

## **RACE, EMPIRE AND LIBERALISM: INTERPRETING JOHN CRAWFURD'S HISTORY OF THE INDIAN ARCHIPELAGO<sup>1</sup>**

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Born in 1783 and dying in 1868, John Crawford's life spanned Britain's industrial revolution. He was a doctor, colonial administrator, diplomat, political candidate and orientalist scholar. He served the British East India Company in Northern India, Penang, Java, Singapore, and as a diplomat to Burma and Siam. Like many company officials, he believed that academic inquiry was part of his official duties. His scholarly interests included: philology, ethnology, geology, biology, and political economy. In the eighteenth century, such renaissance approaches were common, however, by the nineteenth century the idea of specialisation had started to take precedence. Such a range of disciplinary prowess razes problems in interpreting Crawford. One of Crawford's key legacies is his *History of the Indian Archipelago* (1820).

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Historically, *the History of the Indian Archipelago* is important. It is one of the first attempts to view the Southeast Asia archipelago as a regional entity. Early works focused on particular islands, places or kingdoms. Arguably, Crawfurd even became a model for an area studies specialist. Crawfurd's obituarist (Editorial 1868) commented: 'he was an indefatigable contributor to the Press on matters relating to the East, and indeed on many other subjects'. The nature of area speciality is interdisciplinary. Area specialists are routinely expected to move beyond one disciplinary approach (Philpott 2000). Although a post-World War II phenomena, the 'area specialist' has adopted a broad approach that has similarities to Crawfurd. Yet there are huge differences. Although the extent of focus is similar, the objective is very different. Modern area specialists do not analyse Asia as a system. In comparison, Crawfurd followed the eighteenth century idea of the grand narrative. For Crawfurd, the object of writing history was to reveal the theoretical grand system that underpinned the Indian Archipelago. Crawfurd is therefore important in framing the scope of Southeast Asian area studies, a project that did not take off until after World War II.

Crawfurd is also important historically. Along with William Marsden's *History of Sumatra* ([1811] 1966) and Stamford Raffles' *History of Java* ([1817] 1965), Crawfurd's *History of the Indian Archipelago* (1820) was mandatory reading for intellectual travellers going through Southeast Asia. In attempting to look at the archipelago as a system — a lofty goal, of which he fell short— Crawfurd attempted to go beyond Marsden and Raffles. In comparison, Marsden and Raffles presented geographically limited works that focused on Sumatra and Java respectively. Like Crawfurd, Marsden and Raffles approached their studies as encyclopaedic accounts, modelling their approach on the eighteenth century grand historical narratives (Carroll 2002). Writing in the 1960s, Bastin (1965: 266) and Harrison (1961: 247) both considered Crawfurd as being the lesser of the three founders of British Southeast Asian studies. In terms of the paucity of detail in Crawfurd's three volumes and essentially for being the last of the three, Bastin and Harrison both argued that Crawfurd failed to contribute anything new. Crawfurd therefore paid a price for adopting a similar encyclopaedic approach to Marsden and Raffles. Nevertheless, Crawfurd is also criticised for the nature in which he adopted this approach. Both

Marsden and Raffles, theorised Sumatra and Java, however they were careful to base their accounts on fieldwork. Crawfurd in comparison made sweeping generalisations. This was not uncommon in the nineteenth century. James Mill's *History of British India* ([1817] 1820) is also marked by sweeping generalisations. Nevertheless, Crawfurd was still exceptional for his time. Raffles complaining that Crawfurd had:

a rage for generalizing on partial and insufficient data, and the substitution of bold speculation for the patient investigation of facts. With materials sufficient, perhaps, for an account of one of these islands, the author has attempted to grasp the whole (Raffles 1822: 122).

Raffles' criticism addresses a key aspect of Crawfurd's approach, namely his formative role as an anthropological theorist. Crawfurd would go on to become the President of the London Ethnological Society. He effectively transformed this society from little more than a reading group into a society focused on scholarly research. He also used the society's journal of transactions as an engine for advancing his theories. Publishing 38 articles, Crawfurd published more papers than anybody else during the period of his membership. Crawfurd is a transitional figure. He took the history writing traditions of the Eighteenth century and refashioned this methodology as anthropological theory.

Raffles' criticisms however were personal. Crawfurd (1819) had earlier criticised Raffles *History of Java* in the *Edinburgh Review*. Raffles essentially made the same criticisms of Crawfurd. However, Raffles did have a point. Depending on your viewpoint, either Crawfurd's *History of the Indian Archipelago* is a work of anthropological and political theory or the worst form of orientalist stereotyping based on erroneous generalizations, or both. For example, ““contrasting the generous and manly genius of the European nations' with the 'febleness, incapacity, and puerility which has ever characterised those of Asia'” (Harrison 1961: 247).

Raffles' criticisms of Crawfurd have continued to the present. Raffles had a point; however, historiography has also favoured Raffles (Wright 2008). The above criticisms demonstrate that Crawfurd was a complex character. Ter Ellingson (2001: 266) commented on Crawfurd that 'the oscillation between apparently contradictory

viewpoints continued throughout Crawford's career'. Similarly, Mary Quilty (1998: 103) commented:

Crawford is constantly expounding the tenets of liberalism before going on (often immediately) to undermine them. In the same breath he can talk about 'free and equal contracts' between the races and the 'inferiority' of the dark-coloured races'

This is a common theme in contemporary reviews of Crawford. Ellingson's and Quilty's point is that on any page in Crawford's *History*, there are multiple ideological viewpoints. From today's vantage point, these views are conflicting. Even in his own time, Crawford's ideological oscillations caused consternation. In a meeting of the Ethnological society (a society founded on fighting against slavery and for the protection of indigenous peoples, which Crawford was president of) Crawford expressed a view that Maoris were ungrateful for being given the fruits of colonisation. According to the minutes, Crawford went on to say 'they must be taught that they must give way, and he did not care, if they resisted us, what became of them' (Crawford quoted in Ellingson 2001: 267). Alfred Russel Wallace responded stating that 'Mr. Crawford had enunciated a doctrine with which he would find but few sympathisers in that room' (Wallace quoted in Ellingson 2001: 267). Crawford's ideological inconsistency and his multi-disciplinary approach raises a problem in interpreting Crawford's work.

The title *History of the Indian Archipelago* raises one key problem: is Crawford an historian? John Bastin (1965: 266) commented that: "a reader has to proceed through the whole of the first volume, devoted to such subjects as the character of the people, their arts and methods of agriculture, and through half of the second before he will be treated to anything that can reasonably be defined as history proper." It is a work of social theory more than history. In focus it is comparable to Adam Ferguson's *History of Civil Society*, Abbe Raynal's *Philosophical and political history of the Establishment of European commerce in the East and West Indies*, and William Robinson's *History of America*, and Alexander de Humbolt's *Political essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*, and James Mill's *History of British India*. The last two titles Crawford quoted from and referred to regularly. These works were not 'history' in the

modern sense of the word. Crawfurd intended his history to be a work of comparative theory based around the idea of the national character. This is made clear from his criticisms of Javanese historiography. Bastin (1965: 266) argues Crawfurd's dismissal of Southeast Asian indigenous records of history is an example of Crawfurd's Eurocenterism. What Crawfurd despised however was the storyline narrative of Javanese history. He favoured a focus on political and commercial institutions and narratives based on national/racial identity not princely historical figures (Crawfurd 1820ii: 28).

Crawfurd's ideas on race, colonialism and free trade are also ideologically conflicting. As Ellingson (2001) and Quilty (1998) make clear, Crawfurd made sweeping racial statements. At different times in his career, he allied himself to both the racist and anti-racist elements in the ethnological/anthropological community. He made strong arguments against colonialism. He was in favour of a universal male suffrage in the colonies. Crawfurd criticised all forms of colonialism, yet he also advocated of colonialism. Crawfurd's ideas on empire also blur into his ideas of free trade in which he advocated a form of free trade multiculturalism as a means of negating mercantilism and therefore imperial expansion. These conflicting ideological positions, need to be seen in the context of his intellectual interests.

Although Crawfurd had expertise in many areas, he had three predominant intellectual interests: philology, ethnology and political economy. However, these were effectively only two interests, for Crawfurd, like most racial thinkers of the nineteenth century, saw language as a mechanism for the study of race. In his history of the Archipelago, Crawfurd vacillated between the two approaches to racial theory: environmental materialism or racial essentialism. These two approaches were bound-up in his interest in political economy. The two approaches represent the two pre-Darwinist hypotheses behind race in the nineteenth century. Environmental materialism saw the environment as the instigator of racial difference, whilst racial essentialism saw races as separate creations. As separate creations, they were primordially fixed. Crawfurd argued (with sincerity) multiple positions on race. As an example of environmental materialism, Crawfurd played with the idea that food influenced the forming of the racial character.

No country has produced a great or civilized race, but a country which by its fertility is capable of yielding a supply of farinaceous grain of the first quality. Man seems never to have made progress in improvement, when feeding on inferior grains, farinaceous roots, on fruits, or on the pith of trees. The existence of fine spices ... has no tendency in the state of society in which the Indian islanders are, to promote civilization. Civilization originated in the west, where are situated the countries capable of producing corn. (Crawfurd 1820i: 14-15)

This argument had its origins in Adam Ferguson's idea that grain was the source of civilisation and therefore racial development. There are three ways to interpret Crawfurd's arguments on grain. One, that diet changes biology. Two, that the labour exerted in accumulating food changes the character of people. Finally, grain farming created a surplus supply, which made civilisation possible. In the early nineteenth century, the distinction between the three was not clear. Crawfurd was somewhere between points two and three, which argued that it was the industry around crop production that changed society. Rice production however also allowed surplus supply. Crawfurd and later writers (such as Marx) maintained that rice was too productive and a source of despotism. This meant race was dependant on economy, however, ideas on economics were separate from racial stereotypes. Therefore Crawfurd was working with a mix of racial stereotypes and economic reasoning. Throughout his *History of the Indian Archipelago*, Crawfurd connects racial character and political economy. In the following passage, Crawfurd furthered the idea that labour shapes racial character:

Man ... no sooner acquires a little industry and a little property, than he is made a slave on account of them, just as he himself enslaves the docile and labourious animals, while the useless savages of the desert or forest enjoy their freedom. The case of this phenomenon is in a good measure to be sought for in the softness and fruitfulness of the climate, and the consequent facilities living with little exertion, in a word, to the absence of that wholesome discipline by which man, in severer regions, is bred to habits of hardihood, enterprise, and independence, and certainly not in any imagined innate feebleness of frame,

for, on examination, it will be found that the physical constitution of every race is best adapted for the climate it inhabits (Crawfurd 1820ii: 4-5).

The predominant theme in the above passage is that the pattern of labour influences racial change, yet he concluded with an ambiguous comment on environmental determinism. Crawfurd was not convinced with any of these theories, commenting that 'neither climate, nor the habits of the people, seem to have anything to do with it [racial variety]' (Crawfurd 1820 i: 20). In his *History of the Indian Archipelago*, Crawfurd favoured interpreting race through political economy. These passages however also show ambiguity. Thirty years later, when Crawfurd was president of the Ethnological society he advocated a position close to a polygenic position, arguing that there are 'many separate and distinct races of man', which were 'originally created species' (Crawfurd 1861: 355-356). Aspects of his latter polygenic position are visible in Crawfurd's 1820 hesitations around materialist explanations for race. This position is also visible in Crawfurd's questioning the possibility of large-scale migration pre the invention of modern navigation. Therefore, in 1820 Crawfurd used political economy to attempt to understand race, but had reservations. This was a product of his enlightenment education. His experiences in Southeast Asia however, led him to postulate a racial primordialism. He placed emphasis on race as being inherently important, but this emphasis emerged out of a failure of political economy to explain racial diversity.

Crawfurd's focus on political economy and race were bound to his ideas of colonisation. Mary Quilty argues that Crawfurd was an avid imperialist (Quilty 1998: 101-103). Crawfurd's position on colonialism is complex however. In the nineteenth century, John Turnbull Thomson commented that 'Crawfurd, like most covenanted servants of the late East India Company, dilated much on the "intemperance," "avarice," "rapacity," "violence," and "injustice" of Europeans in India, - these Europeans in India being no other than his own countrymen' (Thomson 1865: xiii). Thomson was highly critical of Crawfurd's anti-colonial position. However, this needs qualification. Crawfurd was against colonialism, but not necessarily against empire. Crawfurd saw colonisation as being fraught with problems. His idea of empire however was very different to the model that emerged.

Crawfurd experienced the British Empire and other European empires first hand. In each case, the empires he experienced were in different stages of evolution. Crawfurd's family history is also important in understanding his ideas on colonialism and empire. He was born on the island of Islay in the Inner Hebrides and was raised in the town of Bowmore. Crawfurd was a Scottish highlander. He was "still able to speak and think in Gaelic" (Keith 1917: 17). However, his relationship to the Hebrides was more complex. His father's family heritage was lowland southerner from Ayrshire (Editorial 1868). Crawfurd's highland heritage was from his maternal side, with his mother being a Campbell from Islay. His father (Samuel Crawfurd) moved from the south to the Highlands after he visited Islay and "married Margret Campbell, daughter of James Campbell, of Ballinaby, the proprietor of a small estate which had been for several generations in the family". The Highlands were a colonised society. Samuel Crawfurd was a doctor and moved into an underdeveloped landscape, which under the Laird of Islay, Daniel Campbell, was being rapidly modernised. Therefore John Crawfurd could be called a Creole, in the wider sense of the word. Samuel Crawfurd went to Islay as part of the internal colonisation of the time, practicing as a doctor as well as purchasing land. He was noted by James MacDonald (1811: 67) (who conducted a survey of agricultural improvements for the Board of Agriculture) for "caring on [land] improvements with vigour and success". John Crawfurd grew-up in the remnants of a tribal-feudal society. Nevertheless, he was also a Creole result of colonialism, being raised on the benefits of commercial transformation.

Early in his career, he served in North-West India and Penang. In both locations, the British Empire was in its infancy. In comparison, he also served as the Resident in the Javanese kingdom of Yogyakarta. By the early nineteenth century, the Dutch had been in Java for 100 years. Crawfurd also read widely on the Spanish Empire in America and the Philippines. He saw stark differences in the social outcomes of colonialism in these different places. Many of his criticism of colonialism were directed at the problems brought about by Dutch rule. The essence of his critique of colonialism was the sanctity of indigenous property rights.

Appearing as armed traders, they did not fail to use the power which they had in their hands to possess themselves, on their own terms, of the produce or property of the native states with which they traded (Crawfurd 1820iii: 220)

Crawfurd argued that the nature of trade in the eighteenth century necessitated conquest. This he argued led to the impoverishment of the Asian trade, for ‘in the struggle which ensued, the independence of most of the natives of the archipelago was subverted, and their commerce and industry subjected to the will of monopolists’ (Crawfurd 1820iii: 220). The key problem was mercantilism.

Crawfurd was scathing in his critique of this mercantilist involvement in local politics. In his arguments against mercantilism, Crawfurd developed a sophisticated theory on the evolution of colonialism. His thesis was a materialist study of the inter-relationship between sovereign power, economics and nationalism. Crawfurd (1820iii: 220) argued that “the treaties which” European companies “entered into with these governments had for their object to exclude all rivalry or competition, to obtain the staple products of industry at their own prices, and to possess the exclusive monopoly of the native market for their own imagined advantage”. These mercantilist treaties were commercial in their nature, but the economic and political environment meant that these treaties were also political. These treaties were not negotiated on equal terms, being “violently or surreptitiously obtained” (Crawfurd 1820iii: 220), the result of which, was that native states attempted to “evade the flagrant injustices, as well as absurdity, which an adherence to” these treaties “implied” (Crawfurd 1820iii: 220). But being a political treaty, the European traders “exercised sovereign authority” to defend the “perfidious violation of their rights,” punishing “to the utmost of their power” (Crawfurd 1820iii: 220).

The sin of mercantilism was the linking of sovereignty to economics. This led to ridiculous clauses, which undermined the natural rights of people in Southeast Asia to sell to whoever they chose. Crawfurd recognized the natural independence of Southeast Asian states, by virtue that these people saw themselves as being independent. His claim was that treaties on trading relations, which did not stipulate free trade, effectively removed the independence of native states, giving sovereign

rights to the European companies with whom these Asian states made treaties. As pseudo-states, the companies enforced their rights with military power.

Crawfurd argues that mercantilism led to the territorial occupation of Southeast Asia, and the subjugation of Southeast Asian nations. In pursuing this policy, the mercantilists destroyed the vibrant economy of Southeast Asia. With “the country depopulated and exhausted by wars” the “incentives to industry and production” were “removed” (Crawfurd 1820iii: 221). Independence “spontaneously” created “incentive to industry and production”. But faced with territorial control of wasteland, “the monopolist” responded by “converting the population of each particular country into predial slaves ... to cultivate the most favoured products of their soil, and deliver these exclusively to the monopolist, at such prices as the latter might be pleased to grant” (Crawfurd 1820iii: 221).

Crawfurd saw mercantilism as the ruthless pursuit of profit that creates an empire out of state. This structure resulted in the destruction of the economy and resulted in the creation of an exploitative empire. Crawfurd saw this as a disaster for all parties involved. For the economy to thrive, Crawfurd believed nations needed their independence. Crawfurd saw that trade was needed rather than empire building. He therefore argued that

No control ought to be attempted over the independent government of the neighbourhood, but a friendly and equal correspondence maintained with them. Above all things, the imposition of treaties requiring exclusive privileges, or exemption from duties, ought to be avoided (Crawfurd 1820iii: 270).

Yet, although Crawfurd argued against mercantilist-empire-building, he still believed that trade could not occur in Asia without state power. Like Raffles, Crawfurd advocated island entrepôts that would control colonial officials, urges to expand territory and gain sovereign control over the means of production. Crawfurd’s *History of the Indian Archipelago* preceded the establishment of Singapore by two years. Yet his history outlined the necessity for an entrepôt like Singapore. Raffles’ history of Java, was part of the political campaign to convince the British Government to keep

Java as a British Colony. Crawford's history therefore follows Raffles' history as a campaign of spin that preceded the establishment of Singapore.

Crawford had two problems with mercantilism. One mercantilism destroyed the wealth of the local population and two it ultimately impoverished global trade. In destroying the wealth of the local population, he also argued that it destroyed their social structures and degraded their national character. Therefore, his critique of colonialism linked political economy and race. One of Crawford's key concerns therefore was the impact of colonialism on race. He argued that trade improved racial characters, but it could also degrade racial characters. Crawford maintained, that 'differences of colour and language are the great obstacles to the happiness, improvement, and civilization of mankind'. Therefore, in outlining his vision for his model colony, Crawford was explicit in outlining racial policies. As colonial rulers, he argued 'we have to legislate for Europeans, for Chinese, and for a mixed mass of native inhabitants'. Therefore, 'the law' he argued 'should make no distinction between them' (Crawford 1820 iii: 63). This was not a one-off statement. Crawford kept returning to notions of equality within the colonial framework. He went on to argue that:

No Specific regulation should, therefore, exist for the peculiar protection of any one class... Every class should be permitted to enter freely into contracts with another; and the dark-coloured races should not be looked upon as minors under the guardianship of the state, or their imbecility will be increased and perpetuated. (Crawford 1820 iii: 67)

Although Crawford spoke the language of equality, he also connected race to class and saw inequality as legitimate. Crawford maintained competing ideas at the same time. In the above passage, Crawford outlines a vision of the future colony shaped by a hierarchical racial division of labour. However, he framed his legitimisation of inequality within a framework of equality of classes, in which no class was to be 'looked upon as minors'. Crawford's passages on democracy and equality in the colonies read as contradictions. These contradictions probably reflected his dilemmas. However, we need to put Crawford's ideas in perspective. His arguments on each class being represented went far beyond the franchise in metropolitan Britain.

Suffrage in Britain in the 1820s was limited to male property owners. Crawford was therefore advocating all classes and races having the vote on the far fringes of the British Empire. In 1820, Britain had just concluded 20-year war against French republicanism. Crawford's suggestions were radical in the extreme. Political prudence necessitated a contradictory approach as in the following passage:

To establish, in all respects, a free government on a representative system, will be found, perhaps, impracticable with the motley population, of which such a colony would consist. To a representative body, however, the right of imposing taxes must be left, and, if the representatives are chosen alike from all the classes of inhabitants - if the elective franchise be confined to those who, by long residence, have acquired the right of naturalization, and to persons of considerable estate, no danger from turbulence or anarchy can be apprehended. (Crawford 1820 iii: 269)

Crawford vacillates in this passage. He moves between his desires for total free government to the safer position of colonial oligarchy. The threat of anarchy from a universal franchise was real. This system was not in place anywhere in the world. In the case of a political crisis, real military support for the executive was thousands of miles away in India. In 1820 therefore, Crawford advocated an open franchise only to step back from it. By 1833 however, Crawford was more adamant, arguing:

The conditions on which it appears that British settlement in India might be ... carried into effect ... suppose the existence of a Legislative Council, to which British and Indian subjects of all classes shall be equally admissible, to assist the executive power in framing laws for the good government of India. British free settlers, admitted to such a Council in common with others, could not in reason object to obey, or live under, laws enacted by such a body. (Crawford 1833: 18-19)

From 1823 to 1826, Crawford was governor of Singapore and did little to advance democratic participation in Singapore. Nevertheless, by 1829 Crawford was convinced of the need for democracy. One such reason was the precarious nature of empire on the periphery. Crawford argued that force alone could not hold the empire

together. He also argued that nationality could emerge as a mechanism of resistance to the empire. This was an underlining theme in his *History of the Indian Archipelago*. For example, he dismissed Javanese historiography because of its elite focus. History for Crawfurd was racial history. Racial history focused on the race not the individual. Therefore it was nationalist in direction. For example, Crawfurd argued that the only true examples of Javanese history were a few nationalist narratives of anti Dutch resistance (Crawfurd 1820ii: 27-37). In arguing this, Crawfurd dismissed the majority of Javanese historiography. This dismissal indicates that Crawfurd had an extremely functionalist view of history.

Crawfurd's functionalist emphasis on racial history places ethnological research in a different light. Crawfurd saw managing ethnological differences as imperative for function and stability of government. After the 1857 Sepoy revolt, Crawfurd (1859) argued that the central problem was the multinational British Indian Army. The Indian army united all Indians (hence multinational from Crawfurd's perspective). He argued instead for multiple racial-national armies that could be used against each other. Increasingly, Crawfurd saw that the mixing of nationalities was dangerous to the future of the British Empire. Crawfurd had some inclination of the future battleground of self-determination. Ethnological research for Crawfurd was an integral part of trade, diplomacy and governance. Race had to be managed carefully. He argued that mercantilism led to suffering, servitude, and the rise of nationalist feelings. In comparison, he argued free trade negated the vicissitudes of mercantilism and reduced racial tensions. His arguments on democracy focused on maintaining the integrity of the empire. Crawfurd's intellectual approach is complex. and tied to the necessities of colonial governance.

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