

A Critical Evaluation of the Historiography of Warren Hastings

By ROBERT R. JONES*

IN early February of 1772 Warren Hastings boarded a British ship in Madras bound for Calcutta, where he would soon begin his duties as the newly-appointed Governor of Bengal. Hastings had served the East India Company faithfully and ably for fourteen years in the Indian service, the last two as second on the Council of Madras, where his complete reorganization of the commercial business of the export warehouse had meant a great financial saving for the company. However, despite his fine service, he had not, as one of his best biographers notes, established for himself "any reputation for signal ability or remarkable promise."¹

Hastings was descended from "good and ancient stock" but among his immediate forebears there can be detected no signs of the genius and force of character which allowed him to become one of the great figures in British history.² Warren's mother died a few days after his birth in December, 1732, in the little village of Churchill in Worcestershire, and his father, leaving the boy to be reared by his grandfather, resided in Barbadoes until his death about ten years later. Warren's uncle, Howard Hastings, provided for his schooling at Newington Butts and at Westminster, which then challenged Eton as the finest school in England. Here at Westminster young Hastings' mind was cultivated and enlightened by an education in the classics, and he may have been destined for a life of intellectual endeavor had not death overtaken his uncle when Warren was fifteen years old. His new guardian, a distant relative named Creswicke, had connections with the East India Company and procured for him, apparently not against his wishes, a position in the service of the Company. Near the close of 1749 Hastings left Westminster to be tutored privately in bookkeeping and commercial accounting, and in January of the next year the adventurous seventeen-year-old sailed aboard the East Indiaman *London* for Bengal.³

The years of Hastings' youth, and indeed those down to the

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beginning of his governorship, comprise a turbulent period in Indian history. The Mughul empire, which had been firmly established in India by Akbar in the last decades of the sixteenth century, was on the verge of collapse from within, although few contemporaries were aware of its many weaknesses. Aurangzeb, the last of the competent Mughul rulers, had over-extended the empire by his military conquests and weakened its solidarity with his religious persecutions, and after his death in 1707 no emperor was strong enough to maintain effective control. The Great Mughuls at Delhi were now great only in name. They were unable to defend the empire from the external attacks of the Persians and the Afghans in the north; nor could they contend with the rising Maratha power in the west and the insurrections of the Sikhs in the Central Punjab. As the control from Delhi weakened, the governors of the outlying provinces began more and more to disregard imperial orders and to establish their virtual independence. In Bengal, the stage upon which Hastings was to act out such an important role, the Governor or *Subahdar*, called the *Nawab* of Bengal, governed the province in the name of the emperor, and the *Nawab's* deputies controlled Bihar and Orissa; in reality, the Mughul emperor at Delhi could exert no decisive control over Bengal.

The East India Company, operating under charters from the Crown, had maintained several trading stations in Bengal since the middle of the seventeenth century. In 1717 the Mughul emperor, Farruthsiyar, issued imperial *farmans* which authorized free trade for the Company in Bengal in return for annual payments; these imperial orders granting exemption from the normal inland customs dues were generally recognized by the successive *Nawabs* in Bengal, who allowed both Company trade and the private trade of its servants to be conducted without payment of duties. Although the Company exercised jurisdiction over its servants and carried on a limited number of governmental functions, its significant role in the affairs of India was in the exercise of commercial activities.⁴

Events in the three decades after 1740 would greatly alter the nature of the Company's activities in India. In 1746 the War of the Austrian Succession was extended to India and the East India Company clashed with the rival French Company over the control of South India. As a result of the war and subsequent French adventures under their great leader, Dupleix, the weakness of the Mughul empire became evident to the English, who began to realize that their military superiority and the chaos within the Indian governments would allow them to control, and even to set up, native governments which would be dependent upon them; such

friendly, puppet governments would certainly be profitable to them.

Enlightened by Dupleix's example, such men as Robert Clive, Stringer Lawrence, and Hector Munro established British supremacy over the French in India, and by their victories in such battles as Plassey (1757) and Buxar (1764) established the Company as the real ruler in Bengal. The actual basis for the establishment of Company administration in Bengal came with the grant, during Clive's second governorship, of the *diwani* by the Mughul emperor. The *diwaniship* bestowed upon the Company the delegated power to collect revenue—customs, excises, and especially land revenue—and to administer civil justice. Because it was the dominant military power in Bengal, the Company also gradually took over the administration of criminal justice from the *Nawab's* deputy.⁵

But the first years of British rule were nothing to be proud of. Sir Alfred Lyall described them as "the only period which throws grave and unpardonable discredit on the English government," and Clive was even more descriptive:

I will only say that such a scene of anarchy, confusion, bribery, corruption and extortion was never seen or heard of in any country but Bengal, nor such and so many fortunes acquired in so unjust and rapacious a manner.⁶

The servants of the Company used its new power to gain tremendous wealth through the acceptance of "presents" from Indians, through the special advantages which they enjoyed in the country's internal trade, and through the monopolies which they possessed on lucrative contracts. During his second term as Governor, from 1765 to 1767, Lord Clive took the first steps toward the repression of the abuses mentioned above, but his success was at best only a limited one; and unfortunately the weakness of the two governors who followed him allowed the partial revival of these same practices.⁷

During the years when these developments were taking place, Warren Hastings was diligently performing his duties as a Company servant. After his arrival in Bengal on October 8, 1750, he worked as a clerk in Calcutta for three years, then moved upcountry to one of the Company's factories at Kasimbazar. During the conflict in the late 1750's between Sirja-ud-daula, the *Nawab* of Bengal, and the Company, Warren was captured and taken to Murshidabad, but he had friends among the native authorities and was permitted considerable freedom of action. This position of relative freedom and the trust which the Indians had in him allowed Hastings to act as the medium of important correspondence between the British

authorities, who had been driven to the little village of Fulda below Calcutta, and the *Nawab*. In November, 1756, the twenty-three-year old youth escaped from Murshidabad, and he was soon fighting as a volunteer under Clive. But Clive saw that Hastings' abilities did not lie in the military field, and remembering his former services at Murshidabad, Clive, as *de facto* Governor of Bengal, appointed Hastings to the post of Company representative to the court of the *Nawab* of Bengal in that city. The appointment was effective in August, 1758. After serving ably in this position for over two years, Hastings was elevated in early 1761 to a position on the Governor's Council in Calcutta. He held this post until his resignation in December, 1764, when he sailed for England.

Though little is known of Hastings' four-year stay in England, it is evident that by 1767 he had lost, partly because of his generosity to relatives and partly because of carelessness, the modest fortune he had accumulated in India. When he sought re-employment by the Company, once more it was Clive's influence which acquired for him an important position, this time as second on the Madras Council. Hastings' valuable service on the Council, already referred to above, paved the way for his selection two years later to the post of Governor of Bengal. He received news of his appointment near the end of 1771, and he confidently turned to his new task. It would be no easy one. The Company was in a critical financial plight, and the charges of corruption, oppression, and misgovernment in Bengal grew louder daily. One of Hastings' predecessors as Governor had noted that in order to be effective the new Governor would have to "reclaim men from dissipation, to revive a general spirit of industry, to lead the minds of all from gaudy dreams of sudden-acquired wealth to a patient expectation of growing fortunes".⁸ He would have to re-establish a tottering government, to adapt a commercial company to the exercise of governmental functions, to provide for a starving and oppressed people.⁹

Perhaps no one in the Company's service was as well qualified for the task as Warren Hastings. His years of experience had given him a familiarity with the people of India and with the political intrigue that characterized the native governments. And he was well aware of the effective use to which British military power could be put. Above all, Hastings had held aloof from the corruption of the previous years:

It must be allowed that Warren Hastings had passed with credit and integrity through the most discreditable and corrupt period in the annals of the East India Company. In the midst of a general scramble for money he never stooped to gains that were sordid or

dishonest; and at a time when most of the English were either intoxicated by power or infuriated by misfortune—demoralized by the cruelty and treachery which they saw all round them—Hastings preserved, so far as can be known from contemporary record, a character for equity and moderation.¹⁰

But despite his qualifications, the thirteen years during which Hastings would be Governor and Governor-General of Bengal would be extremely difficult ones:

No subsequent Governor-General has held anything like so long a tenancy of the office; nor has any of his successors had such difficulties to surmount with means so small and responsibilities so great, or to confront, with so little support, such powerful and vexatious opposition in India and England.¹¹

But Warren Hastings overcame these obstacles, and he wrote his name large in the pages of Indian history. No historian worthy of the name would deny this fact. Immediately upon assuming office Hastings carried out important administrative changes—abolishing Clive's Dual System,¹² collecting the revenues through Company servants, establishing a Board of Revenue, transferring the treasury from Murshidabad to Calcutta, and making significant financial savings for the Company. His quinquennial settlement of the land revenues, though open to valid criticisms, did establish a basis upon which improvements could be made in the future. He set up a system of civil courts and established two supreme appeal courts in Calcutta, one for civil and one for criminal cases; in addition, he took steps to correct the worse abuses connected with the private internal trade. These are only the most important of the reforms by which he laid so ably and well "the foundations of the system of civil administration" upon which his successors were to build.¹³

In foreign affairs Hastings' policy was generally a defensive one, in keeping with the Company's wishes. But though defensive, it was an alert policy and its implementation allowed Hastings to establish firmly the Company's position as the primary power in India. He guided the British wisely and capably to a successful completion of three wars—the Rohilla War, the war with the Marathas, and the Mysore War in which the danger of a renewal of French power in India presented itself. With the conclusion of peace after the Mysore War in 1785, he could "leave the Company's possessions as tranquil as he had found them as well as far stronger than before."¹⁴ Warren Hastings's accomplishment in both internal administration and foreign affairs has been concisely summarized by Percival Spear:

His apparent task was the consolidation of the Company's rule in

Bengal, . . . [but] destiny had reserved for him a far greater . . . [achievement]. It was the preservation of the British possessions from deadly danger without and bitter schism within. He found the Company a commercial corporation turned revenue farmer; he left it one of the great powers of the Indian sub-continent.¹⁵

Even James Mill, the first important critic in the vast accumulation of Hastings historiography, paid tribute to Hastings' eminent ability to govern:

He had that great art of a ruler, which consists in attaching to the Governor those who are governed; his administration assuredly was popular, both with his country men and the natives in Bengal.¹⁶

But Hastings' accomplishments were not confined merely to the field of government, politics, and war. He was the first of the British governors, indeed perhaps the only one until the nineteenth century, to study Indian languages and to patronize Indian learning, Indian institutions, and Indian arts and literature.

Hastings with his air of authority, his long tenure of office, his cultural interests, and his understanding of the people, came nearer to the heart of India than any of the pre-Mutiny rulers. His name became a legend, passing into popular folklore, his exploits were celebrated in popular verse. Almost alone of the early rulers, he showed an awareness of cultural as well as political and commercial issues. He sought to understand Indian culture as a basis for sound Indian administration No British ruler before Lawrence was as much in tune with the country he governed and no one was better loved.¹⁷

In spite of the achievements and the general popularity of his administration in Bengal, Hastings has long been the subject of one of the great controversies in the history of British India. The literature of the controversy is concerned only slightly with the success of Hastings' measures in the fields of politics and external affairs, and is concentrated upon his character and the morality of some of his governmental actions. After praising the accomplishments of his administrations, one modern authority on British India has written of Hastings:

. . . his political skill was marred by a certain lack of moral tone and a streak of hardness, more Prussian than English, which grew with the years. His correspondence developed a speciousness and lack of candour which became habitual. If inflexible purpose marked the course of his actions, he also showed at times a cold hostility which could freeze to icy hate. The thin pursed lips which set off the intellectual brow tell their tale of suppressed feelings and smouldering resentments His standards were high in his own estimation, and judged by the level of the times. But they were

neither the standards of the nineteenth-century administrators nor of the best men in English public life of his day Warren Hastings is in any view a complex and puzzling character. The task of interpreting him has been made far more difficult by the controversies which his name and the passions which Bengal excited. Behind this eloquence and prejudice the real man disappeared beneath the mask of *maya*. The achievement of Hastings is an established fact; his character remains something of an enigma.¹⁸

The main center of the controversial storm has raged over whether this is a valid evaluation of Hastings' moral character. The storm clouds gathered even in his lifetime as a powerful opposition severely criticized both his governmental policies and the morality of his administration. This opposition, led by Burke, Fox, Sheridan, and Hastings' bitter enemy, Philip Francis, brought impeachment charges against the former Governor-General after he had resigned his office in January, 1785. The trial began in February, 1788, and dragged on for eight years, ending with Hastings' acquittal on all twenty of the impeachment charges. But the complete reviewing of all the phases of Hastings' administration and the eminent reputation of some of the leaders of the opposition formed a foundation upon which criticism of Hastings would continue to grow in future years.

Adverse criticism of Hastings has centered around his actions in four or five events of his administration. Most criticized perhaps was his part in involving Company troops in a war with the Rohillas; another which has been seized upon by critics to a lesser extent was his role in continuing British participation in the Maratha War. His heavy fining of Chait Singh, the *Raja* of Benares, his treatment of the *Begums* of Oudh, and the execution of Nuncomar after he had accused Hastings' government of corruption are the other events which have been criticized most regularly and most sharply through the years.¹⁹ As interesting as these cases are, they are much too complicated and detailed to discuss as entities in themselves, but salient points about them will be emphasized in the discussion of the controversial literature on Warren Hastings.

It has been noted above that strong criticism of Hastings developed during his lifetime; perhaps one of the first manifestations of this criticism to appear in the historical literature on British India was a small pamphlet entitled *A Short Account of the Resignation of Warren Hastings, Esq.*, by an anonymous author. The pamphlet charged that Hastings had

. . . ruled the Affairs of India by his absolute Will, in violation of all the wise Maxims of Administration established by Experience,

and in Contempt and Defiance of the Legal Controul and Superintendence of his Masters.²⁰

Complaining that Hastings had "deceived mankind" and referring to his government as "despotic", the author called for an examination of the "Character, nay, the Caprices of the Tyrant. . . ." However, despite these strong words, the author offered no specific evidence to support his assertions other than to point out that Hastings' correspondence "sounds well and means nothing."²¹

The next writer to vigorously criticize Hastings was neither anonymous nor so vague in his criticism. In fact, he was one of the most noted thinkers of his day—the famous utilitarian, James Mill. Mill had held official governmental positions in which he was able to gain a considerable knowledge of India, and his six-volume *The History of British India*, first published in 1818, the year of Hastings' death, was the best and most complete history of India that had been written up to that time. The work, though "dry and severe in tone", reflected Mill's strong prejudices, but it was a valuable contribution to British history and it was well received.²² That the volumes were sharply critical of Hastings is not surprising, for Mill's utilitarianism and political radicalism contained no place for Hastings' conservative policies and his attempts to harmonize British rule with Indian tradition. However, in his concluding remarks on the administration of the famous Governor-General, Mill admitted that if all of Britain's highest officials of past years had been subjected to as thorough an examination as Hastings, "few of them would be found, whose character would present a higher claim to indulgence than his." In addition, Mill considered Hastings by far the "most eminent of the chief rulers" of British India "in point of ability."²³

Nevertheless, the general tone of Mill's *History* is very unfavorable to Hastings. Mill is extremely critical of Hastings' financial policies, asserting that he added about 12½ million pounds to the debt of the Company and that at the end of his administration, governmental revenues in India were "not equal to . . . ordinary expenses."²⁴ He charges Hastings with making excessive demands on the *Nawab* of Bengal in violation of treaty arrangements, and he calls Hastings' allegation that the treaty obligations were ambiguous "only a varnish placed upon injustice by fraud."²⁵ Mill accuses the Governor-General of accepting an illegal present of £100,000 sterling from the same *Nawab* at Chunar, and of extorting money from the *Begums* of Oudh by "the torture" of their eunuchs. In his words, "The cruel lessons of Eastern despotism were well

acquired by Englishmen."²⁶ But despite his own failures as a ruler and his despotic measures, Hastings did not, according to Mill, refrain from criticizing others:

A viler display of hypocrisy is not upon record, than the language in which the author of the calamities of the whole Rohilla nation, of those of Cheyte Sing, and of the Begums of Oude, affected to bewail the cruelties which he said, were practiced upon the Nabobs of Carnatic and Oude by Lord Macartney and Mr. Bristow.²⁷

Only twenty-two years after the publication of Mill's *History*, another sharp attack on Hastings appeared in print, its author an eminent historian, a noted political figure, and a friend of Mill. The author was Thomas Babington Macaulay, the work his "Essay on Warren Hastings".²⁸ Like Mill, Macaulay had gained a familiarity with India through the governmental positions he had held, but unlike Mill his duties and his desire for wealth had carried him to India for a period of five years. Here he naturally came into close contact with Indians and things Indian. But as J. H. Vincent has noted, "Macaulay lacked thorough sympathy with human nature, on its spiritual and affectional side," and he neither understood nor appreciated the worth of Indian traditions and Indian institutions. Macaulay "was benevolent, but unsympathetic."²⁹

Both Macaulay's essay on Hastings and his earlier one on Clive have become classics of British literature. For this reason the Hastings essay has exerted considerably more influence on subsequent writers than has Mill's voluminous *The History of British India*. The essay has simply been read more—by numerous schoolboys in the study of English literature, and by men who respected Macaulay's reputation as an historian and appreciated his ability to make history come alive in the pages of his works. But despite its greatness as a literary masterpiece, the Hastings essay has a number of serious defects when considered as a historical work. In the first place, it is highly partial in tone; Sir Leslie Stephen, one of the editors of *The Dictionary of National Biography*, has observed of Macaulay:

It is obvious that he does not rise above the party view of politics, and explains all opposition to whig principles by the folly and knavery of their opponents . . . [His] desire for effect [gives him a] singular audacity in outrunning tangible evidence . . . His misrepresentations are a result of his "castle building", [and] he is too much in love with the picturesque to lower his colouring to the reality.³⁰

Macaulay was careless in the use of his source material, uncritical in his choice of evidence, inaccurate in detail, and prone to "exag-

generation and rhetorical overstatement."³¹ Consequently many of his generalizations and conclusions are open to criticism.

Throughout his essay Macaulay does not hesitate to ridicule and to disparage. After admitting that little is known of Hastings' school days, he goes on to say:

But, we think, we may safely venture to guess that, whenever Hastings wished to play any trick more than usually naughty, he hired [Elijah] Impey with a tart or a ball to act as fag in the worst part of the prank.³²

But Macaulay saved most of his vindictive language for more important subjects such as the Rohilla war. He asserts that Hastings "let loose" the "horrors of Indian war . . . on the fair valleys and cities of Rohilcund":

The whole country was in a blaze. More than a hundred thousand people fled from their homes to pestilential jungles, preferring famine, and fever, and the haunts of tigers, to the tyranny of him, to whom an English and a Christian government had, for shameful lucre, sold their substance, and their blood, and the honor of their wives and daughters . . . Mr. Hastings had only to put down by main force the brave struggles of innocent men fighting for their liberty . . . and he had then only to fold his arms and look on, while their villages were burned, their children butchered, and their women violated.³³

Macaulay was equally as critical of Hastings' conduct in the case of Nuncomar. He charged that the Governor-General, wanting to rid himself of a dangerous foe, conspired with Chief Justice Elijah Impey, who accommodatingly legalized the murder of the unfortunate Indian. Macaulay notes that although the "ostensible prosecutor was a native, . . . it was then, and still is, the opinion of everybody, idiots and biographers excepted, that Hastings was the real mover in the business."³⁴ He describes with exaggerated vividness the execution and the mad rush of hundreds of the Indian spectators to the Hoogly, where they plunged into the holy waters, "as if to purify themselves from the guilt of having looked on such a crime."³⁵

In 1780, Hastings' government at Calcutta was in desperate financial condition and it became necessary for him to look for additional means of income. But "a ruler of great talents and few scruples" could easily turn the "general chaos of laws and customs" which prevailed in India to advantage. Thus Macaulay notes that

[in] every controversy, accordingly, he [Hastings] resorted to the plea which suited his immediate purpose, without troubling himself in the least about consistency; and thus he scarcely ever failed to

find what, to persons of short memories and scanty information, seemed to be a justification for what he wanted to do.³⁶

In this case Hastings "chose to wring money out of Cheyte Sing," *Raja* of Benares. He "was determined to plunder Cheyte Sing, and, for that end, to fasten a quarrel on him."³⁷ Hastings ruthlessly carried out his plans, which resulted in military intervention, the expulsion of the *Raja*, and the annexation of Benares by the Company. But the government was still in need of money, and the source to which he turned this time was the *Begums* of Oudh. In Macaulay's words, Hastings plotted with the *Nawab* of Bengal "to rob a third party; and the third party whom they determined to rob was the parent of one of the robbers":

It was necessary to find some pretext for a confiscation inconsistent, not merely with plighted faith, not merely with the ordinary rules of humanity and justice, but also with that great law of filial piety which, even in the wildest tribes of savages, even in those more degraded communities which wither under the influence of a corrupt half-civilization, retains a certain authority over the human mind. A pretext was the last thing that Hastings was likely to want.³⁸

Hastings found his pretext in the alleged participation of the *Begums* in civil disturbances in Oudh. "In order to extort money from the Princesses" Hastings had their "two ancient" eunuchs "seized, imprisoned, ironed, [and] starved almost to death. . . . What horrors their dungeon . . . [at Lucknow] witnessed can only be guessed."³⁹ These were the means which Hastings successfully employed to build up the Company coffers.

The harsh characterization of Hastings painted by the violent Parliamentary outbursts of the well-intentioned but often misguided Burke, and recorded for posterity by the reform-minded Macaulay and Mill, has exerted a strong influence on later historians. Many writers of the latter half of the nineteenth century, such as Thornton and Marshman of the "older school of Indian historians" are adversely critical of various features of Hastings' governorship.⁴⁰ Another member of this school, Henry Beveridge, author of the voluminous *Comprehensive History of India* (1862), is hardly less critical of Hastings in nearly every respect than Macaulay was in his essay. Describing Hastings' military policy as "tortuous, vacillating, and short-sighted", Beveridge observes a "laxity of principle" and an "inordinate vanity" in "Mr. Hastings", pictures him as "vain, disingenuous, and equivocating," and states bluntly that the Governor-General preferred "the crooked to the straight path."⁴¹ Over twenty years after the appearance of the *Comprehensive His-*

tory, Bveridge published *Maharaja Nuncomar* (1886), an elaborate history supporting Macaulay's version of Hastings' conduct in the Nuncomar case. More recently Edward Thompson and G. T. Garrett, authors of *The Rise and Fullfillment of British Rule in India* (Allahabad, 1958),⁴² have asserted that Hastings was indifferent to the sufferings produced by war, that his colleagues detested him, and that he was habitually guilty of deceit and evasiveness. Thompson and Garrett are critical of Hastings' policies and measures in regard to Oudh and the *Raja* of Benares, and they too accept Macaulay's charge that Hastings was responsible for the death of Nuncomar. Even more recently, in a 1958 edition of *The Oxford History of India*, Percival Spear asserts that the cases of the *Begums* of Oudh and the *Raja* of Benares indicate that Hastings' "velvet glove was wearing thin;" they "reveal a coarsening of Hastings' fiber" and a "fading [of] scruples." Describing Hastings as "aloof and self-centered," Spear observes that it "could almost be said that he never said a foolish thing or ever did a generous one."⁴³

There is, of course, another side in the historical interpretation of Warren Hastings. One of the first defenses of Hastings was written by a Reverend Mr. Logan, whose pamphlet, "A Review of the Principal Charges against Warren Hastings, Esquire, late Governor General of Bengal" (1789), asserted that the impeachment charges of "high crimes and misdemeanors" against Hasting originated "from misrepresentation and falsehood. . . ." Logan, an experienced writer on foreign politics for the *English Review*, minced no words in criticizing the Parliamentary action against Hastings:

An impeachment of error in judgement, with regard to the quantum of a fine . . . characterizes a tribunal inquisition rather than a Court of Parliament The other charges are so insignificant in themselves, or founded on such gross misrepresentations, that they would not affect an obscure individual, much less a public character; they are merely added to swell the catalogue of accusations as if the boldness of calumny would insure its success, and a multiplicity of charges were an accumulation of crimes.⁴⁴

Aware of "the torrent of abuse that had been poured out upon Mr. Hastings, for years . . .", and noting that Parliament had made no attempts to redress the grievances allegedly committed by Hastings, Logan charged that

the world has every reason to conclude that the impeachment of Mr. Hastings . . . is carried on from motives of personal animosity, not from regard to public justice, to the great scandal and dis-

honour of the Commons of Great Britain in Parliament assembled⁴⁵

Significantly, the publisher of Logan's pamphlet, John Stockdale, was tried for libel by the Court of King's Bench Westminster; only the author's untimely death saved him from the same ordeal.

The first full-length biography of Hastings, and still the most complete one, is the *Memoirs of the Life of the Right Hon. Warren Hastings, First Governor-General of Bengal* (1841) by the Rev. G. R. Gleig. In the three-volume work Gleig attempted to answer the attacks which had been made on Hastings by Burke, Mill, and others:

. . . the moralist . . . [should] be very cautious how he condemns proceedings which arise, not out of any selfish anxiety on the Governor's part to increase his own wealth, or his own renown, but from a conscientious zeal to uphold the honour and advance the prosperity of the commonwealth from which his authority is derived

To sum up all, Mr. Hastings has been accused of cruelty and oppression. The very persons whom he was represented to have most deeply injured, were the foremost to declare their attachment to his person and government. Mr. Hastings has been accused of involving British India in an expensive war, for the mere purpose of gratifying his own inordinate ambition. The whole energies of his mind were devoted either to the maintenance of peace, or to remedy the blunders of others, which rendered war inevitable.⁴⁶

Gleig's defense would have been far more effective if he had not over-stated his case and if he had not "made the egregious mistake of unadulterated adulation of his hero" ⁴⁷ Certainly the author was affected by what Macaulay called the "*Furor Biographicus*"; indeed, it was the uncritical tone of statements like that below which prompted Macaulay's "Essay":

He [Hastings] had no faults, even of temper, for that was calm and serene, and thoroughly disciplined; and to sum up all, his religion was at once, sincere, and unobtrusive. . . . I have not been able . . . to discover in the character of Warren Hastings a single trait which I can venture to denounce as a fault, for his weaknesses . . . were all of such a nature as to . . . enlist more and more our affections on the side of him whose greatness they shaded, only so as they brought his amiable and gentle feelings prominently into view.⁴⁸

Despite the strong influence of the writings of Mill and Macaulay in the middle of the nineteenth century, Hastings had defenders even in these years. For in 1862 Beveridge indicated his amazement that "a writer so well informed as Colonel Wilks"

could be "betrayed into [the] profanity" of referring to Hastings as "the *Savior* of India;" even worse in Beveridge's eyes was the attempt by "another writer" to "improve upon "Wilks' reference "by speaking of him [Hastings] as having come in the fulness of time."⁴⁹ Then in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century there appeared a rash of biographies of Hastings and a number of important works on specific areas of Hastings' governorship which have contributed immensely to the understanding of that "enigmatic" ruler of British India. The biographies by Trotter (1878), Malleon (1894), and Lawson (1895),⁵⁰ are very favorable to Hastings, and most of the other studies support his policies and actions in specific cases. Sir James F. Stephen's *The Story of Nuncomar and Impeachment of Sir Elijah Impey* (2 vols., 1885) concludes that the Indian received the fairest trial possible and argues convincingly that Hastings was not guilty of bringing about his "judicial murder."⁵¹ Sir John Strachey in his *Hastings and the Rohilla War* (1892) challenges Macaulay's conclusions, and points out that Hastings "did not sell the Rohillas to the Nabob of Oude merely to enrich the Company, and that he did not tolerate nor permit undue violence against the Rohillas by the Nabob . . ."⁵² Two other books which come to the defense of Hastings are G. H. Hastings' *A Vindication of Warren Hastings* (1900), and Sir George Forrest's *Administration of Warren Hastings, 1772-1785* (1892). The majority of the works noted in this paragraph are more than merely defenses of Hastings; they are scholarly, judicious works which have formed the basis for a restoration of Hastings' reputation.

Another work of this period and this type is Sir Alfred Lyall's *Warren Hastings* (1889). Lyall had a distinguished career himself in India and he was thoroughly familiar with the Indian scene; though "very favourable"⁵³ to Hastings, he looked carefully at both sides of every problem encountered, and he is adversely critical of Hastings when he feels it warranted. Lyall calls the Rohilla war "wrong in principle, for they had not provoked us," and he feels that Hastings, "yet at the beginning of his governorship," blundered into a position in which "he had become responsible for the rapacity and inhumanity of successful Asiatic warfare, at a distance which placed the Vizier far beyond effective control from Calcutta."⁵⁴ Lyall accepts Stephen's account of the Nuncomar case, but he charges that the Governor-General's conduct in his dealings with the *Raja* of Benares was "impolitic and imprudent" as well as severe and precipitant. He also notes that

Hastings "very imprudently sanctioned" further participation with the Maratha power at Poona, and in the case of the *Begums* of Oudh, he maintains that the Governor-General's approval of "measures of coercion against women and eunuchs was conduct unworthy and indefensible."⁵⁵ But the author also recognizes Hastings' abilities and his good qualities, and consequently his book is one of the best balanced biographies of Hastings yet written.

Since 1900 the pendulum of Hastings' reputation has swung over to a position which in general is very favorable to the famous Governor-General. Such writers as S. C. Grier (*The Letters of Warren Hastings to his Wife*, 1905), H. H. Dodwell (ed., *Warren Hastings's Letters to Sir F. Macpherson*, 1927), Miss M. E. Monckton-Jones (*Warren Hastings in Bengal 1772-74*, 1918), Miss Sophie Weitzman (*Warren Hastings and Philip Francis*),⁵⁶ C. C. Davies (ed., *The Benares Diary of Warren Hastings*, 1945, and *Warren Hastings and Oudh*, 1939), and Sir George Forrest⁵⁷ have added essential details to the basic framework provided by Strachey, Stephen, Forrest, and Lyall. It is significant that in a vast majority of cases these noted scholars have not been adversely critical of Hastings' policies or action.⁵⁸

Particularly well disposed towards Hastings are the authors of two of the more recent biographies, A. Mervyn Davies (*Strange Destiny, A Biography of Warren Hastings*, 1935) and Penderel Moon (*Warren Hastings and British India*, 1949). Although they present little new information, Moon and Davies write from a somewhat larger perspective than previous writers. For example, in speaking of the old controversies about which writers have argued through the years, Moon makes the following comments:

Some discussion of these old matters of controversy—the Rohilla war, the trial of Nandakumar, the treatment of Chait Singh of Benares, the spoliation of the Begums of Oudh—cannot be avoided. Whatever their interest may be to the political moralist, historically their significance is small; and they are perhaps mainly valuable to-day simply as illustrations of the ways in which power tends to operate in India. They must not be thought of just as episodes from a vanished age, but as characteristic also of the India of our own times.⁵⁹

Moon contends that Hastings half-heartedly consented to the use of force against the Rohillas because of the danger that they might aid the aggressive and formidable Marathas. He regards the fate of Nuncomar as a result of "the subterranean working of . . .

[Hastings'] friends. . .," in which the Governor-General was not involved, and although he calls Hastings' behavior towards Chait Singh "tyrannical," he maintains that Hastings had grounds for taking action against the disloyal *raja*.⁶⁰ Moon also excuses Hastings' conduct in the case of the Begums of Oudh with the explanation that his actions were justified because the *Begums* had actively supported the outbreak of rebellion in Benares in 1780.⁶¹

Although admitting that Hastings' later career was sometimes marked by "wilfulness and arrogance," Moon strongly challenges the old, traditional view of Hastings' as presented by Macaulay and he stresses Hastings' essentially "good nature":

. . . but these were incidents in Hastings' career which, if taken by themselves, might reasonably suggest that he was hard, ruthless and unprincipled. Macaulay fastened on these incidents, wrote them up in gorgeous prose, and depicted him as a statesman indifferent to the laws of morality and to the rights and feelings of others . . .

The truth is that Macaulay, owing to his Whig bias and pre-occupation with Hastings' crimes, formed a one-sided view of his character . . ., but his finer and rarer qualities of sympathy and moderation, which ran like a golden thread right through his career—. . . these finer qualities Macaulay quite failed to appreciate.⁶²

Davies' *Strange Destiny*, though adversely critical of Hastings in some instances, is in general agreement with Moon. Like Moon, Davies feels that Hastings' character and career have been "distorted" and thrown "out of focus" by the "excessive amount of attention" that has been devoted to those actions "which caused his impeachment;" and like Moon, Davies has attempted "to place him [Hastings] in a better perspective and to present a well rounded view of his life . . ." in order to correct this distortion.⁶³

After examining this mass of conflicting material on Warren Hastings, the reader may wonder whether he is any closer to the real truth. At first glance it seems almost impossible to draw any valid conclusions, as both sides have presented their cases ably and convincingly. However, there are a few comments that can be made about the nature of the arguments presented by each side that may be beneficial to a better understanding of Warren Hastings.

As noted previously, all of the writers who are harshly critical of Hastings without exception recognize his ability and his achievement. Although some modern writers have contributed to the argument of this group, the main outline for their interpretation was laid by writers of the Victorian Age. It is not surprising, then,

that their main attack was based almost exclusively on moral grounds. Such a basis of attack is at best a precarious thing, especially for the historian, for many of his readers will feel that morals are essentially relative in nature. Herein lies one of the weaknesses of what we might call the "anti-Hastings school". To prove their case they have relied too greatly upon particular incidents in Hastings' life, and have neglected the broader view. Their initial attack was obviously made under the influence of a strongly partisan viewpoint, and this fact has served to weaken their case in the eyes of nonpartisan historians.

Most of the works of this school which have been noted above, as well as those of the "pro-Hastings school," have been very sparsely footnoted, but they seem to be based, for the most part, on official papers, on letters, and on other primary source materials as well as secondary works. Neither school appears to have a claim to more extensive research or better writings, and after 1830 both schools have been characterized by the judicious, scholarly works which they have produced.⁶⁴ More specific studies involving Hastings' administration have been completed by the "pro-Hastings school," and that group has almost completely monopolized the field of biography, leaving the opposite school to express its views in an occasional special study or in more general histories.

The historians of the "pro-Hastings school" have been much more productive in the twentieth century and in the latter part of the nineteenth than have their opponents. Their special studies around the turn of the century and their more recent biographies have been very effective in countering the arguments of the opposing school. In reply to the moral judgments of Hastings' critics, those historians have stressed the confused state of political authority and the difficulties of governing in India; they admit that Hastings may have abused his power and made other errors, but they maintain that his mistakes were made in the line of duty and not for selfish reasons. Though such a view does not excuse his shortcomings, it does mitigate them. The biographies of the past three decades, with their emphasis on a broader view of Hastings' career and character and with their de-emphasis of the importance of the traditional controversial features of Hastings' career, have been particularly effective in unveiling the enigma of Warren Hastings and in restoring his much maligned reputation. And rightly so.

The swing of the pendulum to a more favorable view of Warren Hastings might best be summarized in the following quote

from one of the most noted, and most judicious experts of British India during the administration of Hastings, P. E. Roberts:

Yet perhaps we may say that the impeachment had its uses, for while it ended in the acquittal of the accused, it brought about the condemnation of the system under which he had been called upon to govern; and even if it revealed on his part some acts of impolitic and unjust severity and some instances of lax financial control, it also made known, as perhaps nothing else could have done, his splendid administrative abilities, his cool and dauntless courage, his marvelous equanimity under cruel provocation, and, finally, his untiring efforts, at last crowned with success, to wrest victory from defeat, and, in a time of world-wide disaster elsewhere, to leave the British inheritance in the East in extent and resources not less than he found it.⁶⁵

With this favorable, but balanced view of Hastings we can conclude our study, with the credit-debit sheet balanced securely, at least for the present, in favor of Warren Hastings, Esquire, Governor-General of Bengal.⁶⁶

1. Sir Alfred Lyall, *Warren Hastings* (New York, 1902), 27, 29; Penderel Moon, *Warren Hastings and British India* (New York, 1949), 68.
2. Lyall, *Hastings*, 1.
3. *Ibid.*, 1-3; Moon, *Hastings*, 7-11; A. Mervyn Davies, *Strange Destiny, A Biography of Warren Hastings* (New York, 1935), 7-12.
4. Moon, *Hastings*, 12-30; Lyall, *Hastings*, 4-5.
5. Moon, *Hastings*, 20-35; Percival Spear, Part III, "India in the British Period", in the *Oxford History of India* by Vincent A. Smith (Oxford, 1958), 455-479.
6. Both quotes from Spear, *Oxford History*, 472.
7. *Ibid.*, 472-479.
8. Verelst, quoted in Moon, *Hastings*, 72.
9. *Ibid.*, 27-63, 72, 81-82. During the years 1770-72 a severe drought and famine had devastated parts of upper Bengal, where it was said that one-third to one-half of the population had died of starvation.
10. Lyall, *Hastings*, 19.
11. *Ibid.*, 29-30.
12. Under Clive's administration the power of collecting revenue and administering civil justice and that of commanding troops and dispensing criminal justice were theoretically divided between the Company and the *Nawab* respectively. In practice, the Company controlled both phases but allowed both to be administered through Indian agencies. Under Hastings the Company assumed direct control of and responsibility for the whole of Civil administration.
13. Spear, *Oxford History*, 514, 502-514. During Hastings' administration, in 1773, the Regulating Act was passed. The act created the position of Governor-General of Fort William in Bengal, first held by Hastings, and it established a Supreme Court of Justice in Calcutta. The governor-general was authorized to supervise the other two presidencies of Bombay and Madras, thus transforming Calcutta into the effective capital of British India. As Spear comments, however, "The enhanced dignity of the head of the government . . . was not marked by any increase in authority . . . [as the] government was still the Governor-General and Council and not yet the Governor-General-in-Council."
14. *Ibid.*, 513, 507-513. Although he proved an effective and wise wartime leader, Hastings has been severely criticized for his part in involving the Company in the first two wars mentioned above.
15. *Ibid.*, 502.
16. James Mill, *The History of British India* (London, 1826), IV, 455.
17. Spear, *Oxford History*, 513-514.
18. Spear, *Oxford History*, 514.
19. P. E. Roberts, *History of British India Under the Company and the Crown* (Oxford University Press, 1958), 216-219, *passim*.

The Rohillas were migrant Afghantribesmen who had overrun a fertile tract of land which lay to the northwest of Oudh between the Ganges and the Kumaon hills. The place was called Rohilkhand after the influx of Afghans after 1740.

The Marathas were a war like people from western India with their seat of power at Poona. Maratha power declined after the battle of Panipat in 1761, but they were still extremely aggressive during Hastings' administration.

Chait Singh was the *Raja* of Benares, who by the treaty of 1775 owed an annual tribute to the Company; a violent controversy developed when he resisted Hastings' attempts to collect a special tribute for war expenses in 1778.

The *Begums* of Oudh were the Indian princesses of Oudh. They resisted the efforts of the *Nawab* of Oudh, who was a member of the same family and who was supported by Hastings, to use their wealth for his subsidy payments to the Company.

Nuncomar was a political opportunist, but also a Hindu *Brahmin*. He became involved in a power struggle between Hastings and an opposition group within his Council in 1775. Nuncomar supported the latter and obligingly accused Hastings' administration of corrupt practices; however, in the midst of the controversy, he was executed on a charge of forgery which developed out of civil litigation going back to 1772.

20. *A Short Account of The Resignation of Warren Hastings, Esq., Governor General of Bengal, In the Year MDCCLXXV. With Remarks*, (London, 1781), 1.
21. *Ibid.*, 1, 26.
22. Sir Leslie Stephen, "James Mill", in *the Dictionary of National Biography*, edited by Sir Leslie Stephen and Sir Sidney Lee (22 vols., London, 1917-1950), XII, 385, 386.
23. Mill, *British India*, IV, 454; Stephen, "James Mill", *DNB*, XII, 385-6.
24. Mill, *British India*, IV, 444-442-4.
25. *Ibid.*, 371.
26. *Ibid.*, 395, 399.
27. *Ibid.*, 451.
28. The work originally appeared not as a book but as an essay in the *Edinburgh Review* in October, 1841. Two years later Macaulay published a complete copyrighted edition of the Clive and Hastings essays.
29. J. H. Vincent, ed., *Warren Hastings*, by Lord Macaulay (New York, 1886), 9; Sir Leslie Stephen, "Thomas Babington Macaulay", in *The Dictionary of National Biography*, edited by Sir Leslie Stephen and Sir Sidney Lee (22 vols., London, 1917-1950), XIII, 47.
30. Stephen, "Macaulay", *DNB*, XIII, 417; C. R. Gaston, ed., *Macaulay's Essays on Clive and Hasting* (Boston, 1910), xiii-xviii. Macaulay was a liberal Whig, and since Hastings' impeachment had been sponsored by the Whigs, "Macaulay had to believe that he was guilty of great crimes . . ." (Moon, *Hastings*, 329.)
31. W. H. Hudson, ed., *Macaulay's Essay on Warren Hastings* (Boston, 1910), xli-xlii.
32. *Ibid.*, 7. Impey was later Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Justice in Calcutta during Hastings' administration.
33. *Ibid.*, 36-37.
34. *Ibid.*, 50.
35. *Ibid.*, 54.
36. *Ibid.*, 85-86.
37. *Ibid.*, 86, 88.
38. *Ibid.*, 94-96.
39. *Ibid.*, 97-98.
40. P. S. Roberts, *British India*, 171, 216.
41. Henry Beveridge, *A Comprehensive History of India, Civil, Military and Social, from the First Landing of the English, to the Suppression of the Sepoy Revolt; Including an Outline of the Early History of Hindoostan* (London, 1862), II, 651-654.
42. Originally published in the 1930's.
43. Spear, *Oxford History*, 513-514, 516; Davies, *Strange Destiny*, 441-442.
44. *The Whole Proceedings on the Trial of an Information Exhibited Ex Officio' By the King's Attorney General, Against John Stockdale; for a Libel on the House of Commons, Tried in the Court of King's-Bench Westminster, on Wednesday, the Ninth of December 1789, Before the Right Hon. Lloyd Lord Kenyon, Chief Justice of England*. Taken in Short Hand by Joseph Gurney (London, 1790), 3-5, vi-vii.
45. *Ibid.*, 7, viii.
46. Rev. G. R. Gleig, *Memoirs of the Life of the Right Hon. Warren Hastings, First Governor-General of Bengal* (London, 1841), I, x-xi.
47. Davies, *Strange Destiny*, 441.
48. Gleig, *Memoirs of Hastings*, III, 531-32.
49. Beveridge, *Comprehensive History*, II, 650.
50. Entitled *Warren Hastings, Life of Warren Hastings*, and *Private Life of Warren Hastings*, respectively; all published in London.
51. Gaston, *Maucalays Essays*, xxiii.
52. *Ibid.*, xxiii.
53. Roberts, *British India*, 187; Davies, *Strange Destiny*, 441.
54. Lyall, *Hastings*, 48-9.
55. *Ibid.*, 95, 127, 137, 69.
56. No date available for Miss Weitzman's book.
57. Forrest is the editor of *Selections from the State Papers in the Foreign Dept. of the Govt. of India, 1772-85* (3 vols., 1890), and *Selections from the State Papers of the Governors-General: Warren Hastings* (2 vols., 1910).

58. Davies, *Strange Destiny*, 441; Moon, *Hastings*, 355-356.
59. Moon, *Hastings*, 5-6.
60. *Ibid.*, 6.
61. *Ibid.*, 117-33, 150-67, 254-83.
62. *Ibid.*, 329-331.
63. Davies, *Strange Destiny*, vii.
64. With the exception of several extremely favorable and uncritical biographies, such as G. R. Gleig's *Memoirs of the Life of the Right Hon. Warren Hastings, First Governor-General of Bengal* (1841), and Malleon's *Life of Warren Hastings* (1894).
65. Roberts, *British India*, 218-219.
66. Regrettably, a number of important biographies and studies of specific areas of Hastings' administration were not available to the writer of this paper. If possible, the valuable studies by Sir John Strachey, Sir James F. Stephen, H. Beveridge, Miss M. E. Monckton Jones, Keith Feiling, P. E. Roberts (especially an article entitled "Warren Hastings and His Accusers" in the *Journal of Indian History*, vol. III, part I, March, 1924), and others should be included in any bibliography of Warren Hastings.