordial* (London: Athlone Press, 1974), 9.

attack Syria. The successes of Ibrahim's army forced the "Sick Man of Europe" to turn to Russia for help. The two eastern powers reached an agreement and signed the Treaty of Unkiar Skelessi (1833), in which the Czar agreed to defend the Sultan in exchange for Russian control over the Turkish straits in times of war. The Russo-Ottoman alliance successfully stopped Ibrahim's advance, but it could not defeat the Egyptian army. The peace of Kutuhia provided a compromise. The Sultan allowed Ibrahim to remain governor of Syria. In return Ibrahim agreed to pay an annual tribute. Mehemet gained control of Syria through his son while he recognized the overlordship of the Sultan. Such an arrangement did not sit well with the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Palmerston. Russian influence increased at the Ottoman court, and a rebellious ruler controlled British access to India.⁶²

Events in the Levant took a more settled course until May 1838. Mehemet Ali once again struck out against Mahmud; this time the Pasha formally declared his independence. Ibrahim responded to his father's declaration by provoking a fight with the Sultan. Ibrahim's army repeated its previous victories and closed the noose around Mahmud's neck. Palmerston hoped France

⁶²Afaf Lutfi Al-Sayyid Marsot, *Egypt in the Reign of Muhammad Ali* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 222-31.

would join with Great Britain to stop Egyptian expansion. Adolphe Theiers, Louis Philippe's Foreign Minister, rejected Palmerston's offer. "Mehemet employed French officers and technical experts, and France regarded her influence over Egypt as a valuable counterpoise to British dominance in the eastern Mediterranean."⁶³

When Sultan Mahmud tried to subdue his rebellious subject in 1839, the Ottoman emperor failed to restore order and lost the Turkish fleet in a mutiny. The threat of Russian intervention seemed real. Without French support Palmerston had to convince the other great powers to act in concert, rather than unilaterally. The task of coordinating such an alliance took the whole year. Until the Russians agreed, Palmerston could not insult the French.⁶⁴ If Palmerston took aggressive action in Mexico or Buenos Aires, then he risked cutting off Britain from its most prized colony--India. No Ministry could risk such an embarrassment.

Compared to events in Mexico and Buenos Aires, the opium crisis, the third and most recent threat to British trade, occurred in relative isolation. The Opposition considered Commissioner Lin's decision to stop all British

⁶³Bullen, *Palmerston, Guizot and the Collapse of the Entente Cordiale*, 18; Marsot, *Egypt*, 238-45.

⁶⁴Bullen, *Palmerston, Guizot and the Collapse of the Entente Cordial*, 1-19.

trade, including tea, as a *fait accompli*. The conservatives used Captain Elliot's handling of the situation as evidence of the incompetence of the Ministry. The Government declined to discuss the situation until the papers relating to China were laid on the table. The request for papers began with Ellenborough's question in August 1839 and continued during the month of January. Palmerston delayed producing the papers by claiming that the sheer magnitude of the correspondence was overwhelming his staff; the Foreign Secretary did not produce the papers until March 1840 (*Correspondence Relating to China*).

On 23 August 1839 Lord Lyndhurst (John Singleton Copely), an Ultra-Tory leader in the House of Lords, decided that before the session of Parliament concluded, he wanted to review the Government's policies. He asserted that the Melbourne Ministry failed in its responsibilities to the nation because it could not get Parliament to pass any significant piece of legislation. The Ministry also had to take responsibility for the Chartist-inspired unrest in the Northern parts of the country.

It was they who first roused the people--they first excited and stimulated them to acts of tumult and disorder--they first sent forth the watchword, "Agitate, agitate, agitate!" . . . Agitation was convenient to raise them to power,

and they were willing to keep up as much of it as was necessary to maintain them in power.⁶⁵

Lyndhurst's charges summarized six years of conservative accusations.

Melbourne responded with his usual lackluster performance. He charged Lyndhurst with fostering discontent by questioning the authority of Her Majesty's Government and with degrading it in the eyes of Parliament and the public. As to the Ultra-Tory's charge that the Government could not legislate, Melbourne stated that

the passing bills and making laws is only a subsidiary and incidental duty of Parliament; the principal duty of Parliament is to consider the estimates for the public service, to retrench what is superfluous; to correct what is amiss, and to assist the Crown with those supplies and subsidies which it thinks it right and necessary to afford.⁶⁶

Judging the Ministry on these principles, Melbourne stated that the Government served the country well. The people "were roused, if roused they were, by the imprudent and obstinate resistance to the redress of grievances which was given by the noble and learned Lord [Lyndhurst] and those who acted with him."⁶⁷

⁶⁵Lyndhurst, "Business of the Session," House of Lords, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 50 (23 August 1839), col. 515.

⁶⁶Melbourne, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 50 (23 August 1839), col. 518.

⁶⁷Melbourne, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 50 (23 August 1839), col. 527-8.

Lord Brougham rose again to deliver a blow to Melbourne's Government from the Ministerial benches. The noble lord wished to know how the Prime Minister could charge that Lyndhurst wanted to push the reputation of the Government lower when it already reached the lowest depth of degradation. The Ministry had reached such a point because it was "of an obstructive nature rather than a party of movement."⁶⁸ To this charge Melbourne cried "No, no," but Brougham continued his assault. The Tories could not have hoped for better policies from Lord Melbourne if he were the viceroy of the Duke of Wellington. Brougham claimed that blaming the Reform Act for the country's problems, as the conservatives did, distorted the truth. The Act acted as a safety-valve for social pressures, but the machine needed competent operators in order to function properly. At present the "Parliamentary business of the country was intrusted to the hands of men utterly imbecile and incapable of doing it."⁶⁹ He concluded that the Ministry could only solve its problems by sponsoring legislation that adhered to the principles of reform.

The nature of the House of Lords' debate exemplified the problems the Melbourne Ministry faced since the

⁶⁸Brougham, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 50 (23 August 1839), col. 532.

⁶⁹Brougham, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 50 (23 August 1839), col. 536.

Bedchamber Crisis: "In Reforms they went too far for the Tories, and not far enough for the Radicals. . . . They held the a medium between opposite extremes."⁷⁰ The crisis of confidence forced the Whigs to consider the political ramifications of policy decisions before they acted. Without the support of the conservatives, the Radicals, a minority faction, held the balance of power. The political tempest tested the Ministry's ability to walk an "impossible tightrope."⁷¹ In this tense political atmosphere the Ministry met to decide on a China policy, a matter of immense interest to the Radicals and their supporters.

⁷⁰"Resignation of the Ministry," *Leeds Mercury*, 11 May 1839, p.4.

⁷¹Newbould, *Whiggery and Reform*, 246.

CHAPTER 6

THE DECISION TO WAGE WAR

The Opposition's threat to the survival of the Whig Ministry was serious. The time for exploring policy options had ended; the time for action had arrived. Lord Melbourne's Government clearly stood poised on the defensive on a multitude of issues. It could not afford to sit idly by as it had in Mexico and Buenos Aires; the Ministers needed to react to the situation. Because of China's isolation from other British interests and the "outrageous" actions of Commissioner Lin, the opium crisis presented the best opportunity to act forcibly without putting other foreign policy concerns at risk. Most historical interpretations of the Opium War, by ignoring the details of the Cabinet's decision to wage war on China, assume that war was a foregone conclusion.¹ This proposition is far from the truth. Melbourne's Cabinet waited several months before deciding upon the proper

¹Owen, *British Opium Policy*, 168; Collis, *Foreign Mud*, 256; Greenberg, *British Trade*, Ch. 7; Chang, *Commissioner Lin*, 194; Chung, *China and the Brave New World*, 205; Graham, *China Station*, x; Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 102; Only Peter Fay (*Opium War*, 192-5) and Kenneth Bourne (*Palmerston*, 587) provide accurate details of the decision.

response; several ministers doubted the wisdom of waging war; and one had no interest at all in the details of China question. The Government's domestic political interests were central to the decision-making process.

Official despatches concerning the March opium crisis reached the Foreign Office on 29 August 1839,² and the Cabinet began debating the matter in September. News of Elliot's promise to pay for £2,000,000 worth of opium could not have come at a more inopportune time. During the summer of 1839, Palmerston had learned that his reorganization of the trade commission three years earlier was legally questionable and that certain "parties at Canton" intended to challenge Elliot's authority. In 1836 the Foreign Secretary had appointed Elliot to the post of Chief of the Commission rather than to the post of Chief Superintendent of Trade, as required by act of Parliament.³

No direct evidence of Palmerston's immediate reaction to the March opium crisis exists, but John Cam Hobhouse, Palmerston's "most consistent" ally in the Cabinet,⁴ did make his feelings known. Hobhouse, President of the Board

²Elliot to Palmerston, 30 March, 1839, *Correspondence*, 355.

³"Memorandum," 8 July 1839, Foreign Office, Supplement to General Correspondence, Public Record Office, Kew, FO97/96.

⁴Webster, *Foreign Policy of Palmerston*, vol. 1, 40.

of Control, quickly recognized the political implications of the opium question. Early in September he wrote to Lord Auckland, Governor General of India, explaining Ellenborough's intent to hold the Ministry responsible for the detrimental effect of the opium crisis on India. As for a future course of action, Hobhouse was at a loss. He did not believe the British had the resources to send an army from India to China.⁵

At the time of the opium crisis Auckland confronted a major threat to Indian security on the territory's northwestern frontier. Four men struggled for power in Central Asia: Runjeet Singh, Maharajah of Lahore, Punjab (1799-1839); Dost Mohommed, Emir of Afghanistan (1826-1839, 1842-63); Shah Shuja (or Shja-ul-Mulk), King of Afghanistan (r.1803-1809, r. 1839-1842); and Muhammad, Shah of Persia (1834-1848). This struggle put the overland trade route between Europe and India in jeopardy. Czar Nicholas I's attempts to extend Russian influence into Central Asia further complicated the situation. He instructed his representatives in the region to use the local disputes to Russia's advantage. As early as 1828 the Duke of Wellington, then Prime Minister, realized the threat and instructed British officials in India to find a way to extend British influence beyond the Indus River. From the

⁵John Cam Hobhouse to Lord Auckland, India Board, 3 September 1839, Letter Books, OIO, Mss.Eur.F213/7/182.

British perspective the Czar's efforts succeeded in the summer of 1837 when the Shah of Persia invaded Afghanistan with the help of Russian military and political advisors.⁶

Palmerston and Hobhouse collaborated to solve the Central Asian problem. Palmerston worked through the British minister in Tehran, Sir John McNeil, while Hobhouse advised Lord Auckland. Both McNeil and Auckland had the trust of their superiors. They conducted the British empire's distant affairs with a considerable degree of freedom yet still could not set policies without the approval of the Cabinet in London.⁷

As the Persian advance reached Herat, Afghanistan, British concerns intensified. The Czar had offered Dost Mohammed protection from the Persians. The British also heard rumors that the Czar had plans to march on Khiva and Bokhara. In May 1839 Palmerston told McNeil to issue an ultimatum to the Shah; if the Persians did not stop the invasion, then Britain would break off relations and take steps to protect its possessions. Auckland also took steps to thwart Russian and Persian influence in Afghanistan. He arranged a triple alliance with Runjeet Singh and Shah

⁶J.A. Norris, *The First Afghan War, 1838-1842* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 37, 118.

⁷Norris, *First Afghan War*, 87.

Shuja in order to overthrow Dost Mohommed and to place Shah Shuja back on the throne in Kabul.⁸

The Persian failure to take Herat brought the invasion to a halt and forced the Russian Foreign Minister in London to denounce the actions of his emperor's representatives in Central Asia. These events had little effect on British policy in the region. Neither Palmerston nor Hobhouse believed that British India could be protected until Afghanistan was secure. They convinced the Cabinet to sanction the joint venture Auckland had arranged. For his part Auckland issued the Simla Manifesto on 1 October 1838; it publicly turned the quarrel into one among local rulers, rather than a European contest. He left out any references to the Russians in order to keep peace in Europe.⁹

The British-led expedition to restore Shah Shuja to the Afghan throne began in the spring of 1839 (just as troubles began in China). Auckland had his hands full in Central Asia. No British or Company army had ever proceeded past the Indus. The petty chieftains who controlled the territory did not welcome the huge army and refused to supply it with provisions. As British supplies ran low, the troops reached the point of mutiny. British generals avoided a disaster by taking the city of Kandahar

⁸Norris, *First Afghan War*, 160-9.

⁹Norris, *First Afghan War*, 215-21.

along with its rich agricultural regions. After the success at Kandahar, the expedition quickly moved into Afghanistan. On 23 July it seized the fortress of Ghazni after a one night siege and then took Kabul without a fight on 7 August. Dost Mohommed fled for his life. News of this easy success reached London at the end of October 1839.¹⁰

The threat to British India demanded Palmerston's and Hobhouse's full attention. Defeat in Central Asia would mean giving more political ammunition to the conservatives. In January 1839 *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, whose founder, William Blackwood, was an "uncompromising Tory,"¹¹ attacked Lord Auckland as "lamentably deficient in the powers which should enable him to grapple with so momentous a crisis."¹² To place Shah Shuja, an unpopular ruler, on the throne of Afghanistan required constant supervision and skilled leadership. If the British failed in their chosen mission, then they would create a more serious crisis. Dost Mohommed would march back into Kabul under the protection of the Russian Czar.¹³

¹⁰Norris, *First Afghan War*, 264-7, 289-99.

¹¹Maurice Milne, "The 'Veiled Editor' Unveiled, William Blackwood and His Magazine," *Publishing History* 16 (1984): 101.

¹²"Persia, Afghanistan and India," *Blackwood's* 45 (January 1839): 105.

¹³"Persia, Afghanistan, and India," 101.

Even after Auckland's initial success became known to the British public, *Blackwood's* continued its assault on the Melbourne Ministry's India policy. By crossing the easily defensible Indus river, a "natural frontier," the Ministry had opened the only invasion route into India, leaving the valuable territory unprotected. A contributor to the magazine wrote "So low had the reputation of the British name sunk in the East, that even the Chinese, the most unwarlike and least precipitate of the Asiatic empires, had ventured to offer a single injury to the British name, and insult to the British name."¹⁴ Russia surely knew of India's vulnerability and would take advantage of the situation.

Hobhouse sympathized with Lord Auckland's position; to divert men, ships and supplies from India to China at the beginning of September would certainly have jeopardized the Afghan expedition. As the month progressed, Hobhouse's opinion began to change and the Cabinet's new China policy emerged. The Cabinet was "embarrassed by the conduct of the Chinese," and Hobhouse came to believe that some show of force would be necessary.¹⁵ The force, however, should

¹⁴"The Afghanistan Expedition," *Blackwood's*, 47 (February 1840): 247.

¹⁵Hobhouse to Auckland, India Board, 16 September 1839, Letter Books, OIO, Mss.Eur.F213/7/184.

be to relieve Elliot and to restore British honor, not to protect the opium trade.

On 22 September 1839 Hobhouse wrote to Auckland, "Doubtless, you must give up the cultivation of the poppy, and substitute an unprofitable export duty for your present monopoly."¹⁶ His letter was not mere idle chatter between politicians. In January 1840 Hobhouse formed definite plans to cut the links between the Indian Government and its opium monopoly. He pressed his policy on the Chairs of the East India Company over their objections.¹⁷ The Ministry could not afford to tolerate the Company's opium monopoly any longer. Some of the Whig's most strident supporters denounced the Government's participation in the drug trade as immoral. The *Leeds Mercury*, a newspaper that defended the Whigs against the attacks of both the Radicals and the conservatives, lashed out at the East India Company and the British merchants in Canton for pushing the toxin upon the Chinese population: "There is no slavery on earth to name with the bondage into which Opium casts its victims."¹⁸

¹⁶Hobhouse to Auckland, India Board, 22 September 1839, OIO, Mss.Eur.F213/7/189.

¹⁷Hobhouse to Chairs of the East India Company, Draft, India House, May 1840, OIO, Mss.Eur.213/50.

¹⁸"British Opium Trade with China," *Leeds Mercury*, 7 September 1839, p.3.

While Hobhouse dealt with the East India Company representatives and with Lord Auckland, Palmerston faced the British commercial community. Its members demanded to know if the Government would honor Elliot's promise to pay for the opium. They insisted on vigorous measures. One of several groups to whom Palmerston granted a personal audience was Jardine, Matheson & Co. The company had a considerable interest in the formation of the Government's new China policy. After Elliot's pledge to pay for the opium, the company's agents handed over to Elliot in one day 7,341 chests of opium--almost one half of the total amount surrendered to Lin.¹⁹ At the meeting with the Foreign Secretary, Jardine himself and the company's agent, John Abel Smith, M.P., explained their views, which differed little from the rest of the British merchants and industrialists interested in the China trade.²⁰ Palmerston assured them that the Government would respond appropriately. A number of merchants were not so easily reassured. They threatened to make their case public. Smith tried to discourage such talk because of his conversation with Palmerston and because the M.P. felt that

¹⁹Jardine, Matheson to Elliot, 27 May 1839 (In a bundle marked "original opium claims"), Foreign Office, Embassy and Consular Archives: China, Superintendent of Trade, Records, Public Record Office, Kew. FO677/5/214-6.

²⁰Palmerston to Melbourne, note, 26 August 1839, Lamb Papers, M859/6 Box 12/15.

an open debate would hurt the Ministry.²¹ The episode increased the political pressure on Melbourne's Government.

After Palmerston's conversations with the commercial and industrial communities that had vital interests in China, he laid out the Ministry's options to Melbourne in a matter-of-fact letter. He guided the Prime Minister from the least popular to the most acceptable policy. The Government could reject responsibility for Elliot's actions, but then what would become of the merchants? Alternatively, the Government could accept responsibility, but then would it ask Parliament for the money needed to pay for the opium or demand it from the Chinese? Once the Government made the demand for compensation, would it also seek to put the China trade on a more secure footing by demanding a treaty? Palmerston also suggested that the most effective means of carrying out such a policy would be to blockade the Chinese coastal trade in grain and salt. He painted a rosy scenario: "No very large naval force would be required for these purposes."²² In this note to Melbourne, Palmerston laid out his strategy for making the best out of Capt. Elliot's unauthorized action, thus averting another clash with the Radicals.

²¹Smith to Palmerston, Belgrave Square, 18 September 1839, FO17/35/68-9.

²²Palmerston to Melbourne, note, 23 September 1839, Lamb Papers, M859/6 Box 12/13.

During the Parliamentary recess the Ministry also had to deal with several other issues besides the opium crisis. One of the more immediate domestic problems was the reorganization of the Cabinet in the face of Radical and conservative threats. Hoping that personnel changes would aid the passage of legislation, Melbourne allowed Russell and Lord Normanby to exchange their positions in the Home and Colonial Offices. Howick, son of Lord Grey, responded to the shift by resigning his position as Secretary of State for War. He thought Normanby's transfer to the Home Office represented a shift toward the Radicals. Howick's loss created the perception that conservative Whigs wanted to distance themselves from Melbourne's ailing Ministry. Melbourne called upon the extremely popular Thomas Macaulay to solidify the Cabinet's support in Commons. Recently elected as a representative for Manchester, his popularity rested on the controversial question of the ballot. In the past summer's debate on the issue Macaulay had stated his belief that Parliament should institute this mechanism for Parliamentary elections. His elevation to the War Office signaled a growing dependence on Radical support.²³ His appointment did nothing to stop conservative accusations that the aristocratic Ministry was really a "Radical" wolf in sheep's clothing.

²³Newbould, *Whiggery and Reform*, 248-52.

In the area of foreign policy, events in the Levant held center stage and pushed the China question to the side. The Melbourne Government had to decide on a strategy for dealing with Mehemet Ali's rebellion. Palmerston told Melbourne that "the Turkish Question is one of more extensive Interest & Importance to England than any other Question . . . and no administration would be able to stand the Blame . . . if by neglect or indifference" it allowed France and Russia to extend their influence unchecked.²⁴ Palmerston received an unexpected break in September. Baron Brunnow, Russian envoy to London, informed the British Foreign Secretary of Czar Nicholas's proposal to issue a joint declaration with Britain, Austria, Prussia and France. The declaration would state that the great powers saw the preservation of the Ottoman Empire as essential to the European balance. Mehemet Ali and his heirs could keep Egypt, but not Syria. The great powers would meet any further expansion with vigorous measures.²⁵

The Cabinet then met at Windsor Castle on 30 September to consider the Czar's proposal. Palmerston told the Cabinet that in return for a favorable British response, the Czar would allow the treaty of Unkiar Skelessi to

²⁴Palmerston to Melbourne, 5 December 1839, PP, GC/ME/329.

²⁵Hobhouse, 15 September 1839, Diary, Add.Mss.56561/139; Webster, *Foreign Policy of Palmerston*, 647-652.

expire: the Russian threat to the Turkish straits would come to an end. Melbourne thought Mehemet Ali should be allowed to keep Syria, but Palmerston, Hobhouse and Russell protested. A strong Mehemet Ali would continue to threaten the stability of the Ottoman Empire and British trade routes. The Cabinet met late into the evening and finally reached a tentative decision. It agreed to the Czar's proposal in principle but wanted further discussions concerning its implementation.²⁶

After the previous day's grueling session, the Cabinet reconvened on 1 October 1839 to decide on a China policy.²⁷ Palmerston described recent events in China and explained his plans for disrupting the grain and salt trade. He believed that a "small squadron of one line of battle ship, two frigates & some small armed vessels with two or three steamers might blockade the whole coast of China from the river of Pekin [sic] down to the Canton coast."²⁸ Hobhouse expressed concern that such an expedition would fail. He reminded the Cabinet of Staunton's objections to the use of force three years earlier. Staunton had argued that an expedition to extract

²⁶Hobhouse, 30 September 1839, Diary, Add.Mss.56561/140; Bourne, *Palmerston*, 581-3.

²⁷Hobhouse, 1 October 1839, Diary, Add.Mss.6561/144-6; Fay, *Opium War*, 192-95; Bourne, *Palmerston*, 589-90.

²⁸Hobhouse, 1 October 1839, Diary, Add.Mss.56561/144.

commercial privileges would insult the British flag and alienate the Chinese government and people.²⁹ The President of the Board of Control also read a letter from Lord Auckland stating that he had no forces available for hostilities with China. Melbourne then voiced his doubts about the success of Palmerston's proposed expedition.

The rest of the discussion centered on two issues--the Chinese government's use of force and Elliot's promise to pay for the opium. The circumstances of Elliot's capitulation to Lin's demands posed a dilemma for the Ministry. The Government felt obligated to compensate the British merchants for their loss of property, the euphemism used to refer to the opium, but the question of the source of funds remained unresolved. Melbourne instantly opposed using public funds to pay for the drug. The Chancellor of the Exchequer did not have the money, and the House of Commons would not consent to appropriate the necessary resources. Henry Labouchere, President of the Board of Trade, suggested that the East India Company pay. Palmerston and Thomas Macaulay, who argued "with his usual volubility and eagerness," thought the Chinese should pay. The Cabinet members finally agreed; they decided that the

²⁹Staunton, *Remarks on the British Relations with China*, 28.

Chinese themselves should come up with the money.³⁰ This decision meant war.

It would have been difficult for the Cabinet to rebut Macaulay's enthusiastic argument. Melbourne had brought the representative from Manchester into the Cabinet in order to bolster the popularity of the Government. Rejecting his reasoning would have diminished Macaulay's influence among other Radical M.P.s, defeating the purpose of bringing him into the Cabinet. Radical M.P.s were the most vocal proponents of a more aggressive policy towards China.³¹ Their constituencies in Manchester, Liverpool and Glasgow believed that an unprotected China trade remained limited; a protected China trade would provide the largest market in the world. Some British manufacturers and merchants eagerly anticipated an opportunity to sell their goods in China after the war.³²

By the end of the 1 October meeting the Cabinet had decided to send a squadron to China and agreed that

³⁰Hobhouse, 1 October 1839, Diary, Add.Mss.56561/145; Fay, *Opium War*, 193.

³¹Bernard Semmel, *The Rise of Free Trade Imperialism: Classical Political Economy, the Empire of Free Trade and Imperialism, 1750-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 152-4.

³²"Trade with China," *Manchester Guardian*, 9 October 1839, p.2; "The Dispute with China," *Manchester Guardian*, 16 October 1839, p.2; "Differences with China," *Manchester Guardian*, 30 November 1839, p.2; "Relations with China," *Manchester Guardian*, 23 November 1839, p. 2; Greenberg, *British Trade*, 193-5.

Palmerston should draw up instructions for the campaign.
 Before the meeting broke up, Hobhouse leaned over and told
 Macaulay

his two first Cabinets had done some work--i.e.
 resolved upon a war with the master of Syria &
 Egypt backed by France--and also on a war with
 the master of one third of the human race. He
 laughed & said he had no doubt about our Chinese
 policy but was not so certain as to our
 Egyptian.³³

Hobhouse's original diary entry differs slightly from
 the account he wrote in his memoirs, *Recollections of a
 Long Life*. He replaced the vague phrase, "his two first
 Cabinets had done some work," with a more specific
 statement, "that charges made against us of idleness could
 hardly be sustained; for at the first Cabinet which he
 [Macaulay] had attended we had resolved upon war . . ."³⁴
 The change suggests that, at least upon reflection,
 Hobhouse considered the charges of idleness made by the
 conservatives a significant factor in the Ministry's
 decision to go wage war.

Two members of the Cabinet--Melbourne and Chancellor
 of the Exchequer Francis Baring--remained unsure of the

³³Hobhouse, 1 October 1839, Diary, Add.Mss.56561/145-
 6; I would like to thank J. Conway, Superintendent,
 Students' Room [Manuscript Collection, British Library],
 for verifying the accuracy of this quotation.

³⁴Lord Broughton (John Cam Hobhouse), *Recollections of
 a Long Life*. With Additional extracts from his private
 dairies. Edited. by his Daughter Lady Dorchester. Vol. 5.
 1834-1840 (New York: Charles Schribner's Sons, 1911), 229.

decision after the meeting broke up. Melbourne still was unconvinced that a small force could do the job and wanted to defer to the "judgement of Lord Auckland."³⁵ Baring, although his family's firm--Baring Brothers & Co.--provided the financial backing for most of the opium trade,³⁶ had little sympathy for the commercial interests involved in the opium crisis.³⁷ He did not believe that the Government should take responsibility for Elliot's pledge, but he did think the matter would be a "bother in the H of C."³⁸

Lord Holland, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, was indifferent to and ignorant of the whole affair. He usually led the opposition within the Cabinet to Palmerston's foreign policy, especially in regard to France. All Holland knew about affairs in China was that Lord Minto's cousin needed relief. Having missed the Cabinet meeting, he was willing to leave the decision in the hands of his colleagues.³⁹ Holland was more worried

³⁵Hobhouse, October 1839, Diary, Add.Mss.56561/148.

³⁶Cheong, *Mandarins and Merchants*, 226.

³⁷Francis Baring to Melbourne, 24 October 1839, Lamb Papers, M859/6/ Box 1/38d.

³⁸Francis Baring to Palmerston, 1839, PP, GC/BA/264.

³⁹Lord Holland. Political Journal. Holland House Papers. Manuscript Collection. British Library, London. Add.Mss. 51872/1159.

about a rupture with France over Palmerston's proposed Egyptian policy, than events in China.

Palmerston took his time forming the instructions for his subordinates in China and India. He did not inform Elliot of the decision for war until 18 October⁴⁰ and waited until early November to send preliminary instructions to Lord Auckland to make preparations for hostilities. Palmerston's slow reaction would bring criticism from the Opposition, but the commercial interests involved agreed with the delay. They had no reason to believe that the 1839/1840 trading season would not open as usual, and they did not want the conflict to begin until the season was over in March, hoping the violence would end in September.⁴¹ Such considerations suggest neither a knee jerk reaction nor a policy planned well in advance.

When Hobhouse informed the Chairs of the East India Company of the Cabinet's decision to wage war, they "did not give any positive opinion."⁴² This apprehensive reaction is hardly what one would expect from a group dependent upon opium for survival. Hobhouse did raise their spirits when he told them that the British Government, not the Company, would pay for the expedition.

⁴⁰Palmerston to Elliot, Private, 18 October 1839, PP, GC/EL/27/1.

⁴¹Palmerston to Hobhouse, Foreign Office, Letter Books, OIO, Mss.Eur.F213/7/225.

⁴²Hobhouse, 4 November 1839, Diary, Add.Mss.56561/156.

The decision to go to war with China represented a drastic change in Palmerston's Far Eastern policy. Since the creation of the office of Chief Superintendent of Trade, Palmerston had instructed the Crown's representatives to avoid war and to protect the *status quo*. The Foreign Secretary now claimed to seek redress for the Chinese quarantine's insult to the British merchants and to protect future trading privileges in China. Palmerston explained his reasons for his about-face in a letter to the Emperor of China dated 20 February 1840. He claimed that he was not questioning the Emperor's right to prohibit opium nor the right to enforce that prohibition. He did challenge, however, the methods used by the Emperor's officials. The Foreign Secretary accused the Chinese of uneven enforcement of a law that had long remained a "dead letter" by suddenly threatening "innocent" foreigners with violence. Palmerston ignored the fact that China had begun the crackdown three full years earlier and had begun by punishing its own subjects. Furthermore, every foreign merchant house in Canton, with the exception of one American firm, brought opium to China.⁴³ The letter defends Elliot's actions, claiming that Elliot had "to rescue" the merchants from a "barbarous fate," a statement which was far from the truth. Finally, the letter ended

⁴³Report, 1840, 34.

with a list of demands that included payment for property--opium--lost during the March 1839 crisis and protection of future trading rights. If the Emperor of China refused these demands, the expeditionary force had the authority to exact them by force.⁴⁴ Palmerston clearly intended to use this military show of force to gain commercial privileges, the same type of endeavor which he had questioned just one year earlier in regard to France's blockade of Buenos Aires.

The domestic political crisis helped to alter his policy. During the previous three years Palmerston had made it clear to Elliot that he was in no way to offend the Chinese.⁴⁵ Now the situation had changed. Merchants banged on the Foreign and Treasury Office doors demanding compensation for the lost opium, while opposition to the opium trade mounted from across the political spectrum.⁴⁶ After the Ministry made its decision not to pay for the

⁴⁴Morse, *International Relations*, 621-26.

⁴⁵Gerald Graham, *China Station*, 49, 73.

⁴⁶"Foreign and Domestic Intelligence: The East," *Northern Star* (Leeds), 17 August 1839; "The Opium Trade v. British Manufacturers," *Leeds Mercury*, 26 October 1839, p.4; "China," *Leeds Mercury*, 2 November 1839, p.4; "Foreign and Colonial Affairs: China," *The Charter* (London), 3 November 1839, p.642; "Opium Script," *Northern Star* (Leeds), 16 November 1839, p.4; "The Opium Smugglers," *Leeds Mercury*, 16 November 1839, p.4; "The China Question," *Leeds Mercury*, 16 November 1839, p.7; "The Opium Trade," *Leeds Mercury*, 23 November 1839, p.7.

opium, both the Foreign and Treasury Offices answered the merchants' demands with the same response.

H.M. Govt. have no funds at their disposal out of which any compensation could be made to the owners of the opium which was surrendered to Capt. Elliot, in conformity with his public notice dated Canton March 27, 1839. . . . [T]he sanction of Parliament would be necessary before any such claims against H.M. Govt., founded upon Capt. Elliot's notice, could be recognized and paid [F]urther, it is not the intention of H.M. Govt. to submit to Parliament for the payment of such claims.⁴⁷

The Melbourne Ministry refused to take responsibility for Elliot's pledge, because the "Chief of the Commission" had no authority to make such a pledge. The dispersal of funds required an act of Parliament, but to get money from it seemed impossible. Facing a defiant House of Commons, and needing all the support the Ministry could get, it finally decided to act in heat of domestic criticism.

In regard to foreign policy the Parliamentary recess gave the Ministry a little breathing room. In a letter to Lord Palmerston, Lord Minto, First Lord of the Admiralty, wrote

The great success of Auckland will drive the Tories to despair, and Brougham will [be] ready to kill himself in earnest. I think they have now no foreign allies to rest their hopes upon except Commissioner Lin & the Emperor of China--

⁴⁷ initialed "P" to Magniac, Smith & Co., Draft, Foreign Office, 19 November 1839, FO17/36/131-2; see also Treasury to Opium claimants, Copy, Treasury Chamber, 11 November 1839, FO17/36/107-8.

who may serve them for the opening of
Parliament.⁴⁸

Palmerston's vilification of Commissioner Lin would help to blunt the conservative charges of incompetence. The Foreign Secretary felt confident enough to tell Russell not to worry if Minto exceeded his voted estimate at the Admiralty. "Parliament would not object to make good the deficiency, considering that the Slave Trade, Buenos Ayres, China and the Levant all require naval Exertions."⁴⁹

Domestic politics was another matter. The Chartist violence continued to flare up around the country. *Gentlemen's Magazine* described how local magistrates resorted to force in order to put down armed protests. In raids on the houses of leading Chartists, police seized muskets with bayonets and bullets, along with papers and correspondence. "Thousands" of Chartists demonstrated in Stockport, Manchester and Bolton.⁵⁰

The most serious uprising in the winter of 1839 occurred in the seaport town of Newport, Wales, on 3-4 November. The *Morning Chronicle*, a daily newspaper with Whig sympathies, reported that 10,000 armed men with guns,

⁴⁸Minto to Palmerston, private, 2 November 1839, PP, GC/MI/412.

⁴⁹Palmerston to Russell, Windsor, 17 October 1839, Russell Papers, PRO 30/22/1316.

⁵⁰"Domestic Occurrences," *Gentlemen's Magazine* 12 (September 1839): 301-1; "Domestic Occurrences," *Gentlemen's Magazine*, 13 (February 1840): 198-9.

muskets, pikes and swords descended upon the town. The attack left at least twenty dead and fifty wounded. The paper considered the destruction as "penance" for the years of "despicable domination" before the Reform Act.⁵¹ The early newspaper reports have stood the test of time. John Frost, a former Newport corporation magistrate, led 7,000 men, armed with pikes, pistols, guns and heavy bludgeons, from the mining and manufacturing regions of South Wales to the seaport town. The throng hoped to rescue several of their colleagues held by local officials. A severe rain storm delayed the group's advance and allowed the officials to prepare for an assault. When the Chartists reached the Westgate Hotel, the makeshift prison, they violently demanded the release of the prisoners. After a scuffle at the front door, members of the 45th Regiment, hidden inside the hotel, fired into the crowd. After a 25 minute battle, the military managed to disperse the Chartists. The battle left at least twenty persons dead and fifty wounded.⁵²

⁵¹"The Chartist Riots at Newport," *Morning Chronicle*, 6 November 1839, 3; "London: Thursday, Nov. 7, 1839," *Morning Chronicle*, 7 November 1839, 2; "London: Friday, Nov. 8, 1839," *Morning Chronicle*, 8 November 1839, 2.

⁵²"Chartist Insurrection in Monmouthshire," *Leeds Mercury*, 9 November 1839, p.4; "The Insurrection and Its Causes," *The Northern Star* (Leeds), 9 November 1839, p.4; "Alarming Intelligence," *Northern Star* (Leeds), 9 November 1839, p.8; "The Welsh Insurrection," *The Charter* (London), 10 November 1839, p.664; "The Riots in Wales," *The Charter* (London), 10 November 1839, p.657-9; "The Riots in Wales," *The Charter* (London), 17 November 1839, p.677; David Jones, *The Last Rising: The Newport Insurrection of 1839* (Oxford:

Once again, an official who the Melbourne Ministry had appointed to ensure public order threatened life and property. At least in Birmingham, the Ministry's appointees had acted on the side of the Government. This time, the Ministry choice for magistrate--John Frost--actually led the rebellion. Melbourne thought that more unexpected uprisings might occur. He considered the situation a "little awkward after having taken merit for our mode of dealing with Chartism."⁵³ The rebellion further weakened the popularity of Melbourne and the Whigs. At a dinner held for the Lord Mayor of London, the guests drowned with hisses Lord Melbourne's toast. He had tried to express his determination to suppress domestic unrest with force, but the noise obliged the Prime Minister, along with Normanby, Palmerston and Baring, back to their seats.⁵⁴

The Ministry tried to strengthen its position during the Parliamentary recess, but the ground continued to erode from beneath its feet. For every crisis the Government addressed, two more emerged. To carry successfully the

Clarendon Press, 1985), 114-43, 144-54.

⁵³Melbourne to Russell, Windsor Castle, 6 November 1839, *Lord Melbourne's Papers*, ed. Lloyd Sanders (London: Longmans, Green, 1889), 407-8.

⁵⁴"The Lord Mayor's Dinner, and the Unpopular Ministers," *Norther Star*, 16 November 1839; "The Lord Mayor's Day," *Norther Star*, 16 November 1839, p.4.

China policy across the "impossible tightrope," the Ministry refused to respond to specific questions about the use of force. During the preparation of the Queen's speech at the opening of Parliament in January, the Cabinet decided to say simply that the Government had done its duty.⁵⁵ To say more might have pushed conservative Whigs toward the Opposition, but to say less might have upset the Radicals.

⁵⁵Hobhouse, 11 January 1849, Diary, Add.Mss.56562/32.

CHAPTER 7

"THE OPIUM AND THE CHINA QUESTION"*

With the beginning of the 1840 session of Parliament the conservatives' assault on the Ministry started anew. In a vote of no confidence at the end of January they brought together in one debate all of their accusations against the Whigs. The disruption of trade in China provided added fuel for their attack. The private decision did not end the public debate about Government acceptance of responsibility for Elliot's actions. On the contrary, the debate began in earnest. Pamphleteers and journalists wrote polemics on both sides of the issues, while politicians weighed the consequences of defending the Crown's officer in China against the repercussions of leaving the opium merchants to their fate. What emerges from this debate is a community divided. No mandate for war existed.

The conservatives believed the vulnerability of the Government called for a direct challenge. In December 1839 they decided that the challenge should come at the

*The title is taken from an article in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 47 (June 1840): 717.

beginning of the new session in January. On 28 January 1840, Sir John Yard Buller, a distinguished country gentleman, rose from the conservative benches and introduced a motion of no-confidence in the House of Commons. He began by declaring that "distress and dissatisfaction" existed "throughout England." This state of unrest did not arise from extenuating circumstances, which could not be controlled. The unrest arose from the policies of Her Majesty's Ministers. The Ministry adopted a "system of agitation which had [been] nurtured and fostered for the sake of carrying their own measures, pressing them upon the country, and exciting the masses of people for their own purposes."¹ To argue his case, Buller focused on the domestic situation, and proceeded to call the attention of the House to the Chartist riots, "hostility" to the Church of England, abuses of patronage, attempts to repeal the corn laws, and Whig support for the socialist Robert Owen.²

Mr. Alderman Thompson, representative of the Shipping Interests in Commons, then rose to second the motion of no-confidence. He was sure the House of Commons would make the right decision and stated his reasons for withholding

¹Sir John Yard Buller, "Confidence in the Ministry," House of Commons, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 51 (28 January 1840), col. 650.

²John Yard Buller, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 51 (28 January 1840), cols. 650ff.

confidence from the Ministry. Considering the Chartist unrest and the budget deficits, Thompson "found that there was cause of alarm and apprehension for the constitution of the country and the honour and prosperity of the nation."³ After expanding on Buller's themes, Thompson focused on the Ministry's colonial and foreign policy. He called the attention of the House to the French blockade of Mexico, the exclusion of British trade from Buenos Aires, the situation in China, and the Canadian and Jamaican rebellions.

Sir George Grey, Judge Advocate-General, rose first to defend the Ministry. He set the tone for the debate to follow by simply stating that the Opposition's motion gave him nothing to "grapple with."⁴ Grey felt that the motion was motivated by politics rather than policy. He asserted that the empire was not in a state of general unrest as claimed by the Opposition. He called upon the members of Commons to vote on principle. Grey asked if the House would rather have a Government committed to "progressive

³Alderman Thompson, "Confidence in the Ministry," House of Commons, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 51 (28 January 1840), col. 656.

⁴George Grey, "Confidence in the Ministry, House of Commons, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 51 (28 January 1840), col. 666.

movement," or one committed to the suppression of "all future progress."⁵

Once again, the conservatives blamed the Whigs' progressive principles of constant reform as the cause of the instability of the realm. More specifically, the conservatives blamed the Whigs' continuous attempts at extending the Reform Act of 1832 to the workers as the cause of the considerable unrest. The Whigs, on the other hand, denied that a general state of unrest existed and said that the unrest that did exist was prompted by the reactionary principles of the conservatives, who wanted to overturn the Great Reform Act. The Whigs held the reins of power. They were vulnerable to the charges that the Government was failing to respond to the extensive unrest, which was quite real.

All of the problems which Great Britain faced did not go unnoticed on the Ministry's side of Commons. Lord Howick, a former member of the Melbourne Ministry, probably delivered the most damaging speech in the no-confidence debate. Lord Howick, on the second night of the debate, rose admitting that the Ministry lacked the full confidence of the House of Commons and the country. As he spoke, cheers arose from the Opposition benches. Their cheers diminished, however, as Lord Howick stated that he would

⁵Grey, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 51 (28 January 1840), col. 688.

vote against the motion because he had even less confidence in the Opposition.⁶

After four long nights of debate the motion of no-confidence failed. The Ministry had only a twenty-one vote majority. Hobhouse wrote in his diary that the Ministry "had a majority of 300 to 287--much more than I had expected a day or two before. Russell told me we should have 14."⁷ The Radicals decided to vote with the Ministry on this particular occasion, but their continued support remained unreliable. The Ministry entered the debate over Elliot's pledge to pay for the opium in a slightly better position than it had at the close of the last session of Parliament. When the House of Commons finally took up the issue in April, however, the Ministry found itself back in its previous precarious state.⁸

The arguments for and against supporting Captain Elliot's pledge to pay for £2,000,000 worth of opium were wide-ranging. The argument used most often in support of Government responsibility rested on a simple fact--Elliot had acted in his official capacity. The Government must champion their representative's decision and bear the loss of the £2,000,000. By failing to pay for the opium, the

⁶Lord Howick, "House of Commons, January 30, 1840," *Times*, 31 January 1840, p.4.

⁷Hobhouse, 31 January 1840, Diary, Add.Mss.56562/53-4.

⁸Newbould, *Whiggery*, 256.

Government was avoiding its responsibility.⁹ Supporters of Government action also justified their position by highlighting official complicity in the opium trade. When Parliament abolished the East India Company's trade monopoly in the Far East, the Government allowed the government of India to keep its monopoly for the production and sale of opium.¹⁰ This lack of action sanctioned the India Company's collection of £2,000,000 in revenue from the exportation of the drug to China.¹¹ Complementing the above arguments was the belief that the British Government needed to avenge the insults to an officer of the Crown and the British community in Canton.¹² The outrageous behavior of the Chinese, which compounded the cruelty perpetrated against the "unavenged martyr," Lord Napier, demanded immediate action.¹³

⁹Samuel Warren, *The Opium Question* (London: James Ridgway, 1840), 17-18. Volume 1139. Wellington Pamphlets. Deposited in Southampton University Library (Hereafter cited as WP).

¹⁰H. Hamilton Lindsay, *Is the War with China a Just One?* (London: James Ridgway, 1840), 7. Volume 1139. WP.

¹¹Alexander Graham, *The Right, Obligation, & Interest of the Government of Great Britain to require Redress from the Government of China, For the Late Forced Surrender of British Owned Opium at Canton* (London: Whittaker, 1840), 1. Volume 1138. WP.

¹²*Some Pros and Cons of the Opium Question: with a few Suggestions Regarding British Claims on China* (London: Smith Elder, 1840). Volume 1139. WP; "The Disputes With China, *The Guardian* (Manchester), 16 October 1839, p. 2.

¹³Warren, *The Opium Question*, 25-6.

Other writers saw the opium traders as the source of the unsettled state of affairs in China rather than as the victims of Chinese despotism. The British merchants in Canton had returned Chinese hospitality with acts of aggression. The Chinese government had attempted to put down the opium trade since 1836, but the British merchants failed to heed the warnings. They kept illegally importing the drug.¹⁴ Opponents to accepting responsibility for Elliot's pledge also argued on moral grounds. According to an anonymous author the issues were clear. The opium trade, and the war to protect it, was a "National Sin."¹⁵ George Thompson, a "celebrated anti-slavery advocate," spoke to an overflowing crowd in Leed's Music Hall for two hours on the horrors of the opium trade. While the pagan rulers of China and the Ottoman Empire suppressed the immoral trade the Christian rulers of Great Britain

¹⁴Captain T.H. Bullock, *The Chinese Vindicated, or Another View of the Opium Question: Being a Reply to a Pamphlet by Samuel Warren* (London: Wm. H. Allen, 1840), 85. Volume 1139. WP; "War with China," *The Charter* (London), 19 January 1840, p.8; "The Opium Trade.--War with China," *Leeds Mercury*, 22 February 1840, p.4.

¹⁵*A Voice for China: An Answer to the Question, Is the War with China Just? To My Countrymen, the Government, and My Church. By One of Her Ministers*, 2d (London: Nisbet, 1840). *passim*. Volume 1139. WP; "The Opium Trade," *Leeds Mercury*, 8 February 1840, p.7.

encouraged it. No true Christian could support a war that protected such an atrocity.¹⁶

Surprisingly, economic reasoning motivated some authors to contest the Ministry's policies. For example, William Storrs Fry claimed that money spent by the Chinese on opium deprived British manufactures of a market. As the opium trade increased, British exports to China decreased.¹⁷ He also cited a petition by the Mayor of Leeds and 3127 inhabitants of that town. The petitioners asserted that the opium trade was the cause of British trade problems in China and was harmful to the manufacturing and mercantile classes in Britain.¹⁸ Fry concluded that the evidence necessitated an immediate end to the opium trade.¹⁹

Chartist newspapers added their voices to the outcry against the Ministry's China policy. The movement objected to war in general.²⁰ The pending hostilities with China provided more proof of the abuse of political power for sectarian interests. The Chartists argued that corrupt

¹⁶"The Opium Question," *Northern Star* (Leeds), 22 February 1840, p. 1; "The Opium Trade: Public Meeting at Leeds," *Leeds Mercury*, 22 February 1840, p.8.

¹⁷Fry, *Facts and Evidence*, 45-9.

¹⁸Fry, *Facts and Evidence*, 54.

¹⁹Fry, *Facts and Evidence*, 5.

²⁰*Northern Star* (Leeds), 12 October 1839, p. 4.

politicians, merchants and stock jobbers would reap the benefits of the war, while the laborers would bear the weight in taxes.²¹ Constitutional reform furnished the only solution to the problem.²² The nation could then pursue its true interest--"peaceful and unrestricted commerce, each nation taking from the other the produce raised with greater facility."²³ The Chartist papers also decried the loss of national honor caused by the opium crisis. For the Queen to keep the dignity of her crown, her Ministers should hang the opium merchants, "as hanging commissions are Whig fancies."²⁴ Insulting the aristocratic honor of the Ministry, the *Northern Star* stated that the behavior of "Opium Elliot" and the Reformed Ministry proved them to be merely the tools of "Shopkeepers," sacrificing the national honor for the un-Christian pursuit of mammon.²⁵

Both proponents and opponents of the Government's China policy used international law to support their

²¹"War with China," *The Charter* (London), 19 January 1840, p. 8.

²²"The Opium War," *Northern Star*, (4 April 1840), p. 4.

²³"War with China," *The Charter* (London), 12 January 1840, p. 888.

²⁴"The Queen's Speech," *The Charter* (London), 26 January 1839, p.9.

²⁵"The 'Shopkeepers:' Their 'Profit' and Our 'Loss,'" *Northern Star* (Leeds), 18 January 1840, p. 4.

claims. Proponents stated that the Chinese government behaved in defiance of "all international laws recognized by civilized nations for the protection of life and property."²⁶ It had no right to demand opium which the authorities themselves could not capture. The receiving ships anchored at Lintin remained outside the reach of the Chinese. Since Elliot turned over the opium housed at Lintin only after the Chinese held the foreign community as prisoners, the seizure was illegal.²⁷ Opponents stressed that according to international law an individual must obey the laws of the state in which he resides. The Chinese forbade the importation of opium. British merchants in China had no choice but to comply with that state's wishes. The Government of Britain should not take responsibility for the illegal behavior of English subjects in China.²⁸ Both sets of arguments based on international law were, however, of questionable validity. International law depended upon the "general consent" among independent nations.²⁹ China never consented to any set of common principles until after the war ended with its defeat.

²⁶Lindsay, *Is The War with China a Just One?*, 7.

²⁷Graham, *The Right, Obligation, & Interest of the Government of Great Britain*, 2, 10-11.

²⁸Bullock, *The Chinese Vindicated*, 64.

²⁹Henry Wheaton, *Elements of International Law: With a Sketch of the History of the Science* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea & Blanchard, 1836), 46.

The authors of the above articles and pamphlets based their arguments on newspaper reports, private correspondence or personal knowledge of events in China. At the end of January and throughout the month of February the Opposition turned up the pressure on the Ministry by demanding all official papers relating to China.³⁰ The Ministry's plans to use force had been a secret decision. It left the country in the dark about the expeditionary force. The debate remained focused on the general issues involved until Palmerston produced the Foreign Office despatches.

In March murmurs of discontent began to be heard, as news of Lord Auckland's military preparations in India leaked out. The Opposition demanded to know the details, but the Government remained silent. Its silence, however, left the Opposition free to speculate and accuse the Ministry of hiding details from the British public. In an editorial on 2 March, *The Times* wrote

It is in keeping with the whole genius and history of the MELBOURNE Cabinet, that they should first, from fear, look on while France was the oppressor of La Plata, and then plead their own connivance at that series of crimes as a defence of their consistency in the preparation of similar outrages upon China."³¹

³⁰Collis, *Foreign Mud*, 258.

³¹*Times* (London), 2 March 1840, p.4

The lack of official details gave the Opposition more time to put the Ministry's policy into context.

On 5 March Palmerston finally broke the Government's cloak of secrecy by producing the *Correspondence Relating to China*. This large Blue book did not quickly satisfy the Opposition, because it did not provide an immediate narrative of events. The document contained 458 pages of despatches with no table of contents or index. It presented the despatches in turgid, chronological order. Any Member of Parliament seeking clarification of events had to be enthusiastic and have a lot of free time to complete a thorough analysis of events in China. Furthermore, *The Times* continued to accuse the Ministry of hiding information, because the manuscript did not include the Foreign Office's orders to Elliot since the crisis occurred.³²

The Times got the story right. Palmerston had covered his tracks well. Charles Webster, author of the most respected book on Palmerston's foreign policy, claimed that, when the Foreign Secretary personally edited the Blue books, he "meant to enlighten rather than mislead the public."³³ Such a statement cannot be substantiated. Palmerston deleted almost all references to the conflict

³²*Times* (London), 14 March 1840, p.4.

³³Webster, *Foreign Policy of Palmerston*, vol. 1, 62.

between Robinson and Elliot, Elliot's refusal to perform his duty and Elliot's renegade foreign policy.

Even with the deletions Palmerston provided the public with the source for debate, and the blue book quickly sold out.³⁴ A new set of pamphlets and review articles, which focused on the details of Elliot's actions and his instructions, appeared as commentary for the mountain of despatches. The anonymous authors of two such pamphlets examined the same evidence and came to opposing conclusions.

In *Review of the Management of Our Affairs In China* the author states that because of the "lack of timely protection" by the British Government, the China trade might be lost forever.³⁵ The Government had left Elliot alone to follow his own policies, and he had involved himself needlessly with the Chinese authorities. This involvement clouded his decisions because he overestimated his own ability to negotiate with the Chinese.³⁶ Nothing could better illustrate Elliot's lack of foresight and

³⁴*A Digest of the Despatches on China (Including Those Received on the 27th March): A Connecting Narrative and Comments* (London: James Ridgway, 1840), 1.

³⁵*Review of the Management of Our Affairs in China, Since the Opening of the Trade in 1834; with an Analysis of the Government Despatches From the Assumption of Office by Capt. Elliot, on the 14th December, 1836, to the 22d of March, 1839* (London: Smith, Elder, 1840), 4.

³⁶*Review of the Management of Our Affairs In China*, 76.

overconfidence than his leaving Macao for Canton during the heat of the opium crisis. He went with the intention of demanding release of the foreign community, but he had to surrender £2,000,000 worth of opium.

On went his uniform coat, and up went the national flag. The one was taken off by himself, but we do not hear who hauled down the other. It was probably trampled under the feet of the Chinese coolies, in whose keeping he was placed immediately after landing.³⁷

Leaving such a man as Elliot without instructions required the Government to take responsibility for his actions.

The author was, however, willing to forgive the Government's past transgressions because it had decided to use force. He believed that the use of force would protect the China trade from the Chinese government and demonstrate to it that the time for conciliatory policy had come to an end. The opponents of force should recognize this fact and hail the new policy of the Government.³⁸

To fight, or not to fight was the question in the spring of 1840. Pamphlet author did not believe the final decision had been made. They still hoped they could influence Parliament's decision. Hence, the author of *A Digest of the Despatches on China* had a simple and straight-forward message. He found fault neither with the

³⁷*Review of the Management of Our Affairs In China*, 75.

³⁸*Review of the Management of our Affairs in China*, 210.

Government nor Elliot. The Government had no authority to put down the opium trade, and Elliot performed his duty by protecting British merchants. The anonymous writer acknowledged the moral evil of opium, but he believed that "moral evils are to be met by moral cures."³⁹

Commissioner Lin's material pursuit of the illicit traffic demanded a forceful response.

The parliamentary debate heated up on 12 March 1840 after the two main metropolitan newspapers, *The Times* and *The Morning Chronicle*, announced a British declaration of war on China. *The Times* ran the following sensational headline: **"EXPRESS FROM INDIA: DECLARATION OF WAR AGAINST CHINA."** The Opposition demanded an explanation from the Government, which continued its evasive strategy. Russell stated that he knew of no declaration of war. The Government had instructed Lord Auckland to make "active preparations." Those preparations fueled the rumors of war. Peel, "supposing the declaration should prove to be true," insisted on knowing who would pay for the war. Palmerston responded by denying that the nation was at war, but said the Government of India would share the fiscal burden. Peel was not satisfied. He asked Palmerston if the House should expect a message from Her Majesty stating

³⁹A *Digest of the Despatches on China*, 209.

that hostilities were imminent. In an arrogant response, Palmerston stated that no message was forthcoming.⁴⁰

The next day *The Morning Chronicle* reversed its previous position. It now maintained that *The Times* had "magnified" the orders for preparations into a declaration of war. In all probability "not only will there be no declaration of war against China, but no war at all."⁴¹ *The Times*, however, continued to blast the Ministry on a variety of issues relating to the expeditionary force. The newspaper could see no reason for the undeclared war. It would accomplish nothing and leave other British interests "ruinously exposed," because the Empire's defenses were already stretched too thinly. Furthermore, the Government refused to present its intentions to Parliament. Should not Parliament voice its opinion before the Government committed the nation to war? Lord Palmerston followed a course "of doing nothing and saying nothing, at the same time when both declarations and actions had become a paramount duty."⁴²

The Ministry finally caved in to the pressure. On 29 March, six months after the Foreign Office received Elliot's despatches and one year after the crisis began,

⁴⁰"War with China," House of Commons, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 53 (13 March 1840), cols. 1155-57.

⁴¹*Morning Chronicle* (London), 13 March 1840, 2.

⁴²*Times* (London), 14 March 1840, p.5.

Lord John Russell divulged the Government's objectives: 1) "to obtain reparations for the insults and injuries offered to her Majesty's superintendent, and Her Majesty's subjects by the Chinese government;" 2) "to obtain for the merchants trading with China an indemnification for the loss of their property;" 3) "to obtain security that the persons and property of those trading with China, should in future be protected from insult or injury."⁴³ The Ministry responded too late. This feeble attempt to avoid a conservative challenge missed its mark. The conservatives were not concerned about war aims, but about war origins. They realized the political value of the Government's mishandling of the affair and were determined to make the best of it.

After reviewing the massive *Correspondence Relating to China*, the conservatives knew the blue book contained few materials relating to the Palmerston's China policy. Sir James Graham even confessed to Hobhouse that Elliot made a better superintendent than anticipated, "but he [Graham] nonetheless gave notice of a motion on China."⁴⁴ The conservatives still believed that they would have a

⁴³Russell, House of Commons, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 52 (19 March 1840), col. 1223.

⁴⁴Hobhouse, 19 March 1840, Diary, Add.Mss.5662/95.

majority. The Ministry did not know what to expect.⁴⁵ On 7 April 1840 Graham moved that the House withdraw its confidence in the Ministry for its incompetent handling of Anglo-Chinese relations. He based his motion on the crisis that had developed in China and the government's failure to take action in response to it. Dismissing the opium question, Graham maintained that "it is the crime of the QUEEN'S Ministers in having entailed a needless and unjust war upon this country, through the difficult and helpless condition in which they left their own diplomatic agent."⁴⁶ The illicit opium trade only made Elliot's impotence that much more deplorable.

Even after Palmerston's careful editing, Graham was able to use the *Correspondence Relating to China* with great skill to substantiate this accusation. He called the attention of the House to the dismissal of Sir George Best Robinson. Graham wanted to know why Palmerston dismissed a man who followed a policy which produced two and a half years of peace. Graham answered his own question by stating that Robinson's policy clashed with the progressive philosophy of the present Ministry: Robinson had wanted to leave well enough alone. Immediately after the personnel

⁴⁵Hobhouse to Auckland, India House, 4 April 1840, Letter Books, OIO, Mss.Eur.F213/7/326.

⁴⁶Sir James Graham, "House of Commons, April 7, 1840: China," *Times* (London), 8 April, 1840, p.4.

change, "Violence, discord--he might almost say agitation--visted that peaceful region."⁴⁷ Graham also cited Elliot's attempts to warn Palmerston about the dangers of the opium trade and Palmerston's failure to give Elliot the necessary powers needed to control the trade. Palmerston's vague instructions had left Elliot unprepared to handle any problems which might arise. Graham concluded that Palmerston's inaction--not the actions of the Chinese government--destroyed British trade relations with China.⁴⁸

Writing in his diary later that night, Hobhouse assessed these accusations. He believed that Elliot did possess the necessary powers to fulfill his duties. "As to instructions perhaps Palmerston's letters were not sufficiently full & definite."⁴⁹ If Palmerston's staunchest supporter could come to such a conclusion, then the conservatives truly had a chance of winning over those members who were undecided.

The Ministry was not, however, willing to concede defeat easily. Secretary of State for War, Thomas Macaulay, rose to challenge Graham's motion. As he began

⁴⁷Sir James Graham, "War with China," *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 53 (7 April 1840), cols. 684.

⁴⁸Graham, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 53 (7 April 1840), cols. 691-4.

⁴⁹Hobhouse, 7 April 1840, Diary, Add.Mss.5662/103.

to speak, one could imagine drums beating, a chorus shouting "God Save the Queen," and the Union Jack flapping in the wind. Macaulay treated the present no-confidence motion with the same contempt that Sir George Grey had expressed toward the no-confidence motion in January. He started with the basic principle that the "flag should be the protection of an Englishman, however remote,"⁵⁰ and went on to defend Palmerston's instructions to Elliot. The instructions were sufficient, he insisted, considering the vast distance between England and China; the Government of India functioned quite well without detailed instructions. Macaulay asserted that no amount of power would have been sufficient for Elliot to stop the trafficking in opium. The trade was a profitable endeavor and those involved would stop at nothing to make a profit. Macaulay also complained about the nature of the motion; it dealt with past policy. He asked if the Opposition could find any fault with the Ministry's present policy. Finally, the Secretary turned to the action taken by the Chinese. The Chinese, by imprisoning the whole foreign community, had insulted the dignity of Great Britain, and that insult demanded retribution. As Macaulay sat down, the House erupted into "Loud and continued cheering."⁵¹

⁵⁰Thomas Macaulay, "House of Commons, April 7, 1840: China," *Times* (London), 8 April, 1840, p.5.

⁵¹Macaulay, *Times* (London), 8 April 1840, p.5.

Macaulay's argument did not sway the conservatives. Sir William Follet rose to respond to Macaulay. Follet stated that an appeal to national sentiment missed the point. The charge against the Government was that it left the Superintendents in China without powers and advice despite their repeated calls for both. Did Palmerston answer any of Captain Elliot's pleas for powers or advice? Follet answered his own question with a resounding "No!" An agent of the crown must have one or the other. The Government of India survived without advice because it had sufficient power. The superintendents did not have this luxury. The Government must be held responsible for the consequences.⁵²

Mr. Sidney Herbert also directly challenged the Secretary of State for War. Herbert "did not complain of Her Majesty's Government for sending out an armament, but he did complain of this--that their previous conduct had rendered such a proceeding necessary."⁵³ "Hear, hear" was heard throughout the house. The Opposition had to attack the past policies of the Ministry, because "on the Opposition side of the House they had no knowledge of the

⁵²Sir William Follet, "House of Commons, April 7: China." *Times* (London), 8 April 1840, p.5.

⁵³Sidney Herbert, "House of Commons, April 7, 1840: China," *Times* (London), 8 April 1840, p.6.

future policy of the present advisors of the Crown."⁵⁴
 Once again, expressions of approval were heard from the benches. If the nation did go to war, however, then the Government would be "expending 6,000,000*l.* to recover 2,000,000*l.*; that we were sending good money after bad, and that we were contending with an enemy whose cause for quarrel was better than ours."⁵⁵

The young and promising William Gladstone forcefully challenged the Government's policy on the second day of the debate. Gladstone disputed Macaulay's appeal to national sentiment. He acknowledged the "animating effects" produced by the sight of the flag, but rhetorically asked why it had such effects. He then answered himself:

It is because it has always been associated with the cause of justice, with opposition to oppression, with respect for national rights, with honourable commercial enterprize; but now, under the auspices of the noble lord, that flag is hoisted to protect an infamous contraband traffic.⁵⁶

Cheers came from the Opposition benches as Gladstone began with a bang, but he was not finished yet. He also disputed the Secretary's assertion that the Government lacked the ability to control the opium trade. He did so

⁵⁴Herbert, *Times* (London), 8 April 1840, p.6.

⁵⁵Herbert, *Times* (London), 8 April 1840, p.6.

⁵⁶William Gladstone, "House of Commons, April 8, 1840: China--Adjourned Debate," *Times* (London), 9 April 1840, p.5.

by pointing to the fact that the East India Company, under the jurisdiction of the Government, controlled the supply of opium. If the Government had wanted to address the problem created by the opium trade, then the Government should have cut off the supply. The Ministry chose to put Britain's commercial position at risk by failing to respond to Elliot's repeated warnings.⁵⁷ Gladstone also insisted that Palmerston had neglected his duty by failing to inform the House of the increasing danger. Palmerston had behaved like an "Egyptian task master, commanding his officer 'to make bricks out of straw.'"⁵⁸ Gladstone concluded by stating that the insult to the flag had not been delivered by the Chinese, but by the Melbourne Ministry's tacit approval of the illegal opium trade.

Gladstone's valiant condemnation of British participation in the opium trade is much praised by historians. At the time, however, he went too far when he defended the Chinese actions. Responding to reports that the Chinese had poisoned the water wells in order to drive Captain Elliot and the opium merchants away, Gladstone stated "of course they poisoned the wells."⁵⁹ The Ministerial benches "raised a yell of abhorrence . . .

⁵⁷Gladstone, *Times* (London), 9 April 1840, p.5.

⁵⁸Gladstone, *Times* (London), 9 April 1840, p.5.

⁵⁹Gladstone, *Hansard*, 3d ser., vol. 53 (8 April 1840), col. 817.

[while] . . . Peel & Stanley hung their heads."⁶⁰ Such naive statements hurt rather than helped opponents to the Ministry's China policy.

On the third night of the debate the Ministry fought back with vigor. John Hobhouse stated that the Opposition's motion was a mere attempt at party politics and contained no substantial charges. He asked whether or not it was British policy to punish subjects who smuggled goods into Spain; should it be different in China? Let the Chinese stop the smugglers. As to the superintendent's want of powers, the President of the Board of Control responded with contempt. "It does not appear, he thought, that Captain Elliot imagined there was any deficiency in his powers."⁶¹ Hobhouse had chosen to ignore both the evidence presented by the Opposition and the despatches supplied by the Foreign Secretary.

Sir Robert Peel returned to the conservative case, concluding it with some simple observations. He pointed out that the arguments of Macaulay and Hobhouse made it clear that the Ministry had set the nation on a course for war. The war would not be cost-free. The Ministry must consider the responses of other countries, especially the

⁶⁰Hobhouse, 8 April 1840, Diary, Add.Mss.5662/104.

⁶¹Sir John Hobhouse, "House of Commons, 9 April, 1840: China--Adjourned Debate," *Times* (London), 10 April 1840, p.4.

United States. Would the Americans sit by as a war raged, destroying their trade? Peel's simplicity did not serve the conservative cause. Hobhouse thought that the speech was not "one of his [Peel's] best."⁶²

After the leader of the Opposition's brief speech, Palmerston rose in defence of his policy. He felt that he had little to fear; he held the "trump card."⁶³ His strong, "swift" action intended to defend the British flag in China was meant to secure British trade. Palmerston clearly attempted to use national sentiment to his advantage. The noble Lord spoke with an air of arrogance as he brushed aside the accusations of the Opposition.

If the resolution of the right hon. baronet who had opened the debate were not so pointedly directed at the department which he [Palmerston] had the honour to fulfill he should not--and he wished to say it without meaning the slightest offence--think it necessary to address himself to a motion so feebly conceived and so feebly enforced as the one under discussion, more especially after the able manner in which the friends around him had refuted the arguments of those on the opposite side.⁶⁴

Cheers arose from the ministerial benches, while laughter flowed from the Opposition benches. As Palmerston spoke, he gave little of substance to defend his position.

⁶²Hobhouse, 9 April 1840, Diary, Add.Mss.5662/185.

⁶³Collis, *Foreign Mud*, 262.

⁶⁴Lord Palmerston, "House of Commons, April 9, 1840: China--Adjourned Debated," *Times* (London), 10 April 1840, p.5.

In rebuttal to Graham's charges, Palmerston defended his orders to Elliot as appropriate and Elliot's actions as honorable. He asked the Opposition what could have been done. If he had followed Gladstone's advice and moved against the opium trade, "the house would not have treated their [the Ministry's] proposal with serious levity [sic], but would absolutely laughed them out of court."⁶⁵ He claimed that he should be praised for doing nothing, because it was the only option. Palmerston concluded by declaring that he acted in accordance with the international consensus. The expeditionary force sent to insure British national honor would not bring retribution from the Americans or the French.⁶⁶

Graham tried to answer Palmerston's charges, but the members of the House had grown weary of debate. They were tired and wanted to go home. The M.P.s shouted until Graham sat down. The House divided after Palmerston's "glorious" speech, and once again the Ministry succeeded in holding on to its position. Their margin of victory, however, had dropped. The motion failed by only nine

⁶⁵Palmerston, *Times* (London), 10 April 1840, p.5.

⁶⁶Palmerston, *Times* (London), 10 April, 1840, p.5; Palmerston had little to fear from the American government. It even refused its citizens request to join the British expedition in extracting commercial concessions from the Chinese. William J. Donahue, "The Caleb Cushing Mission," *Modern Asian Studies* 16 (1982): 194.

votes.⁶⁷ Hobhouse commented that the Ministry's "casualties were numerous . . . [and] . . . we were fortunate in being able to keep our party together on this occasion."⁶⁸ The Opposition had presented a strong case against the Government. Palmerston's only defence was his claim that the Ministry was defending British honor against the barbarous actions of the Chinese. Apparently, this jingoistic rhetoric successfully, though narrowly, persuaded the British nation to wage war on China. In the process the Melbourne Ministry began the process of opening China to Western trade.

The Ministry's defeat of the 7 April 1840 vote of No-Confidence was, in any case, a pyrrhic victory. After losing a series of by-elections in the early part of 1841, the Ministry faced another serious threat from the Opposition. This time, however, the Opposition had the upper hand. Lord Stanley, a leading member on the Opposition side of the House, brought forth the Irish Registration Bill. Stanley wanted to restrict Irish suffrage, but the Ministry tried to counter with a more liberal bill. When it came time to debate the issue, Lord Howick argued against the Ministry. Howick, by far the

⁶⁷"House of Commons, April 9, 1840: China--Adjourned Debate," *Times* (London), 10 April 1840, p.6; Collis, *Foreign Mud*, 274.

⁶⁸Hobhouse, 9 April 1840, Diary, Add.Mss.5662/106.

most prominent defector, was not the only one. The Ministry lost by ten votes.⁶⁹

The Ministry chose to remain in office and fought ahead, making the budget the issue upon which it would stand or fall. The Ministers hoped to gain support by turning to Free-Trade issues. Melbourne's Government argued that the country's financial difficulties would be solved by lowering tariffs on such items as corn and sugar. The reduction of duties on corn was highly controversial. The Ministry gambled that the conservatives would not challenge it on this issue. The Cabinet made the right assessment on corn, but failed to see the attack on the reduction of the sugar tariff. The Opposition assaulted the Government's budget on the single issue of sugar. This focus allowed the conservatives the luxury of not taking a stand on the Corn Laws. The Opposition argued that by reducing the sugar duty the Ministry threatened the newly freed black population of Jamaica. Jamaican free labor would be forced to compete with cheaper slave labor. When the votes were counted, the conservative margin of victory had increased to thirty-six.⁷⁰

The Ministry reluctantly decided to dissolve Parliament, but before doing so it wanted to force the

⁶⁹Clark, *Peel and the Conservative Party*, 463-473.

⁷⁰Clark, *Peel and the Conservative Party*, 478-479.

conservatives to take a stand on the Corn Laws. After the Ministry announced their intention to make a motion to reduce the Corn Laws, the Opposition quickly decided to make a general motion of no confidence on 27 May 1841, thus avoiding a direct challenge on policy issues. The conservative Opposition pointed to the Ministry's two previous losses as proof of the lack of confidence in the Ministry. The Government, however, would not fall so easily. The Whigs tried in vain to make Peel, the leader of the Opposition, take a stand, but he refused to do so. He merely stated that his views were already well known. The issue before the House was not Peel's ability to govern, but the Melbourne Ministry's ability. The majority of the House agreed with Peel and the Ministry lost by one vote. Melbourne and his colleagues had failed to address the more serious issues of the day. Palmerston's rationale for war against the Chinese had faded into the background. After seven long years in Opposition, the Conservatives led by Sir Robert Peel formed a ministry.⁷¹

Accordingly, the Melbourne Ministry was out of office when one of the most significant events of the nineteenth century took place--the Treaty of Nanking, 29 August 1842. The treaty ended hostilities between Great Britain and China and signaled the opening of China to the West.

⁷¹Clark, *Peel and the Conservative Party*, 480-86.

Palmerston did play a significant role in designing its content. After being accused of giving vague instructions and leaving an officer of the crown without powers, Palmerston took no chances. The Foreign Secretary sent clear and precise demands to Elliot and gave him plenipotentiary powers. Elliot decided to settle for less than Palmerston had demanded. Palmerston removed Elliot, stating "Throughout the whole course of your proceedings you seem to have considered that my instructions were waste paper, which you might treat with entire disregard, and that you were at full liberty to deal with the interest of your country according to your fancy."⁷²

Palmerston then sent out Sir Henry Pottinger to replace Elliot and to carry out his instructions. Pottinger served Britain well. After a series of military victories, Pottinger extracted all of Palmerston's demands from the Chinese. The British made the Chinese surrender \$21,000,000 to pay for both the seized opium and the expense of the war. Furthermore, the Chinese opened five ports--Canton, Amoy, Foochow, Ningpo, and Shanghai--not only to British trade, but also to British residents and consuls. The British also demanded and got the elimination of the Co-hong and the establishment of regular duties.

⁷²Palmerston to Elliot, 21 April 1841 as quoted in Fay, *Opium War*, 309.

Finally, the Chinese ceded the island of Hongkong to the British, and the island came under British jurisdiction.⁷³

As stated above, the Melbourne Ministry fell before Pottinger signed this remarkable treaty. Palmerston's clear and concise instructions came too late to be of any good to the Ministry. The immediate concerns at home overshadowed the foreign war abroad. Any political leader contemplating a "splendid little war"⁷⁴ should remember the events surrounding the Opium War. War euphoria will soon recede, and the domestic tide will swell unless domestic needs are satisfied.

⁷³Fay, *Opium War*, 362.

⁷⁴"It has been a splendid little war; begun with the highest motives, carried on with magnificent intelligence and spirit, favored by that fortune which loves the brave." John Hay, U.S. Ambassador to England, writing to Colonel Theodore Roosevelt at the close of the Spanish-American War; As quoted in Frank Freidel, *The Splendid Little War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1958), 3.

CONCLUSIONS:
HISTORIANS AND THE OPIUM WAR

War is never inevitable. Political leaders make conscious choices of when to fight and when to compromise. They do not, however, always base their decisions on clear, rational policies. More often than not, they fail to look past short-term goals. The immediate circumstances often overshadow larger historical forces such as economics or cultural differences. Historians, on the other hand, prefer to examine the long-term trends in their studies of the origins of war and often look for the sources of violent outbursts in inappropriate places, favoring historical forces over immediate conditions. To understand fully the motivation for war, historians must consider the immediate circumstances surrounding those making the decision to wage war, as well as the prevailing views within society.

Historians have used a variety of arguments to assert that the first Opium War was an inevitable consequence of Anglo-Chinese commercial contact. Earl Pritchard, for example, claimed that the British and the Chinese "thought

and acted in a way almost directly opposed to one another."¹ Unlike Britain's experience in Europe, China developed in relative isolation and refused to accept the British government's or merchants' demands to be treated as equals. After Lord Macartney (1791-1792) failed to establish a permanent British embassy in Peking, "the gauntlet was clearly thrown down for the future."² As British merchants expanded their economic connections with the Chinese, the lack of any diplomatic relations, which might have peacefully settled conflicts between the two countries, made an armed contest unavoidable.³

Other historians, such as Michael Greenberg, have found the source of the inevitable tensions between the British and the Chinese in Britain's expanding modern economy. Greenberg contended that the country traders joined with British manufacturers to provide the primary impetus behind the campaign first, to eliminate the East India Company's China trade monopoly and second, to tear down Chinese restrictions on foreign trade--the Canton System. The removal of the East India Company's monopoly unleashed these dynamic agents of change. Working in

¹Pritchard, *Crucial Years*, 110; see also Chang, *Commissioner Lin*, ix, 9-13.

²Pritchard, *Crucial Years*, 389.

³Owen, *British Opium Policy*, 168; Costin, *Great Britain and China*, 20; Chang, *Commissioner Lin*, 2; Graham, *China Station*, x.

tandem, these merchants and manufacturers easily convinced the British government to act violently on their behalf in the first Opium War, shattering China's stagnant world view.⁴

Historians have also used the British-run government in India's opium monopoly as evidence to argue for the inevitability of the Opium War. Tan Chung and J.Y. Wong found the desire to expand the China trade in India rather than Britain or Canton. The East India Company needed the expansion of the China trade--opium exports--in order to finance the Government of India. When Commissioner Lin cracked down on the opium trade, a response by the British Government was inevitable, because the Indian government could not survive without the money derived from the sale of opium.⁵

These economic and cultural factors certainly played a role in the British Cabinet's decision to wage war and can not be ignored. British economic dependency on the opium trade and the deep-seated cultural differences about the role of the merchant in society played important roles in the outbreak of hostilities in 1839 and 1840; the economic

⁴Greenberg, *British Trade*, 215; see also Chang, *Commissioner Lin*, 13-14.

⁵Tan Chung, "The Britain-China-India Trade Triangle (1771-1840)," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 11 (December 1974): 411-31; J.Y. Wong, "Monopoly in India and Equal Opportunities in China, 1830-33," *South Asia* 5 (1982): 81-95; see also Chang, *Commissioner Lin*, 215.

variables and the cultural differences unquestionably laid the foundation for conflict. This does not mean that war was inevitable, or even likely before March 1839. These historical realities only defined the "limits of the possible"--the border that separate "the possible from the impossible."⁶ Previous historians of the Opium War have interpreted these borders within the context of an emerging modern, industrial state in which the middle class manipulated the political debate. If one redefines the limits of the possible and places the war within the context of a aristocratic society, then the likelihood of the Melbourne Ministry fighting a commercial war decreases.⁷ The March opium crisis should not have been a life or death issue for the Government. Those who pushed for the war--Radicals in Parliament, and northern merchants and manufacturers out of doors--were political and social minorities.⁸ Interpretations that rest on economic and cultural explanations fail to explain fully the motivation behind the first Anglo-Chinese war by ignoring how these

⁶Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism 15th-18th Century*, vol. 1, *The Structures of Everyday Life: The Limits of the Possible*, trans. Siân Reynolds (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 27.

⁷Jeremy Black, "British Foreign Policy in the Eighteenth Century: A Survey," *Journal of British Studies* 26 (January 1987): 44-45.

⁸Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, 40-42.

minorities convinced the British Cabinet to expand violently British merchants' trading privileges in China.

Their failure is the result of an assumption made explicit by Morris Collis. In *Foreign Mud* (1947) Collis argued that the British Government and merchants sought an excuse for military intervention in China. The British wanted to compel the Chinese government to sign a "modern commercial treaty," as well as to allow an expansion of trade.⁹ The Chinese government's behavior prior to the arrival of Commissioner Lin had not warranted the use of force, but "Lin had played straight into his [Palmerston's] hands." The High Commissioner's "naive" actions provided a "godsend" that the Foreign Secretary used to justify his change in tactics.¹⁰

This assumption has led historians to neglect the manuscript sources relevant to the discussion of the Opium War. Historians of the war's origins have focused almost exclusively on Foreign Office letters, while they have completely overlooked Melbourne's, Palmerston's and Hobhouse's private papers. Historical interpretations of the Cabinet's decision to fight a war half-way around the

⁹Collis, *Foreign Mud*, 8; See also Costin, *Great Britain and China*, 20; Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 102; Fieldhouse, *Economics and Empire*, 215.

¹⁰Collis, *Foreign Mud*, 256-7.

globe suffered as a result. For example, Chang Hsin-pao wrote that

Within the frame work of the British constitution, Parliament has very little voice in foreign-policy decisions. The decision to wage war against China in 1839 was made by Palmerston alone, under the influence of Smith, Jardine, Elliot and a few others.¹¹

Tan Chung made a similar erroneous assertion: "the British government could bypass Parliament in making decisions of far-reaching consequences."¹² Such statements conform neither to the British constitution nor to the evidence found in Hobhouse's diary. Palmerston had no authority to start a war without consulting the Cabinet, and Parliament did have a voice in the decision, especially when the Ministry lacked the confidence of the country. If a majority of the M.P.s disagreed with any Cabinet decision, then they could remove both the Foreign Secretary and the Cabinet.¹³

Peter Fay is the only previous historian who came close to finding a political motivation for the Opium War,

¹¹Chang, *Commissioner Lin*, 194.

¹²Chung, *China and the Brave New World*, 205.

¹³Melbourne to Queen Victoria, South Street, 22 March 1839, "Cabinet Reports by the Prime Minister to the Crown, 1837-1867" (Microfilmed by Harvester Press, 1973), Reel 1; Angus Hawkins, "'Parliamentary Government' and Early Victorian Political Parties, c.1830-c.1880," *English Historical Review* 104 (July 1989): 641; On the relationship between domestic and foreign policy see Black, "British Foreign Policy in the Eighteenth Century," 38.

but he quickly moved away. In one paragraph, he presented some of the most significant factors surrounding the Melbourne Ministry's decision to wage war--the Bedchamber Crisis, the budget deficit, and the Chartists riots--but he minimized their importance in the larger scheme of Anglo-Chinese trade relations--the opium trade. The Cabinet had to find the money to pay for the opium because "the lobby, the memorials, the piercing sounds of distress from Calcutta and Bombay all combined to persuade the Cabinet that they must."¹⁴ Citing Hobhouse's memoirs, *Recollections*, Fay explained that since neither the British nor the Indian governments could pay for the opium, the Cabinet decided to force the Chinese to pay. He then promptly disregarded his own analysis and accepted Palmerston's explanation of the war. The British sent the force to China to extract a mere £2,000,000 from the Chinese, because of the immeasurable insult wrought by the Chinese. Palmerston wanted to make sure that no such threat to British trade would happen again.¹⁵

The British press's reaction to the Opium War has also received little attention from historians. In the only article dealing with the subject Shijie Guan argued that the Chartist newspapers' attitudes toward the war "can

¹⁴Fay, *Opium War*, 193.

¹⁵Fay, *Opium War*, 194.

throw light on the nature of the Chartist movement, its class consciousness and feelings of international solidarity for the oppressed."¹⁶ Viewed in isolation, the articles Guan cited seem to support his thesis, but when put into context, they suggest another possible interpretation. No single economic "class" monopolized the opposition to the war in China or the disreputable and unchristian opium trade. Newspapers with little ideological common ground such as *The Times*, *The Leeds Mercury*, *The Northern Star* and *The Charter* all joined in denouncing the vain attempt to collect money for greedy opium smugglers by violently assaulting China's sovereignty and people. The uniqueness of the Chartists' opposition stems from their belief that the English political system, which excluded a large portion of the people, allowed a privileged few to command the resources of the state. Evidence from the Chartist newspapers thus supports Patrick Joyce's argument that class consciousness was less significant in shaping social identities in early industrial England than populism: "'populism' points to a set of discourses and identities which were extra-economic in character, and inclusive and universalising in their

¹⁶Shijie Guan, "Chartism and the First Opium War," *History Workshop Journal* 24 (1987): 18

social remit in contrast to the exclusive categories of class."¹⁷

The neglect of the Cabinet's actual decision to wage war and the opposition to the conflict has led British imperial historians astray. Both Robinson and Gallagher, and Cain and Hopkins cited Palmerston's desire to force British manufactured goods on China as evidence for their own theories of "free trade imperialism" and "gentlemanly capitalism."¹⁸ Neither of these claims can be substantiated because they rest on the assumption that the use of force was a necessary component of Palmerston's foreign policy. Studies of Palmerston's policy in this period have shown that the Foreign Secretary's belligerent behavior in China marked a departure from his peaceful execution of foreign policy in the Levant, South America, and Mexico. Even when merchants and manufactures placed considerable pressure on the Government, he refused to solve overseas commercial problems with the use of force.¹⁹ Before the conservative Opposition made a

¹⁷Joyce, *Visions of the People*, 11.

¹⁸Gallagher and Robinson, "Imperialism of Free Trade," 10; Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, 82, 100.

¹⁹Webster, *Foreign Policy of Palmerston*, Vol. 2, 621-4, 785; Ferns, *Britain and Argentina*, 250-2; W.M. Mathew, "The Imperialism of Free Trade: Peru, 1820-70," *Economic History Review* 21 (December 1968): 567; Morgan, "Anglo-French Confrontation and Cooperation in Spanish America," 97-99; Platt, "The Imperialism of Free Trade: Some Reservations," 297.

political issue of Palmerston's China policy, he also followed a peaceful course in the Far East. Once the debate entered Parliament he acted more like a shrewd politician reacting to an immediate political crisis than a high-minded statesman following a clear imperialist policy.

Cain's and Hopkins' focus on the metropolis does, however, provide a more appropriate context for studying the motivation that drove imperialism than Gallagher's and Robinson's concentration on the periphery.²⁰ The Napier episode makes this point quite clear. Lord Napier's behavior had brought Britain and China to the brink of war, but the Foreign Office refused to be dragged into a fight that went against British policy. Only Her Majesty's Government had the authority to commit troops. Palmerston himself told Elliot that representatives of the Crown stationed abroad had no authority to make important decisions. Authority rested in London, not Canton.

While Cain's and Hopkins' argument parallels in some respects the one presented here, there are important differences. Between 1837 and 1842, the height of an economic depression and the Chartist crisis, they found an increase in imperialist activities directed by Lord Palmerston and claimed that he sought to avert a "social

²⁰Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, 12; Robinson, "Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism," 147-8; On the periphery thesis see also Fieldhouse, *Economics and Empire*, 8; Graham, *China Station*, x.

breakdown" in Britain by finding "overseas solutions to domestic problems."²¹ They asserted that he wanted increased access to foreign markets in order to counter the Chartist unrest caused by the sharp rise in unemployment.²² Neither Palmerston nor his colleagues in the British Cabinet adhered to such a grand scheme; considering the vocal opposition Chartist newspapers expressed to overseas wars in general, and the Opium War in particular, there is no compelling reason why the Whigs should have had such an expectation. Moreover, Palmerston and the Chartists shared the belief that economic vitality depended more upon developing home rather than external markets.²³ The political crisis in Parliament, not the desire to prevent a social breakdown, forced Palmerston to go against his beliefs and to side with the northern industrialists and merchants in violently opening China's market. Cain's and Hopkins' theory of gentlemanly capitalism thus fails to explain Palmerston's "burst of bellicosity" in 1839.

The overwhelming concentration on British imperialism has also hurt the interpretation of the Opium War by

²¹Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, 100; *idem*, "Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Expansion Overseas," 523; *idem*, "The Political Economy of British Expansion Overseas," 480.

²²Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, 40.

²³Semmel, *Rise of Free Trade Imperialism*, 219-21.

neglecting the Chinese side of the story. As Martin Lynn has cautioned, the historian's focus on imperialism has exaggerated the importance of the Western presence overseas. Focusing on Africa as his primary example, Lynn states, "The Europeans were simply one factor in a complex mix of forces which an African ruler had to account of; they were neither the only nor the most deadly threat to the independence of his state."²⁴ Distance, fiscal policy, the ineffectiveness of the navy inland, the size of Africa and the desire of indigenous populations to manipulate the foreign presence for their own benefits restricted the ability of British merchants and Foreign Office agents to control events in Africa. Many of the above qualifications of European imperial power in Lynn's discussion of Africa also apply to China. In *Discovering History in China*, Paul Cohen points out that studying China's history from a paradigm based on the significance of the Western impact is misleading. Even considering all the trouble the Westerners caused in the treaty ports, the Chinese government faced the far greater problem of internal unrest. Westerners provided Chinese officials,

²⁴Martin Lynn, "The 'Imperialism of Free Trade' and the Case of West Africa, c.1830-c.1870," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 15 (October 1986): 31.

and later historians, with easy scapegoats for the unraveling of Chinese society.²⁵

The most recent work on the Anglo-Chinese conflict examines the subject from Chinese perspective, and its conclusions complement the arguments presented in this dissertation. In *The Inner Opium War* (1992), James Polachek shifted the focus from Canton to Peking. Polachek explicated the political wrangling over the opium question within the Emperor's Court. He tied the decision to suppress the detestable trade to an attempt by the Spring Purification Circle to seize power. His argument dismissed theories about traditional Chinese isolationism and aversion to western trade, looking instead at the immediate political circumstances around the decision.²⁶ Both Polachek's book and my argument question the validity of viewing the first Opium War as clash of two cultures, and both doubt the primacy of economic motivations in causing the conflict. Minority factions in Peking and London used the political crises in their respective governments to their own advantage.

Umberto Eco's novel, *Foucault's Pendulum*, helps to explain the recurring deficiencies in the secondary sources

²⁵Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Writing on the Recent Chinese Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 9-55, 97-147.

²⁶Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 134-5.

that focus on the Opium War. While telling the story of various occult theorists and publishers, Ecco enlightens his reader with numerous excursions into areas such as causality and historiography. Two such excursions are relevant to the discussion at hand. First, for many people causality is simply: A causes B. Eco explains, however, "The belief that time is a linear, directed sequence running from A to B is a modern illusion. In fact it can also go from B to A, the effect producing the cause."²⁷ Historians, by connecting events and ideas together, create the past as much as the past creates the future. In the historical literature on the Opium War, this reverse sequencing seems to have taken place. Since the effect of the Opium War was to open China, the cause must have been the desire to see China opened. Historians readily accepted justifications, or *ex post facto* explanations for the war, without questioning their validity. Second, when trying to "prove" a thesis, occult writers and historians alike effortlessly cite the work of experts to support their theses. As the field grows older, and more experts produce more works, "They confirm one another, therefore they're true."²⁸

²⁷Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*. trans. William Weaver (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 173.

²⁸Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*, 231.

From the very beginning of the debate over the Opium War the political polemics discussed the war's origins in terms of economic or cultural conflict in the Far East.* In late 1839 and 1840 writers had no access to the secret documents between the Foreign Office and Captain Elliot. Anyone wishing to write on this subject had to rely on Palmerston's heavily edited Blue Book and on the public statements of Cabinet ministers in order to divine their motivations for waging war half way around the world. The story told by twentieth-century historians differs little from the story told in the 1840s. Recent historians have used both the early narratives and the Blue Book as primary sources when in fact they are secondary sources. "They confirm one another, therefore they're true."

Shifting the focus from events in Canton to conditions in London challenges long-held assumptions about the reasons for the first Opium War. During the 1830s Lord Palmerston and the Melbourne Ministry received repeated warnings from their agents at Canton that the situation there was deteriorating. The Ministry either chose to ignore these warnings or decided that their priorities lay elsewhere. Only when news of Elliot's actions in March 1839 reached Great Britain, and the Opposition held the Government accountable, did the Whigs decide to take

*See *Bibliography* "Primary Sources: Printed" and Chapter 7 above.

action. The Chartist riots, the three years of deficit budgets, Irish unrest, colonial rebellions in Canada and Jamaica, the first Afghan War and French threats to commerce in Mexico and Buenos Aires all weighed heavily on the minds of Cabinet members when they made policy decisions. As the crisis developed in China over opium, the Melbourne Ministry faced mounting pressure from the conservative Opposition and from Radicals sitting in the Ministerial benches. The Opposition accused the Ministry of encouraging unrest at home and of failing to protect British interests abroad; they charged that the Ministry lacked the ability to govern.

It is in the context of these immediate charges by the Opposition that the Ministry's decision to go to war must be viewed. Captain Elliot clearly had no authority to pledge payment for £2,000,000 worth of opium. If Palmerston had dismissed the Chief of the Commission, then the Foreign Secretary would have had to admit that his policy failed to achieve peaceful access to China's market; if the Cabinet decided to honor Elliot's pledge, it would have had to get the approval of Parliament. The domestic political crisis thus intensified the commercial crisis in the Far East and created the opportunity for the Radicals, whose constituents eagerly awaited the "opening" of China, to sway a cautious aristocratic government.

The Ministry had few options. It had to change British policy by sending an expeditionary force to China in order to counter another conservative charge that Her Majesty's Government neglected the nation's commercial interests. Before the opium and Ministerial crises Palmerston stated his policy clearly to Captain Elliot: the Government would not take an active role in opening China to foreign trade. Free trade meant free trade. The Ministry would not replace one form of government intervention--the East India Company--with another--military force. Merchants had to open markets on their own. Palmerston was not looking for an excuse to attack the Chinese in an effort to expand trade and could have continued the policy of quiescence had there been no crisis of confidence in the Melbourne Ministry. The Radicals took advantage of the Ministry's weakness, pressing for war to enlarge Britain's commercial relationship with China. The convergence of the economic crisis in China and the political crisis in London pressured the British Cabinet to reverse course. The Whigs finally sent the naval and military force that merchants and manufacturers had been demanding since the failure of the Napier mission. The force went to the Far East with the intent of demanding Chinese redress for the "Insult to the British Flag," and of guaranteeing future trading rights. The use of force was not the result of long-range planning. Rather, the

Opium War was an unintended consequence of Palmerston's failed foreign policy.

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APPENDIX A

Viscount Powerscourt, "House of Commons Debate: January 30, 1840," *Times* (London), 31 January 1840, p. 3.

"We have in the first place," continued the noble lord, "a Chartist conspiracy branching all over England and Scotland; we have, in the second, a Riband conspiracy with a secret organization and of an extensive nature, proved to exist in most parts of Ireland (cheers from the Opposition benches), and we have a system of perpetual agitation kept alive in that country, which, like the effects of unwholesome excitement on the human frame, must terminate in exhaustion and decay. (Cheers continued.) We have numerous colonies--some of them only discontented,--and what must our condition be when more discontent is considered comparative happiness! (hear, hear)--others in a state of subdued revolt--and others again the seat of a late military triumph, which those who are best acquainted with the country say will prove only a short-lived one. (Cheers from the Opposition benches.) Those colonies composed of petty states, partially independent of each other, were only waiting for a small disturbance to fall to pieces as so many beads would do when the string is cut which confines them together. (A laugh.) We have a war in India imminent, and a status quo liable to be disturbed by the introduction of the sword of Russia or the bayonet of France into the scales of diplomacy. We have a state of great financial difficulty before us at home (cheers from the Opposition benches), and to crown all this, we have a Government--it is difficult to deny it--which cannot pass a single measure through Parliament except by sufferance (cheers from the Opposition benches)--a Government not distinguished by the possession of a single talent, not illuminated by a single ray of genius (laughter and cries of "Oh!" from the Ministerial benches), and not even supported by the common attributes straightforward dogged and plodding mediocrity. (Cheers from the Opposition benches.) The only aptitude of its members is for dexterous maneuvering. (Cheers from the Opposition.) They have not the power to stem the torrent with manly fortitude, for all they aim at is to keep their heads above it, and to float listlessly along its tide. (Cheers from the Opposition benches.) Their last resource is in the favor of the Crown, whose illustrious wearer is so unacquainted with the state of affairs as to be incapable of knowing the danger

state of affairs as to be incapable of knowing the danger of her position, and is kept so purposely in the dark by those who surround her as to be incapable of seeing what ought to be her [calm] and magnanimous course. (Hear, hear.) With all these dangers staring me in the face, I have no hesitation in saying that, whatever their fate may be now, in spite of their accommodating system of open questions and contradictory evasions, which render impossible even for their best friends to conjecture what the next day may bring forth, their doom is sealed. (Cheers from the opposition.) They have weighed in the balance and have found wanting. The voice of the country is now pushing them from their stools (roars of laughter from the Ministerial benches), and will soon set in their places men whose principles are in accordance with those of the constitution, and whose talents are proportioned to the emergency of the times." (Great cheering from the Opposition benches.)

Viscount Powerscourt
Vote of No-confidence Debate
January 30, 1840

APPENDIX B

Lord Ellenborough. Question to the Prime Minister, 1 August, 1839. *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*. 3d ser., vol. 49, (1839), cols. 1052-55.

China-Opium Trade] Lord Ellenborough wished to put a question to the noble Viscount opposite, but, as he intended to make some remarks on the subject to which it referred, he should conclude with a motion. He wanted to draw the attention of her Majesty's Government to the information lately received from China. The case, as he understood it, was this: The Chinese government determined at length to put an end altogether the illicit trade in opium, and dispatched a commissioner with full powers of that purpose to Canton. On the arrival of the commissioner, he intimated to the British merchants that, with regard to the past, the Chinese government would not insist on prosecuting any one of anything he might have done against the law. But they desired for the future that the trade in opium should cease. They required further immediate delivery to the Chinese government all opium then in the possession of British merchants on the waters of China. They enforced this demand by forming a cordon round the British factories, and preventing the introduction of provisions. The British superintendent then went to Canton, and placed himself in the same circumstance of peril with the British merchants, his arrival had not the effect of making any alteration in their condition. On the contrary, the blockade was yet more strictly enforced, and ultimately Captain Elliot, the superintendent, felt himself obliged, or imagined he was obliged, to request that the British merchants should deliver to him all the opium in their possession, for the purpose of being delivered by him to the Chinese government, he undertaking, on the part of the British Government, that all those merchants should be by the British Government identified. The quantity of opium so delivered, or agreed to be delivered, amounted to 20,000 chests. He (Lord Ellenborough) understood that the value was estimated--the estimate being by no means sufficient--at more than two millions sterling. Now, it would be a subject undoubtedly for serious consideration with her Majesty's Government, when they were acquainted with all the circumstances of the

when they were acquainted with all the circumstances of the case, how far it might be incumbent on them to sanction the proceedings of Captain Elliot. Until that gentleman's case was fully before the public, it would be improper to form an opinion upon it. But he (Lord Ellenborough) must lay this down as a general principle, that any person, in civil situation, who is called upon to perform civil duties in the public service, is under as solemn an obligation to disregard every feeling for his own personal safety as any man in the military service. That which would not be justified in one holding a [civil] situation, when he undertook to act for [the] public but in what a position were we now practically placed by what had occurred? Whatever might be the conduct of her Majesty's Government, or whatever might be the success of any negotiation or intervention with a view of obtaining compensation for these losses from the Chinese government, he thought it was impossible not to come to this conclusion, that the trade in opium practically at an end. Now the revenue of India derived considerably more than a million sterling a year from the monopoly of that trade--he believed that the amount was 1,200,000l a year and he apprehended, that from 800,000l to 900,000l was delivered from the export of opium to the Chinese territories. The export of opium to China formed fully more than one-half of the whole export that export was the equivalent which this country gave to the Chinese empire for tea. Consider in what position the revenue of England would be placed by any great change in the tea trade. If a smaller quantity of tea should be imported, the revenue must suffer but in case of the cessation of the opium trade, the same quantity of tea must be had at a great additional expense, and, therefore tea would become much dearer. With respect to the opium trade, however, it would be difficult for any man to say one word against the grounds the Chinese government insist on its discontinuance. That government declared that it was contrary to its duty to permit this trade, which had been carried on to such an extent, and which was destroying the morals and health of the people. He (Lord Ellenborough) really did not know what answer could be given by the British Government to the allegations of the somewhat long but sensible and able statement of the Chinese commissioners on that subject. These circumstances, and considering the great importance of anything affecting our financial condition, at a time when Parliament was considering the propriety of taking off a tax which would for some time diminish the revenues, he desired to ask the noble Viscount [whether] he could lay on the table of the House any dispatch which he might have received from the superintendent, giving an account of those transactions.

In order to make his observation regular, he would beg to move for the production of any new dispatch.

Viscount Melbourne said, that no dispatch had been received. The facts might be as the noble Lord stated, but her Majesty's Government had received no account of them whatever. Therefore he should not make any observations on the subject until the Government was in position of full information.

Lord Ellenborough had taken the account from the newspaper, but there could be no reasonable doubt of its accuracy.

Subject dropped.

VITA

Glenn Melancon, born on 24 January 1966 in Heidelberg, Germany, was graduated from the University of Southwestern Louisiana in the spring of 1989 with a B.A. degree in History and a B.A. degree in Philosophy. After receiving his undergraduate degrees, Mr. Melancon continued his education at USL, and in the Spring of 1991 he received a Master of Arts degree in History. He then attended Louisiana State University. There, he majored in Modern European History (1500 to the Present) and minored in Modern Britain (1688 to the Present) and Modern Chinese History (Eighteen Century to the Present).

While an undergraduate, he received the W. Magruder Drake Award For Excellence in History and the Louisiana Omicron Chapter of Phi Kappa Theta Outstanding Scholar award. As a graduate student Mr. Melancon served as a teaching assistant in the History Departments at USL and LSU and as an Adjunct Instructor at USL. He held the office of President of Phi Alpha Theta (1990-1991). Furthermore, both Blue Key National Honor Society and Phi Beta Delta, Honor Society for International Scholars, inducted him into their organizations. Finally, in the spring of 1991, Glenn Melancon received the Charles B. Allen Memorial Award for outstanding service to the History Department and Phi Alpha Theta from USL's History Department.

DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT

Candidate: GLENN P. MELANCON

Major Field: HISTORY

Title of Dissertation: PALMERSTON, PARLIAMENT AND PEKING:
THE MELBOURNE MINISTRY AND THE OPIUM CRISIS, 1835-1840

Approved:

Meredith Veldman
Major Professor and Chairman

John L. Stutz
Dean of the Graduate School

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Date of Examination:

October 28, 1994