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**No. 279**

**Anti-Imperialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century:  
A Contemporary Critique of the British Invasion of Java in 1811**

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## ABSTRACT

Postcolonial historians in Southeast Asia have sometimes described the colonial encounters of the past in dialectical terms, lending the impression that Western colonial intervention in Asia received widespread support back in Europe. This paper looks at one of the most vocal critiques of the British invasion of Java in 1811 that came from William Cobbett, a radical Tory writer and pamphleteer, whose criticism of the Java invasion was complex and nuanced. It shows how the British invasion of Java at the time was not so widely supported as assumed by some, but it also shows how anti-war activism has a long history that dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Reading Cobbett's critique of the Java invasion today is instructive for scholars of international relations as parallels can be found in his criticism of the converging interests of both capital and militarism, and his warnings of the long-term consequences of such colonial adventurism and imperial overreach.

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## I. Refusing to Cheer: Recognising the Existence of Anti-Colonial Narratives in Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

You never need an argument against the use of violence, you need an argument for it.

**Noam Chomsky**

Many of us today are familiar with the arguments against military aggression and foreign intervention that lead to policies, which can be described as “neo-colonial” in both praxis and ambition. Over the past two decades, scholars and activists alike have criticised the policies of certain Western powers—notably the United States of America and its allies—when dealing with the problem of rogue states and global terrorist networks. America’s intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq have been condemned as instances of aggression against weak though errant regimes that, despite their bellicose rhetoric, did not really pose an existential threat to the U.S. or any other developed country with strong defensive military capabilities. (Khalidi, 2004.<sup>1</sup>) Scholars have also taken issue with the actions of international bodies such as the IMF and the UN, whose global campaigns they argue did little to alleviate the economic and social problems that may exist in the developing world, but whose liberalising agendas have served the interests of global capital and powerful states instead. (Furedi, 1994;<sup>2</sup> Broad, 1990.<sup>3</sup>)

This paper looks at one such instance of foreign intervention that took place in Southeast Asia, long before the advent of the “war on terror” and when military intervention and subsequent socio-economic structural adjustments made to native societies were justified in the name of progress, enlightenment and free trade. However, our analysis is made more complicated by the fact that the official historical narratives of many postcolonial nation-states have the tendency to present the past in decidedly monochromatic and dialectical terms. For many countries that have experienced colonialism in the past, and whose nationalist discourses are replete with accounts of valorous deeds performed by the nation’s founding fathers who stood up against the behemoth of Western imperialism, the latter can only be cast as negative and threatening. Official history textbooks tell the tale of the fight between good and evil, light against darkness: The colonised can only be framed in the role of the victim—though ultimately triumphant—while the coloniser is cast in the light of the fearful, cruel, rapacious aggressor. Seldom do we find attempts to problematize and interrogate this somewhat two-dimensional and linear telling of the past; and rarer still do we come across instances of collaboration, inter-dependency and auto-critique that would add nuance and complexity to the staid story.

To radically redirect the focus of the historical juggernaut would be beyond the capabilities of this paper. Rather, its aim is to provide one particular counterfactual that may give reason to question some of our settled assumptions about the appeal of Empire among Europeans at the time – that was

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance: Rashid Khalidi, *Ressurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America’s Perilous Path in the Middle East*, Beacon Press, Boston, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Furedi, *The New Ideology of Imperialism: Renewing the Moral Imperative*, Pluto Press, London, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Robin Broad, *Unequal Alliance: The World Bank, the IMF and the Philippines*, UCLA, University of California Press, 1990.

somewhat melodramatically (though artistically) captured in films such as Tony Richardson's *Charge of the Light Brigade* (1968), "*black bottles*" and all.

The historical context is provided by the British invasion of Java in 1811, which led to Britain's occupation of the island and its dependencies for six years. Much has been written about the subject by now, and many of the critical academic writings on it have centred on the personalities involved in the attack and occupation such as Lord Minto and Stamford Raffles. Wurtzburg (1949) and Hannigan's (2012) work on Raffles' role in the invasion of Java, for instance, have been highly critical of the British period of rule and presents a sobering—if unflattering—account of its principal actors and agents including Raffles himself.<sup>4</sup> Other recent scholarship on the Java occupation have also looked at the many subaltern voices and marginalised local narratives that were lost at the time, such as Peter Carey's excellent *The British in Java 1811-1816: A Javanese Account* (1992).<sup>5</sup>

The aim of this paper is to draw out another marginalised and forgotten voice, but one that was heard in England. The invasion of Java took place at a time when British society, already weary of a decade-long conflict with Napoleon and his allies, was seeking some form of lasting peace in their lifetime. The conquest was hailed by the leaders of the country as an event of great importance to the political and economic wellbeing of the country and a cause for celebration. Yet despite the celebratory tone that was struck by the hawks of war, there remained sceptical voices in England who did not accept this latest argument for more violence being meted out to unknown native populations on the other side of the earth, ostensibly in their name. One of these voices was that of William Cobbett: Tory, radical, patriot, Parliamentarian and pacifist – who flatly refused to cheer as the war party sung their praises to Britain's latest exploit in the East Indies.

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<sup>4</sup> Hannigan's account of the British invasion of Java sets out to demolish one particular myth, namely, that the period of British rule in Java was somehow politically, economically and ethnically better than that of the Dutch. His main focus is the conduct and reputation of Stamford Raffles, who comes out the worse after the author elaborates upon the mismanagement of the colony during his rule. Hannigan notes that during the British period of rule over Java the Javanese themselves had suffered as a result of their policies: The Javanese royal families had been cowed into submission; local Javanese producers suffered from foreign competition; foreign money-lenders and tax-collectors had been used to squeeze the Javanese peasantry – thus worsening ethnic relations between the Javanese and Chinese in particular; and that Java had fallen into a state of economic dependency and backwardness. Hannigan points out that 'when the Dutch returned to Surabaya in 1816 they found the people in the surrounding countryside in a state of grinding poverty, dressed in rags, and owing a lifetime of future harvests to Chinese moneylenders'. (p. 312) See: Tim Hannigan, *Raffles and the British Invasion of Java*, Monsoon Books, Singapore. 2012; C. E. Wurtzburg, *Raffles and the Massacre at Palembang*, Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, No. 22, part 1, 1949. Pp. 38-52.

<sup>5</sup> Re: Peter Carey, *The British in Java 1811-1816: A Javanese Account*, Oxford University Press, Oxford. 1992.

## II. The Cudgel has Come Back Like a Boomerang: William Cobbett as Radical Critic of British Adventurism and Colonial-Capitalism<sup>6</sup>

The merchant and man of affairs was a small and harmless by-product of their system; they had no notion that it would grow large enough to swallow all the rest. The point about Cobbett is that he alone really knew that there, and not in kings or republics, Jacobins or Anti-Jacobins, lay the peril and oppression of the times to come.<sup>7</sup>

**G. K. Chesterton**  
***William Cobbett, 1925***

William Cobbett (1763-1835), who during his career earned himself a number of sobriquets such as “the Hampshire Hog” and “the Porcupine”, was a Tory-turned-radical writer and one of the most well-known pamphleteers of his time.<sup>8</sup> Fervently nationalist, a lover of the English countryside and its rural economy, and openly contemptuous of big business and politicians who aid its progress, his *Weekly Political Register* was among the most widely circulated papers in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; and unlike the more highbrow papers that were read among the political elite of London, Cobbett’s *Political Register* was accessible to ordinary readers from the poorer classes as well.

In the *Political Register*, Cobbett constantly raised objections to what he regarded as irregularities and instances of injustice meted out to ordinary Englishmen, notably to those of the rural agricultural labouring class and the lower ranks of the armed forces. Cobbett’s writing on military matters was not without some knowledge of how the British army functioned: his short career in the armed forces began in 1783 and ended in 1791, when he was discharged with the rank of Sergeant Major in the 54<sup>th</sup> West Norfolk Regiment. It was during his stint in the army that he gained first-hand knowledge of the abuses that were taking place in the armed forces, a topic that he returned to time and again in his subsequent writings on the subject.

In 1792, he travelled to France (then in the grip of the Jacobin Revolution) and then proceeded on to the United States of America. In 1800, he returned to England as the Napoleonic wars engulfed Europe, and he launched the *Political Register* (calling it *Cobbett’s Weekly Political Register*) in 1801. By then, Cobbett had seen the effects of the French Revolution up close, and was also acquainted with the political culture of America. Though strongly anti-Jacobin in his beliefs, Cobbett was also critical of the many abuses that he saw in the British government, and the manner in which institutions like the East India Company had come under the patronage and control of powerful politicians and businessmen.<sup>9</sup> His criticism of the government’s handling of the national debt, of commercial monopolies, of abuses in the army, led him to court on many occasions; and in 1811—the year of the

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<sup>6</sup> The phrase ‘the cudgel has come back like a boomerang’ comes from G. K. Chesterton’s work on William Cobbett. Re: G. K. Chesterton, *William Cobbett*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1925. p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Chesterton, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Heath, [William Cobbett](#): The English Peasant. T. Fisher Unwin. 1893.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Cobbett’s lengthy expose of the secret goings-on between the company directors of the East India Company in: *To the Thinking People of England, On the Affairs of the East India Company – Letter I.*, in: *Cobbett’s Weekly Political Register*, Vol. XXIII No. 5. London, Saturday, January 30, 1813. (pp. 129-147) and *To the Thinking People of England, On the Affairs of the East India Company – Letter II.*, in: *Cobbett’s Weekly Political Register*, Vol. XXIII No. 6. London, Saturday, February 6, 1813. (pp. 161-189)

invasion of Java—he was in Newgate prison after losing a libel case. Despite his incarceration (1810-1812), Cobbett was still able to write and run the *Weekly Political Register* and was far from browbeaten.<sup>10</sup>

After another trip to America (1817-1819), Cobbett continued his work as a popular critic and defender of the interests of the agricultural community and the rural economy. His views grew increasingly radical in tenor, though he remained a patriot to the end. Despite his condemnation of British adventurism (as in his critique of the invasion of Java), he staunchly opposed the revolutionary ideas of Napoleonic France as he professed no sympathy for Republicanism. After a brief stint in politics as Member of Parliament for Oldham, he continued writing articles denouncing corruption in business and denounced the Poor Law of 1834. He had engaged in numerous controversies, campaigns and libel cases throughout his career; and had attacked a succession of prominent statesmen including Pitt, Peel, Dundas and Castlereagh. His bitter critique of the invasion of Java, which was published in 1811, was in keeping with his political and ethical beliefs. As an activist who opposed the rise of monopolies and who railed against the collusion between politicians and big businesses, he regarded the invasion as an adventure by the East India Company that was sanctioned by the British government, but which afforded no advantages whatsoever to ordinary Englishmen.

Chesterton (1925) noted that Cobbett himself was bitter and angry for much of his life, for he was among the few who could see that the workings of the free market during the Industrial Revolution would engulf all of humanity and would not be free of repercussions. Actions that took place in one part of the world would eventually return to haunt those at home<sup>11</sup> — an observation similar to that of Chanda's (2007), whose account of globalisation connects the dots between the lives of privateers, adventurers and statesmen of different nations.<sup>12</sup> It is this broad vision that encompassed the interconnected nature of global capitalism, and understood the ramifications of the invasion of Java, that we see in Cobbett's critique of the military expedition of 1811.

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<sup>10</sup> At the time the *Weekly Political Register* was still being sold at the price of 1 shilling. As the paper grew more popular, and became more influential, the government introduced a tax of 4 dimes on each copy. Undeterred by this attempt to control the press, Cobbett persisted in his writings, but the *Weekly Political Register* took on the form of a pamphlet that was sold at 2d instead. This was when papers such as the *Political Register* were referred to as 'two-penny trash', but that hardly dampened Cobbett's spirit or diminished the popularity of the paper: At its peak the *Political Register* sold 40,000 copies per edition.

<sup>11</sup> Chesterton, pp. 72-73.

<sup>12</sup> Re: Nayan Chanda, *Bound Together: How Traders, Preachers, Adventurers and Warriors Shaped Globalisation*, Caravan, Michigan, 2007.

### III. "What Advantage will *This Country* Derive from This Conquest?"—William Cobbett's Critique of the Java invasion

The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilisation lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked.

**Karl Marx**  
***The British Raj, in the Daily Tribune, 1853***

The year 1811 was an eventful one by any standard. In England, the Prince of Wales was named the Prince Regent while the mind of King George III was temporarily on holiday due to a bout of dementia. America's President Madison had prohibited trade with Great Britain; while up in the north of England, Ned Ludd began a movement that called upon working men to destroy the machines that were slowly making human labour redundant. Venezuela, Paraguay and El Salvador broke free from Spain, then under the heel of Napoleon; Muhammad Ali marched into the Arabian Peninsula; Wellington triumphed at Salamanca; *Sense and Sensibility* was published; William Makepeace Thackeray was born; and on the 4<sup>th</sup> of August, the Dutch garrison based at Batavia, Java, retreated before the advance of British troops led by Sir Samuel Auchmuty and Rollo Gillespie. Britain's occupation of the Dutch East Indies had begun.

William Cobbett was then confined to his cell in Newgate prison, the result of a libel suit that went against him in court. Having access to the hundred or so newspapers and pamphlets that were in circulation in London then, he was abreast of the latest developments in the continent and further abroad; though at the time he was probably occupied with the vexing challenge of keeping his own paper afloat thanks to the taxes that had been imposed on newspapers and pamphlets across the country. *The Times* (est. 1788) and *The Courier* (est. 1801) were the newspapers of choice then, as *The Scotsman* (est. 1817), *The Manchester Guardian* (est. 1821), *The Northern Star* (est. 1838) and *The Daily Telegraph* (est. 1855) had yet to arrive on the scene. Cobbett's own *Weekly Political Register* was competing against the more mainstream and conservative papers of the day, while the main rival to his paper was *The Morning Chronicle* (est. 1789), whose writers were known to harbour ideas as radical as his own. (William Hazlitt would later join the *Chronicle* in 1813.)

Owing to the distance between London and Java, and the troublesome war that Napoleon was waging across Europe at the time, news of the capture of Java reached England only by December of that year. Cobbett wasted no time before he responded to the latest dispatches being sent from Batavia (Jakarta), and his first stinging attack came on 21 December 1811. In the *Register*, Cobbett lets loose not a single shot, but more a broadside of arguments.



**III. (a) “Thus the conquest was completed in due form... , without any exception to the rights of any of the native sovereigns of the country”: Cobbett’s defence of the rights of the Javanese**

Though an Englishman down to his breeches, and a staunch defender of the rights of the ordinary working man in England, Cobbett’s critique highlighted the plain fact that the invasion of Java was not simply a case of capturing enemy territory beyond Europe (for the Napoleonic wars could, as Fregosi (1989) has argued, be regarded as the first World War) despite the necessities of conflict and the requirements of the service; nor was it a case of walking to an empty *terra nullius* where no nation was present. Java was, by then, populated by an estimated 30 million Javanese, who presumably harboured some attachment to their homeland and who may have regarded the British as just another set of invaders as foreign and as unwelcomed as the Dutch.

In his critique of the invasion, Cobbett raises this point in response to the declaration by Lord Minto (Gilbert Eliot, Earl of Minto, Commander in Chief of the East India forces and Governor-General of India) to the effect that Java was no longer under the rule of its sovereign Napoleon (then master of the Dutch) and had come under the rule of Britain and King George III. Lord Minto had declared that “the *French Government* is hereby declared to be dissolved, and the *British authority to be fully and finally established in the island of Java*”. This pronouncement was made for “the good people of Java, in order that they may strictly conform to the duties of *allegiance and fidelity to their Sovereign George the Third*, and they are hereby enjoined and commanded, *under the most severe penalties*, to abstain from holding correspondence with, or affording aid or any assistance to the members of the late French Government or its adherents”.<sup>13</sup> (*Emphasis in the original*)

Cobbett wryly notes that this declaration signalled that “the conquest was completed in due form, and assumed all characters of permanent sway over the whole nation, *without any exception to the rights of any of the native sovereigns of the country*”. (*Emphasis mine.*) Yet Java was, as Cobbett insisted, a land that was not only rich and populous, but also governed by native rulers who had, in the past, held dominion over much of the island. He lists “one *Emperor*, several *Kings*, and many princes of inferior note” who were, and remain, the rightful rulers of Java and the 30 million Javanese who lived there.<sup>14</sup>

Cobbett’s argument in defence of native rights was, however, somewhat thin on details and he failed to name the “Emperor” of Java. There were, in fact, several kingdoms of note in Java at the time, with Banten and Cirebon in the West, Surakarta and Jogjakarta in the centre and several other courts still active on the islands of Madura and Bali to the East of Java. However, none of these could seriously be said to have had power over all of Java, though in all likelihood Cobbett was referring to the residual power of the ancient kingdom of Mataram—which had by then been split between the two central Javanese courts of Surakarta and Jogjakarta. Here it has to be noted that British scholarship on Java and the East Indies was poor in 1811. The most substantial work on Sumatra had been done by William Marsden, and it is interesting to note that Marsden’s *History of Sumatra* (1783) was reissued that same year (1811)—with a better, more detailed, map—to coincide with the Java

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<sup>13</sup> Cobbett, 21 December 1811, p. 769

<sup>14</sup> Cobbett, 21 December 1811, p. 770.

expedition. The following year, John Stockdale's (1812) work on Java was also released.<sup>15</sup> In was only during the British occupation of Java (1811-1816) that men like Stamford Raffles and John Crawfurd would begin to compile a vast columbarium of information about the island and its dependencies.

Notwithstanding Cobbett's economy with the facts and his failure to name the name of the "Emperor of Java", it is important to note that he did raise the question of the rights of the natives of Java themselves; and did pose the question of whether the British crown possessed the moral right to usurp power from the Dutch, who were themselves guilty of usurping power from the Javanese. The point that Cobbett was making here was that the invasion of Java was not simply an extension of the war against Napoleon and his Dutch allies beyond Europe, but that Britain had, in fact and praxis, assumed sovereignty over a foreign land and had denied the natives of Java and their rulers, their right to govern themselves.

Cobbett probably realised that the plight of the Javanese was the last thing on the minds of the British government and the Board of Directors of the East India Company then. What did concern the government, however, was the state of affairs in Europe and whether Britain would be able to contain the spread of France. Another major concern was the deteriorating state of relations between Britain and the United States—the Anglo-American War was looming over the horizon—and how America might interpret the intentions and outcome of Britain's latest Eastern adventure. His next argument pressed exactly on this point.

### **III. (b) "What should induce the President of America to be alarmed at the progress of French ambition, and to feel no alarm at all at the progress of English ambition?"—Playing the American card**

Cobbett's play was a complex one indeed, and he turned to the next card up his sleeve when he noted that "we have now stepped into the shoes of the Dutch, or rather, those of their sovereign, the Emperor Napoleon; and, indeed, the proclamation of Lord Minto, above quoted, clearly shows, that we mean to whole (sic) the country by the same tenure. That proclamation takes the absolute sovereignty from the hands of Napoleon and puts it into those of George the Third, who has certainly been the greatest conqueror, as well as the greatest warrior, who has sat on the English throne". In simple terms, this was nothing less than a claim that King George III was a greater warmonger than Emperor Napoleon— the "beast of Europe".

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<sup>15</sup> See: John Joseph Stockdale, *Sketches, Civil and Military, of the Island of Java and its immediate Dependencies, comprising interesting details of Batavia and authentic particulars of the celebrated Poison-Tree*. Printed for the author at 41 Pall Mall. London, 1812. The second edition of Stockdale's work was published in 1812, right after the British invasion of Java and the Dutch East Indies. It is interesting to note that Marsden's *History of Sumatra* (1783) was also republished in 1811, as a result of renewed interest in the East Indies. Stockdale's work and Marsden's provided vital information about the East Indies to the British public who were not acquainted with the developments in Southeast Asia then. John Stockdale (1770-1847) was not a traveller or explorer, but a publisher who was notorious during his time. He was accused of publishing pornographic works, and was accused of blackmail by the Duke of Wellington. He was also involved in a number of legal cases against reporters during his career, including a serious case of defamation against the Parliamentary Hansard.

Cobbett pointed out that the Americans across the Atlantic were not likely to share Britain's enthusiasm for collecting Asian colonies. He remarked, "Is it not perfectly ridiculous to hear our writers reproaching the American President for not making our cause his own; for not declaring himself on our side; at the very moment, when these same writers are boasting of our having swept three quarters of the world clean of the French? They say that England has staked her existence upon the event of this contest, and they tell America, that if we fall, she must fall too. They are, here, downright alarmists; but what must she think of their alarms, when the next packet brings her accounts of England having, at one single dash, conquered more subjects than Napoleon has conquered altogether; and when she hears us not only express no doubts as to the propriety of such conquests, but hears us boast of it as a glorious achievement?"<sup>16</sup>

It is not difficult to see how and why William Cobbett was accused of sedition so many times in the course of his career; though at the moment, things could not have gotten any worse for him as he was already languishing in Newgate prison. In the article, his critique of the Java invasion amounted to nothing less than the bold claim that Britain had become a bigger threat to the freedom and independence of other nations in the world than France was a threat to the kingdoms of Europe. Inviting his readers to adopt a radically different point of view, he solicited his readers to place themselves in the shoes of the President of the United States, and bluntly asked: "I beg, therefore, to ask any man in his senses, what should induce the President of America to be alarmed at the progress of French ambition, and to feel no alarm at all at the progress of English ambition?", noting that "this new conquest of ours, will not, I presume, tend to alter his opinions upon that subject; for, why should we stop at Java? Why should Peru and Mexico not be as necessary to us as the kingdoms in Asia?" Cobbett rounds up his argument with his conclusion that "I cannot help thinking, that, as far as this new conquest of ours have any effect at all upon the minds of the American government and people, the effect will be that of giving them a strong disinclination than before existed of throwing any part of their weight into our scale in the present contest."<sup>17</sup>

Cobbett's choice of playing the American card was not an instance of him pandering to the Americans: he remained a patriotic Englishman who was concerned, first and foremost, with the interests of his own country. Cobbett was aware of the shift that was taking place in American public opinion, something that was reflected in the American press that year.<sup>18</sup> In earlier issues of his paper, he had elaborated upon the dispute between Britain and the United States, and argued that the introduction of the Non-Importation Act in America (that forbade the import of goods from Britain to the

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<sup>16</sup> Cobbett, 21 December 1811, p. 775.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 776.

<sup>18</sup> By 1811 the American press was already beginning to feature articles that were sympathetic to Napoleon's cause. The Boston-based paper *The Repertory*, for instance, featured the entire speech by Napoleon where Napoleon insisted that France had made appeals to Britain to end the conflict between them, and that France had no choice but to impose a blockade on Britain and to prevent any commercial exchange between that country and other nations. In the same speech Napoleon had also warned that American ships would not be allowed to trade in the continent if they had any commercial dealings with Britain. (See: *Latest from France: Retaliation*, in *The Repertory*, Boston, 11 May 1811.) Other American papers had shown support for the new trade restrictions that the United States had placed on British goods, such as *The National Intelligencer* (11 May 1811), and earlier the same paper had reported that President Madison had approved the appropriations made by Congress for the re-fitting and rearmament of the US navy and army, in preparation for war. (See: *An Act making appropriations for the support of the Military Establishment of the United States*, in: *The National Intelligencer*, 12 February 1811.)

United States) could only be seen as a *hostile* act, and warned of further American hostilities to come.<sup>19</sup> But as Chesterton (1925) had noted, Cobbett's view of America was as complex as he was: he admired American industry and politics, and was cognisant of the fact that should America turn against Britain at that time then Britain's own security would be jeopardised.<sup>20</sup> His love for England and his desire to protect the interests of his fellow Englishmen, would be the next argument that he used in his critique of the Java expedition.

### **III. (c) But still I ask, what advantage the conquest will produce to the people of this kingdom; to the people who perform the labour and pay the taxes of the country?—Cobbett's criticism of the cost of the Java invasion**

Cobbett could have hardly been called a friend of big business. In his *Political Register*, he continuously took pot-shots at the government and its links to the major corporations of the time, and much of his venom was reserved for the East India Company in particular.<sup>21</sup> That the invasion of Java involved the use of both the British army and navy as well as the forces of the East India Company was something that irked him, and in his critique of the adventure, he directed his disapproval towards those in government and business "who wish to get fortunes without labour or study".<sup>22</sup>

Cobbett's argument here was an economic one, where he argued that the invasion of Java would only benefit a small group of political and business elites, but would add to the economic hardship of ordinary Britons in the long run: "What advantage will *this* country, what advantage will the *people of England, Scotland and Ireland*, derive from this conquest? That it will benefit those who possess *patronage* and those who crave for its largesses (sic) I know very well; that it opens a vast field for those who wish to get fortunes without labour or study; that it will be an out-let for hundreds and thousands of persons who for diverse reasons require a voyage to the antipodes; that it will disburden many and many an individual who is loaded with that species of poor rates which the parish knows nothing of; that it will tend to make elbow-room upon the sinecure and pension lists; that it will do all this I will readily allow; for Java with its 30,000,000 of people and all its Emperors and Kings cannot be taken proper care of without a great number of persons of this country any more than they were by the Dutch or the French rulers... Here will be an abundance of *lawyers* and *tax-gatherers* wanted, and, will any man say, that we are, as to numbers, at least, deficient in either; and with regard to the latter, can any man have the face to say, that he supposes, that we fall short, in point of experience

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<sup>19</sup> Re: William Cobbett, *On the Dispute with the American States*, in: Cobbett's Weekly Political Register, Vol. XX No. 9. London, Saturday, August 31, 1811. Pp. 257-272.

<sup>20</sup> Chesterton noted that 'It is important to note that his (Cobbett's) motive was much more patriotism than conservatism. It is sometimes said that Cobbett began in pure conservatism; men talk of him as a Tory from the start; but even from the start the ease was more complex than that. His old father the farmer, if he was a Tory, was a Tory with ideas of his own, for he defended the American rebels; and Cobbett had first gone to America bearing a letter to the great Thomas Jefferson. He did not defend England because England was monarchical and he was a Royalist, or because England was aristocratic and he was a snob, or because England was the home of Toryism and he was a Tory. He defended England because England was attacked and he was an Englishman; and his real rage was reserved for other Englishmen who attacked her, or seemed to him not sufficiently to defend her.' (p. 20)

<sup>21</sup> See: William Cobbett, *To the Thinking People of England, On the Affairs of the East India Company – Letter I.* and *To the Thinking People of England, On the Affairs of the East India Company – Letter II.* , in: *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, Vol. XXIII No. 6. London, Saturday, January 30, 1813. (pp. 129-147); February 6, 1813. (pp. 161-189)

<sup>22</sup> Cobbett, 21 December 1811. p. 776

and ability, of any nation to be found on the globe, whether we speak of taxes to be raised on land or water? – To impart, to “the *good people of Java*” as Lord Minto calls them, a portion of what we enjoy in the above-named descriptions of persons the nation might, and doubtless, would, be very willing; but still I ask, what *advantage* the conquest will produce to the people of this kingdom; to the people who perform the labour and pay the taxes of the country? – Will it cause less labour; or, which is more to the point, will it cause *less taxes to be paid* by the present payers of taxes; for all centers there at last? That it will *not*, I am, for my part, fully convinced; and indeed, I am pretty confident, that I shall be able to show to my readers, when the proper time comes, that it will have caused an *augmentation* of the taxes. I never yet saw one of our conquests which did not produce such an effect, in which respect our conquests are of a nature precisely the opposite of the conquests of our enemy.”<sup>23</sup> (*Emphasis in the original*)

Cobbett’s view was that Britain’s penchant for collecting colonies was never accompanied by a sound policy of making those colonies work to serve the interests of Britain itself. Here he contrasted the conquests of Britain to those of France, and argued that in the case of Napoleon’s continental empire, the subject nations that fell before the advance of France were compelled to provide troops, munitions and finance to strengthen Napoleon’s position further. Conversely, Cobbett regarded the invasion of Java as a costly enterprise in both economic and human terms, for he felt that Java could not be maintained without a large presence of British troops, and that the Javanese would never, and could never, be expected to serve Britain’s military needs in the future.

This was fundamentally an argument against imperial over-reach, and against stretching the military assets of Britain too far across the globe. Logical though the argument may seem, Cobbett did, however, commit one error when he suggested that the invasion of Java was carried out by European troops who had been sent there from India, for contemporary records show that the invasion force consisted of not only British troops but also a number of native troops from the Indian sub-continent who were in the service of the British army and the East India Company. The mixed composition of the invasion force was remarked upon by the Malaccan writer Munshi Abdullah Abdul Kadir in his work *Hikayat Munshi Abdullah* (1840), where he noted that many of the soldiers were *sepoys* from India who were Punjabis, Pathans, etc.<sup>24</sup> Hannigan (2012) notes that one of the units that took part in the Java invasion was the Light Infantry Battalion of the Bengal Presidency Army, that had been raised in 1810 for the campaign, and its troops were drawn from Rajasthan and Northern India.<sup>25</sup>

Notwithstanding this factual error—which was likely due to the slow arrival of news from Java and the absence of precise figures relating to the troops and the units involved—Cobbett’s concern can be gleaned through the pages: He was worried that Britain was expanding its imperial domain too far and too fast, and that in the process of doing so, it was not only presenting itself as a belligerent power equal to France, but also compromising its own defence at home. He remarked on this when he wrote:

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, pp. 776-777.

<sup>24</sup> Munshi Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, *Hikayat Munshi Abdullah* (1840), Malay Literature Series 4. Malay Publishing House Limited. Singapore. 1947.

<sup>25</sup> Hannigan, p. 313.

“What has not been resorted to augment and keep up the military force in this kingdom? Now, it will, I suppose, be admitted, that these measures have all been *necessary to the safety of the country*; I mean, to the *defence of the country against the French*, for, as to any *other* danger; as to any *other* purpose for keeping up this force, it has never, at any rate, been openly avowed. Well, then, if all these means of raising men, means so distressing to the people, so burdensome to the parishes and so ruinous to many individuals, have been necessary for the defence of the country against the French, who are just on the other side of the Channel, must not that defence be rendered less secure, must not our danger be augmented by sending 15 or 20 thousand troops, and keeping them up, in the newly conquered Empire? Shall I be told that the troops required for the defence of the empire of Java will go from our Indian Empire? My answer is, they cannot be spared thence; or that, if they can, we have been making great waste of money and of lives in keeping up so large a force in our Indian Empire, and that, too, at a time, when our superfluous force might have been employed in Spain, or Portugal, or at Walcheren.”<sup>26</sup> (*Emphasis in the original*)

Far from adding to the power and defensive capabilities of Britain, Cobbett regarded the acquisition of Java as yet another burden to the country’s defence as well as its finances, for “from such conquests no military aid is to be expected; but, on the contrary, they demand a part of our own military means to secure us the possession of them. Nothing is to be drawn from them in the way of taxes; for all the proceeds of those are to be swallowed up by the persons deputed to rule over the conquered; and, if we want any proof of this fact, it is found in the experience of our colonies, not one of which ever yet sent a shilling to the Exchequer.”<sup>27</sup>

Cobbett’s gripe was that the Java expedition had done little in terms of securing the safety of Britain, but it proved to be extremely profitable to a handful of English businessmen, politicians and adventurers—an argument that would later be proven to be true by historians who have uncovered the extent of the wealth accumulated by the leaders of the expedition themselves.<sup>28</sup> Men like Raffles, John Crawford and Alexander Hare had tried their luck at the great Javanese gamble, and some had succeeded.<sup>29</sup> But Cobbett’s critique was in defence of the ordinary Englishmen—peasants, labourers and soldiers alike—who gained not a penny from the enterprise.

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<sup>26</sup> Cobbett, 21 December 1811. p. 779.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 781.

<sup>28</sup> Hannigan (2012), for instance, notes that by the time that Stamford Raffles had been asked to leave Java and return to England, he had pocketed for himself an impressive fortune: ‘The luggage loaded onto (Raffles’ ship) the *Ganges* amounted to some twenty tons of looted Javanese manuscripts, Hindu statuary, *gamelan* sets and other treasures and trinkets. The supercargo included Raffles’ doctor Thomas Sevestre, a shadowy Englishman called Graham who had managed to accrue a private fortune of 60,000 pounds in Batavia during the cash-strapped interregnum, and who clearly realized the good times were over, a pair of Malay clerks, a young Javanese man from a good family, and a child slave from Papua.’ (p. 330)

<sup>29</sup> Alexander Hare – whom Hannigan describes as ‘an adventurer in the very worst sense’ – was one of those who attempted to make his name and fortune in the East Indies while Britain held sway over Java. His project to establish a private fiefdom for himself in Southern Kalimantan (near Banjarmasin) ultimately led to failure, but in some respects it anticipated the maneuverings of a later adventurer who would succeed: James Brooke, who would found his own kingdom in Sarawak and assume the title of *Rajah*. (Hannigan, pp. 294-297)

#### IV. The Patriotic Pacifist: Why William Cobbett Remains Relevant Today

Therefore, I am inclined to think, that, if the conquest of the Empire of Java answers no other purpose, it will not be likely to fail in answering that of rendering the great conflict here even more desperate, more expensive, more bloody, and of longer duration.<sup>30</sup>

**William Cobbett**  
***The Invasion of Java,***  
**in *The Weekly Political Register*, 21 December 1811**

Living in the post-Vietnam War era, we have grown used to criticism of war and foreign intervention which may range from the radical to the cheesy—the latter exemplified by the somewhat vacuous sentimentalism of pop icons like Bruce Springsteen, whose song ‘War’ misses the point entirely.<sup>31</sup> Springsteen decried that war is “absolutely good for nothing”, though the likes of Cobbett would argue that wars and occupations are actually very useful indeed when it comes to expanding imperial power, extending colonial hegemony and enriching monopolies and militarised commercial interests. Pop stars today may bemoan the fact that wars “shatter young men’s dreams”, but Cobbett understood that they fattened the coffers of the East India Company and its Directors. After the military interventions in both Afghanistan and Iraq, and the failure of the occupying powers to pacify those societies and introduce some semblance of legitimate local rule that would usher a return to political-economic normality, William Cobbett’s criticism of the invasion, occupation and colonial government of Java seems all the more relevant to the realities of our time.

Chesterton summed up the character of William Cobbett thus: “he was a demagogue in the literal sense; that is, he was a demagogue in the dignified sense. He was a mob-leader; but he was not merely a man mob-led.”<sup>32</sup> That he was not bothered about winning the approval of men like Pitt or Dundas (that profound pair of statesmen) can evidently be read off his pages. But he was concerned about the condition of the ordinary working man of England, and was worried that Britain’s adventurism abroad could have ill-effects for his well-being back home.

Forever concerned about the unity of the United Kingdom and worried that Britain might one day tear itself apart should it fail to institute genuine socio-economic reforms in favour of the people, Cobbett’s critique of the Java expedition was in keeping with the broad themes that animated his other writings. By 1811, with the prospect of war with America becoming more real by the day, he repeatedly wrote about the need for political reform and the enfranchisement of the ordinary Englishman.<sup>33</sup> Although he was a man with military experience who was prepared to defend his country if need be, Cobbett was certainly not a sabre-rattling warmonger. His argument against the invasion of Java was a complex one that consisted of a string of arguments linked to one another and mutually supportive: Namely,

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 783.

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/brucepringsteen/war.html>

<sup>32</sup> Chesterton, p. 52.

<sup>33</sup> In January 1811 Cobbett wrote in one of his columns: ‘It is high time for us to consider how *this land*, how *these islands*, are to be defended. And, does any man think that they are to be defended by a *divided people*? If he does he must have shut his eyes to the cause of the fall of every nation on the continent; and to expect to see an united people without reform in Parliament, is, in my view of things, something worse than madness’. (*Emphasis in the original*) Re: William Cobbett, *Summary of Politics: The Regency*, in: Cobbett’s Weekly Political Register, Vol. XIX No. 5. London, Wednesday, January 16, 1811. p. 110.

that (i) it was a denial of the sovereign rights and independence of the Javanese themselves; (ii) it would encourage Holland to support France even more, out of spite against Britain for having robbed her of her colony; (iii) it would portray Britain as an ambitious power more dangerous than France; (iv) which in turn might turn the tide of American opinion against Britain and in favour of France instead; (v) and that in the final economic analysis it would not serve the military-defensive needs of Britain but merely add a huge burden on its already strained budget and over-extended army.

Though certainly in the minority then—Cobbett noted that even the publication *The Morning Chronicle* was supportive of the invasion of Java despite its radical credentials—Cobbett's tract is worth reading today, for it highlights several factors that may have been passed over by historians who have written about the invasion of Java and the East Indies:

Firstly, it reminds us that during the time of the invasion of Java, British society was itself in a state of flux, and that there were many alternative currents of political thought circulating about the nation. Cobbett's radical Toryism is a case in point, and the stance that was taken by the *Weekly Political Register* demonstrates that the British media was certainly not *wholly* in favour of British adventurism abroad.

Secondly, the broad brush that has sometimes been used by scholars when recounting the history of Western imperialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century often passes over the many singular exceptions to the norm. It would be wrong to suggest that the invasion of Java was met with enthusiasm by all sections of British society at the time, for that was clearly not the case. As Cobbett was at pains to demonstrate, such imperial adventurism overseas also incurred a human and economic cost back home, be it in the form of more conscription of poor working-class men into the armed forces, or rising cost and higher taxes. Coming as it did at a time when ordinary working men were rising up against the combined power of big businesses and industrialisation, the acquisition of another colony so far away from the shores of England did little to lessen the burden of the working poor.

Thirdly, it reminds contemporary historians today—particularly those busied with the task of writing subaltern histories of the oppressed and colonised—that the dichotomy between the colonising power and the colonised people is never a simple one. Works such as Peter Carey's (1992) on the resistance by the Javanese against British intervention are of great worth and constitute important literature for historians of Southeast Asia; but such works—exemplary as they are—can also be *supplemented* further by a reading of the writings by men like William Cobbett, for they provide us with the other half of the incomplete story of Empire. Western colonialism in Java and other parts of Asia was never a simple case of one nation dominating another, for there are plentiful examples that point to moments of collusion and collaboration among the Javanese elite, some of whom aided and abetted Holland's (and later England's) colonisation of their own land.<sup>34</sup> And at the same time it could not be said that the entire population of England relished the prospect of gaining more imperial power,

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<sup>34</sup> A good example of such contemporary critical historical writing, that examines the extent of native collaboration in colonial rule, is Kua Kia Soong's *Patriots and Pretenders: The Malayan Peoples' Independence Struggle*, 2011.



for as Cobbett's writings show, there were also voices in England that spoke up against such imperial aggrandisement.

Fourthly, Cobbett's critique of colonial-capitalism and imperial adventurism remains as relevant to us today as it was during his time. Scholars of international relations and geo-politics might be able to see curious parallels between the political ambition of Britain then, and the major powers of today. Cobbett rightfully noted that by acquiring more territory beyond Europe in order to contain the threat of Napoleonic France, the British government was in effect using the Napoleonic War as a justification for imperial outreach. Similarly America's interventions in parts of the world deemed 'unstable' or 'rogue'—according to calculations and criteria set by America itself—has elevated it to the pole position of being the world's only hegemon. In the same way that Cobbett was worried about the international perception of Britain—notably the perception held by the Americans back then who may not have been so enthusiastic about Britain's growing power—the United States today is viewed askance by other powers such as Russia and China, who have not been too keen to join the Washington-led crusade against terror. And as for Cobbett's condemnation of the get-rich-quick attitude of the East India Company and its functionaries who lined their pockets during their brief overlordship over Java, we can look at the many contemporary media exposés of the profits made by arms companies, private security firms, mercenary units and companies who have likewise filled their bank accounts during the Iraqi adventure. The East India Company's land reform schemes failed to create a thriving economy in Java, in the same way that the institutional reform measures introduced by Paul Bremer in Iraq did not create an inclusive, representative democracy in Iraq—and had instead opened the way for the rise of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki whose divisive policies helped to create a pool of discontent that has contributed to the rise of radical groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISIS) today. If we were to substitute 'Iraq' for 'Java' and 'America' for 'Britain', Cobbett's dire warnings about the dangers of colonial ambition and imperial over-reach strike one as eerily prescient.

William Cobbett himself never set foot in Java—his own travels were confined to North America and the European continent—and he certainly was not able to reverse the outcome of the invasion of the island in 1811 and its subsequent occupation. Furthermore, as his writings demonstrate, Cobbett was neither an explorer nor an expert on Java, and his critique did contain several inaccuracies and instances of fudging of the facts. In a sense, Java drops out of the argument as Cobbett would probably have penned a similar critique had the British invaded another equally large and far-flung nation in another part of Asia or Latin America at the time. His aim was to criticize Britain's imperial ambitions in general, and not merely this singular exploit in the East Indies. Written at a time when many of the local broadsheets of England were happy to laud the country's latest colonial conquest, Cobbett was a lone—but not insignificant—voice against the war lobby. Though mindful of England's security and interests, he was not willing to allow Java to be colonised in his name.



## Appendix

### The full transcript of the article by William Cobbett, on the subject of the British invasion of Java

\*Author's note: I have retained the spelling of words, including the errors, as found in the original. Note that all emphases (*in italics*) are as found in the original.

Cobbett's Weekly Political Register

Vol. XX, No. 25. London, Saturday, December 21, 1811.

Summary of Politics.

Conquest of the Empire of Java.

On Monday, the 16<sup>th</sup> instant, intelligence was received by our government, that the ships and troops, sent against the Empire of Java, under Rear Admiral Sir Robert Stopford and Sir Samuel Auchmuty, had succeeded in taking the city of Batavia and also the greater part of the Dutch and French European forces in the Empire of Java. The troops landed, it seems, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of August, Batavia surrendered at discretion on the 8<sup>th</sup>, and on the 26<sup>th</sup>, the intrenched and fortified works of Cornelis were forced. The enemy are stated to have lost two thousand in killed and five thousand in prisoners, including among the latter two generals. Our loss is said to have been considerable. The Governor of the island, whose name was Jansens, was a Dutchman, and his troops, about 10,000 in number, were Dutch. The amount of our force, which went from our East India possessions, is not stated in gross; but from the detail of the several corps engaged, it would seem to have amounted to between 15 to 20 thousand land troops, exclusive of the sailors and marines belonging to the squadron employed on the expedition, which, to have conveyed such an army, must have been considerable, though its force is not particularly stated, an omission so common to all our dispatches of this nature, that it cannot be fairly attributed to accident. The contest seems to have been very sanguinary; for Sir Samuel Auchmuty states, in his dispatch, that "in the action of the 26<sup>th</sup>, the numbers killed were immense, but it has been impossible to form any accurate statement of the amount. About one thousand have been buried in the works, multitudes were cut down in the retreat, the rivers were choked up with dead, and the huts and woods were filled with the wounded, who have since expired. We have taken near 5,000 prisoners, among whom are 2 General Officers, 34 Field Officers, 70 Captains, and 150 Subaltern Officers; [770] General Jansens made his escape with difficulty, during the action, and reached Buitenzorg (sic), a distance of 30 miles, with a few cavalry, the sole remains of an army of 10,000 men. This place he has since evacuated, and fled to the Eastward." – Lord Minto himself, the Governor General of India, repaired to Batavia, the capital of the Empire, and thence he writes his dispatches, dated on the 1<sup>st</sup> of September. Directly after his arrival there he took formal possession of the sovereignty of the country and of sovereign sway of the inhabitants, by the following proclamation: - "Proclamation. In the name of his Majesty George the Third, King of the United Kingdoms of Great Britain and Ireland. – In consequence of the glorious and decisive victory obtained by the British Army under the command of his Excellency Lieutenant General Sir Samuel Auchmuty, Commander in Chief, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August, by which the French troops were driven out of the strong position at Meester Cornelis, upon which their generals placed their sole reliance, and by which their whole army, with hardly any exception, either fell in the field or were made prisoners of war; Lieut. Gen. Jansens fled in great disorder to Buitenzorg; but, knowing that the victorious troops would soon pursue him, he has precipitately quitted that post also, and has directed his flight, in despair, to some other quarter, after having refused a second time the invitation of the English, to enter into arrangements for the benefit of the country, which he left without defence at their disposal. – Lieutenant General Jansens, who represented *the French Sovereign* in Java, having thus abandoned his charge, and avowed by his actions his incapacity to afford any further protection to the country; the *French Government* is hereby declared to be dissolved, and the *British authority to be fully and finally established in the island of Java*, and all the possessions of the French in the Eastern Seas. This proclamation is issued for the information [771] of the good people of Java, in order that they may strictly conform to the duties of *allegiance and fidelity to their Sovereign George the Third*, and they are hereby enjoined and commanded, *under the most severe penalties*, to abstain from holding correspondence with, or affording aid or any assistance to the members of the late French Government or its adherents; but on the contrary support with zeal and obey with fidelity, the authority

with which they are now happily united. A *provisional form of administration* will immediately be established, and as soon as that is performed the *beneficent and paternal disposition of the British Government* towards the people of Java will be manifested by the publication of such regulations as may be successively adopted. Done at Weltevrede, the 29<sup>th</sup> day of August, 1811, by his Excellency the Governor General of British India. (Signed) Minto” – Thus the conquest was completed in due form, and assumed all characters of permanent sway over the whole nation, without any exception to the rights of any of the native sovereigns of the country; and, in one of his dispatches, Lord Minto observes, that this conquest being completed, the British nation has neither an enemy nor a rival left from the Cape of Good Hope to Cape Horn; that is to say, in nearly one-half of the globe. His lordship speaks of this achievement as being full of glory and advantage, and appears to anticipate from it the most beneficial results. – The First Lord of the Admiralty, in communicating this intelligence to the Lord Mayor of London, calls it “*satisfactory intelligence*”; the ministerial writers exultingly observe, that this puts the finishing hand to the work of conquest out of Europe, there being now three out of the four quarters of the world, wherein neither a French nor Dutch flag is flying; and, it is to be remarked, that, on the day that the intelligence arrived, those old proclaimers of victory and joy, the Park and Tower guns, were fired, – Yet am I, for my part, of the opinion, that this conquest, great as is its magnitude, will be of *no advantage* to this country; nay, that it cannot fail to be an injury to her; for which opinion I will now proceed to give my reasons. – Were I to confine my view to that description of persons in the kingdom, who are the dispensers, or the objects, of *patronage*, I should be far from saying, that there [772] was no advantage in this conquest; for, to them, it will, for a while, at least, prove a most abundant harvest; as it already has proved, I dare say, to those immediately concerned in it, the worth of the *prizes* being immense. I look at the conquest as it will affect the whole nation; as it will affect those who will have to pay the taxes, and to expose their persons in defence of this our own country; and then, I am to enquire, how it will aid the pecuniary resources, or add to the security of the country from foreign attack. – But first of all, let us see what this conquest consists of. A country, in geographical extent equal to England; and in population exceeding it by two thirds. The island, or Empire, of Java, consists, as it is computed, 30 millions of souls. The Dutch were the absolute masters of the island, though there are in it, one *Emperor*, several *Kings*, and many princes of inferior note, who are suffered to retain their titles, but are the mere puppets of their European masters, who take upon themselves the trouble of governing, especially in those two important particulars, the *administration of justice* and the *collection and disposal of the revenues*; that is to say, the absolute power over men’s *lives* and *purses*. We have now stepped into the shoes of the Dutch, or rather, those of their sovereign, the Emperor Napoleon; and, indeed, the proclamation of Lord Minto, above quoted, clearly shows, that we mean to whole (sic) the country by the same tenure. That proclamation takes the absolute sovereignty from the hands of Napoleon and puts it into those of George the Third, who has certainly been the greatest conqueror, as well as the greatest warrior, who has sat on the English throne. He has lost some territory, indeed, and some subjects, in his time; but what were the three millions, which the American States contained, at the time of their separation, compared to the scores of millions, which he has conquered and who are become his liege subjects in Asia and Africa? – The Empire of Java produces great abundance of articles of commerce, especially Spices, Indigo, Cotton, Coffee and Sugar; and, we are told, in the ministerial prints, that we have, by this conquest, supplanted the Dutch-French in the most valuable part of their commercial possessions and pursuits. – These are fine pictures to draw; fine exhibitions to make to a people who are called upon so often by the tax-gatherer for the means of supporting the [773] war; fine matter for a paragraph or a speech; but, let us not be dazzled by them; let us examine the thing with closer eyes. – In the first place, as to our relationships with Europe and North America: Does the reader suppose, that the having made this conquest will tend to convince the nations of Europe, that Napoleon alone has the range of all conquests and ambition in his breast; that it will tend to convince them, that they ought to hate him and make other efforts against him, because he is not content with a sway over the original territories of France; that it will convince them, that we are not actuated by any motives of ambition, and that we are at war purely for our own defence, and for the restoration of the liberties and independence of the nations of Europe; will this conquest, in short, tend to make the nations of Europe regard us solely in the light of *deliverers*? We have added here 30 millions of people to our conquered subjects, a number far surpassing all those whom Napoleon has added to the Empire of France; and, if our conquests in India, in Africa and in the islands of America, since the commencement of the French Revolution, be taken into the account, all that he has done in the way of conquest is, as to the number of subjects, a mere trifle; and as the vulgar saying is, he, as a conqueror, is a fool to us. – And, as to the Dutch nation, what impression must this conquest produce

upon their minds? Will they like us the better for it? And will they like him the worse? Will it not rather make them zealous in his cause, and reconcile them to his sway, as the only means of protection against our power? They have been reproached by our writers for submitting quietly to that sway; but these writers have never pointed out the means by means the Dutch were in any way to preserve themselves from submission to us and to Prussia. The states of Holland were compelled to seek protection from the old Government of France, upon whom they actually depended upon for their safety; and, that which has taken place now is very little, if any, more humiliating than their then situation. – As to the part that Napoleon is acting towards Holland, it is not that of a conqueror, to be sure. The country, whose Government was then at war against France, was conquered by France in 1795, just after the retreat of our army, under the Duke of York, out of [774] Flanders. From that time, Holland has been at the disposal of France; it has been under the sway of France; and now it has become part of the French Empire, as much as Ireland has become part of the United Kingdom, sending, in the same manner, deputies, or members, to the Legislative Assembly in Paris. – The right of conquest has never been disputed until of late. It is the way, and the only way, that the sway over countries is acquired; but the folly of our complaints against Napoleon, on this score, is, that every word we say, is a word said against ourselves; for, by what other right than that of conquest, do we hold so great a part of India, and by what other right have we divested so many sovereigns of their authority? Talk of putting down sovereigns, indeed! Why, here, in this single conquest, of which we boast, do we not assume absolute sway over an Emperor and several Kings, as well as over the 30 millions of people of whom they formerly claimed allegiance? – How will this new conquest operate in the mind of the American government? Does the reader think, that it will tend to remove any apprehensions there felt, with regard to the power and views of England? Will it tend to give the President a more favourable opinion of those views? I should think not. I should think, that it would make him doubly fearful of doing anything tending to throw weight into our scale. He must naturally wish to see neither France nor England have the power to domineer over the world; and, of course, when he sees that “France has not a flag flying in any part of three quarters of the four”, he will feel less apprehension at her strides than those of England. Therefore, every conquest that we make tends to give America a stronger and stronger bias towards France. And is it not perfectly ridiculous to hear our writers reproaching the American President for not making our cause his own; for not declaring himself on our side; at the very moment, when these same writers are boasting of our having swept three quarters of the world clean of the French? They say, that England has staked her existence upon the event of this contest, and they tell America, that if we fall, she must fall too. They are, here, downright alarmists; but what must she think of their alarms, when the next packet brings her accounts of England having, at one single dash, con-[775]-quered more subjects than Napoleon has conquered altogether; and when she hears us not only express no doubts as to the propriety of such conquests, but hears us boast of it as a glorious achievement? – The President, in his late speech, takes a glance at the revolution now going on in South America, and seems to signify his approbation of the change that is likely to be the result. Strong condemnation has been expressed of that part of his speech here. But, does he not perceive, that the country will, unless independent, fall into the hands of either England or France; and ought he not to wish to see that prevented? This new conquest of ours, will not, I presume, tend to alter his opinions upon that subject; for, why should we stop at Java? Why should Peru and Mexico not be as necessary to us as the kingdoms in Asia? And why should the President of America think more about the conquest of Spain and Portugal than about that of Java? If he takes a view of the *whole* of the conquests of France, he will find them to fall far short of this *one* conquest of England. Let us see a little how the fact stands, when exhibited in figures. France has conquered, or claimed sovereign sway over the following countries, inhabited by the following numbers of people.

Genoa and Tuscany...	1,250,000
Modena and the other Sovereign Dukedoms of Italy...	2,000,200
States of the Pope...	2,000,000
The Two Sicilies...	6,005,396
The United Provinces...	2,758,632
Switzerland...	1,900,000
Hanover, Brunswick, Hamburgh, etc...	1,145,000
Spain...	11,000,000
Portugal...	1,838,879
Total:	29,898,107

England has conquered and proclaimed full and sovereign authority over the Empire of Java, containing all its inhabitants: 30,000,000

Deduct conquered by France: 29,898,107

Balance in favour of England: 101,893.

Now, observe, reader, that this is giving the island of Sicily to France, while it is very well known, that our writers recommend the vigorous measure of taking possession [776] of it for ourselves, and it is also giving her Spain and Portugal, of the latter of which countries it is equally well known that we have actual possession and almost absolute command, and of the former that we say that the French will never obtain the sovereignty. I have here placed the object in the best possible point of view for the enemy; and yet we beat him by 101,893 conquered souls. I beg, therefore, to ask any man in his senses, what should induce the President of America to be alarmed at the progress of French ambition, and to feel no alarm at all at the progress of English ambition? – I shall be told, perhaps, that there is a great deal of *difference* in the two cases. O aye! A great deal indeed. I am well aware of that: namely, that the one is *French* and the other is *English*; but that is all the difference that I can see. There is indeed another difference to *us*; that is, that our conquests are in another hemisphere, whereas those of Napoleon are close to home; are of territories and people bordering upon France, and speaking, in great part, the French language. But this, while not an important distinction with *us*, will not, I should suppose, weigh much with the American President, who can scarcely be more alarmed at that power which confines its conquests to Europe and to its own borders, than at those of a power, that sends its conquering fleets and armies to the utmost extent of the globe. I am told, that Napoleon would gladly extend his conquests to distant countries if he could; my answer is, that his inability to do it must render him less an object of fear with America. So that, in whatever way I view the matter, I cannot help thinking, that, as far as this new conquest of ours have any effect at all upon the minds of the American government and people, the effect will be that of giving them a strong disinclination than before existed of throwing any part of their weight into our scale in the present contest, which, in spite of all our boasting, we yet feel to be *for our existence for a nation independent of France*. – And here we come to the second question: What advantage will *this* country, what advantage will the *people of England, Scotland and Ireland*, derive from this conquest? That it will benefit those who possess *patronage* and those who crave for its largesses (sic) I know very well; that it opens a vast field for those who wish to get fortunes without labour or study; that [777] it will be an out-let for hundreds and thousands of persons who for divers reasons require a voyage to the antipodes; that it will disburden many and many an individual who is loaded with that species of poor rates which the parish knows nothing of; that it will tend to make elbow-room upon the sinecure and pension lists; that it will do all this I will readily allow; for Java with its 30,000,000 of people and all its Emperors and Kings cannot be taken proper care of without a great number of persons of this country any more than they were by the Dutch or the French rulers. We are told that these latter “took care of the *administration of justice*, and of the *public revenue*”; that is not to be doubted, that we shall take as good care, at least, of these matters, as they did. Here will be an abundance of *lawyers* and *tax-gatherers* wanted, and, will any man say, that we are, as to numbers, at least, deficient in either; and with regard to the latter, can any man have the face to say, that he supposes, that we fall short, in point of experience and ability, of any nation to be found on the globe, whether we speak of taxes to be raised on land or water? – To impart, to “the *good people of Java*” as Lord Minto calls them, a portion of what we enjoy in the above-named descriptions of persons the nation might, and doubtless, would, be very willing; but still I ask, what *advantage* the conquest will produce to the people of this kingdom; to the people who perform the labour and pay the taxes of the country? – Will it cause less labour; or, which is more to the point, will it cause *less taxes to be paid* by the present payers of taxes; for all centers there at last? That it will *not*, I am, for my part, fully convinced; and indeed, I am pretty confident, that I shall be able to show to my readers, when the proper time comes, that it will have caused an *augmentation* of the taxes. I never yet saw one of our conquests which did not produce such an effect, in which respect our conquests are of a nature precisely the opposite of the conquests of our enemy, who always makes a shift *tirer parti*, as he calls it, or as we call it, *to turn to good account*, the conquests that he makes. In short, he always makes the people, whom he conquers, assist in carrying on the war against us, while we, as far as my observation has gone, always incur a new burden with every new conquest. I shall be told, that this conquest clears the Eastern seas of [778] every French sail, and that we shall require less men-of-war, and, of course, less expense to protect our commerce in those seas. May be so; but, that is not to my point; which is simply this: will

the conquest *diminish our taxes*? If it does not, it is worth nothing to us. – Yes, it might possibly be, if it rendered us at home more secure against those deadly blows which the enemy aims at us; and here we come to the last and the main point of our discussion; for, though the conquest were not to lessen our taxes; nay, if it were to augment them if that can well be; still if it lessened our danger, if it added to our security, I should freely say, then it was a good thing; a thing for which we ought to toss our hats into the air, to hollow, and to make bonfires, the age for which latter seems, by-the-bye, to be passed. I do not, however, see how this can possibly be. For, in the first place, Java will require *European troops*; and have we these to spare? All the good things in Java; with 30 millions of people; all the justice, all the revenue, will require *troops*. But, granted that we can still find troops to send thither, still there is nothing *added* to that force which is to protect us against the fleets that are building for the avowed purpose of our subjugation, and to augment which force so many schemes have been resorted to. The reader cannot carry in his mind one half of the devices that have been put in practice to get men into the army. Measure after measure have been adopted; law after law; there have been regulars and militia, and fencibles and supplementary militia and army of reserve and local militia and volunteers and volunteering out of the militia into the regulars. In short, what has not been resorted to augment and keep up the military force in this kingdom? Now, it will, I suppose, be admitted, that these measures have all been *necessary to the safety of the country*; I mean, to the *defence of the country against the French*, for, as to any *other* danger; as to any *other* purpose for keeping up this force, it has never, at any rate, been openly avowed. Well, then, if all these means of raising men, means so distressing to the people, so burdensome to the parishes and so ruinous to many individuals, have been necessary for the defence of the country against the French, who are just on the other side of the Channel, must not that defence be rendered less secure, must not our danger be augmented [779] by sending 15 or 20 thousand troops, and keeping them up, in the newly conquered Empire? Shall I be told, that the troops required for the defence of the empire of Java will go from our Indian Empire? My answer is, they cannot be spared thence; or that, if they can, we have been making great waste of money and of lives in keeping up so large a force in our Indian Empire, and that, too, at a time, when our superfluous force might have been employed in Spain, or Portugal, or at Walcheren. No: it is clear, that we must send out an additional number of troops to those empires; and then, I say, that we shall, by so much that this number amounts to, weaken our defences at home. If, indeed, we could hire foreign troops, at so much per head, as we did in the American war, there would be nothing but the money wanting; but these, I believe, are not, now-a-days, to be got to serve *out of Europe*. So that we must, it seems to me, make an absolute deduction, from our native force, for the purpose of securing the possession of this newly conquered Empire. Thus do our conquests work in a way precisely the opposite of Napoleon, who from all the countries he conquers, draws legions to fight against us, and whose armies now in the Peninsula, are well known to consist in great part of Germans, Italians, Hollanders, Swiss and even Polanders. If we, indeed, could bring a hundred or two of thousands of our newly conquered subjects into the field against the French; we could bring a good stout army of those brave people, 30,000,000 of whom suffer themselves to be held in subjection by 15 or 20 millions (sic): If we could bring these into the field against the French, we might see fine works; but, as matters are, the conquering of them will not give us the smallest security against France, and must, as I think I have shewn, weaken the defences we already have. – At the time when the peace of Amiens was made, the ministers and Mr Pitt (for whom, in fact, the peace was made by Mr Addington), told the nation, in their speeches in Parliament, that *extension of dominion was no proof of an increase of real power*. Their motive for doing this was plain enough. They, who had all been in office during the Anti-Jacobin war, had to justify themselves for having suffered France to retain such an extension of territory as she did retain at the peace. They, therefore, to [780] hide their disgrace, held forth that France would rather be weakened than strengthened by her new acquisitions. They were told of Antwerp and of the fleets that would grow up there; but, they still insisted that an extension of territory would tend to weaken the power of France; and Lord Hawkesbury, who had once talked of marching to Paris, said, that all the territorial conquests of France were more than over-balanced by our acquisitions in the way of “*capital, credit and confidence*”; whereupon Lord Castlereagh produced a string of statements and calculations about imports and exports, proving the truth of Lord Hawkesbury’s assertion. These worthy people forgot, or seem to have forgotten, wholly, that they had, a thousand times over, insisted on the necessity of continuing the war in order to drive the French within their old boundaries; and that one of the great alleged grounds of the war, in the first instance, was the necessity of preventing the French from opening the navigation of the Scheldt. All this they had forgotten, or supposed that the people had forgotten it; but at any rate, they now all said, that there was no danger to England from the extension

of the dominion of France; for, that extension was no proof of an increase in power. – Now, passing over the inconsistency, the change of tone, of these people, and passing also over the fact, that we are every day of our lives inveighing against Napoleon for extending his dominions, and that we are now, as we say, “fighting the battles of England” in endeavouring to keep him from conquering Spain and Portugal; passing all this over, let us see how this position of Lord Hawkesbury applies to our present case. As a *general* proposition it certainly is not true; for, if it were, what state ever need ever be afraid of the aggrandisement of its neighbour; what state would ever complain of its neighbour’s conquests? If it were true as a general proposition, little states would be more powerful than great ones, which it would be burlesque to attempt to maintain. Conquests, extension of territory, by adding the means of warfare, generally add power to that which a country already possesses, as was known in the rise of Prussia, where a kingdom, and one of the most powerful in Europe, grew out of the addition of territory and subjects, from time to time made to a petty electorate. But, then the conquered parts, the conquered territory, must be contiguous; [781] nature must assist policy. The territory must be advantageously placed, and the people must be able and willing to defend their new government; they must bring no burden to the conqueror, but must bring him assistance. Where this is the case, extension of territory is the proof, and the most certain of all proofs, of an increase in power. This is the case with the conquests of Napoleon. The countries of which he has assumed the sovereignty lie contiguous to France; they are parted from her only by imaginary bounds, such as those that separate Middlesex from Hertfordshire; the people of those countries have had an intimate intercourse with France before. When you get to Hamburgh or Rome, indeed, the connection was more remote, but still there was a connection by means of intermediate countries, and when these had been annexed to France, the annexation of the former partook less of the odious nature of a conquest. But, how is it with our conquests? What connection is there between us and the people conquered? They knew us not as neighbours but merely as conquerors; and of course, we have no power over them, other than that of the sword; no principle to govern by but that of fear. From such conquests no military aid is to be expected; but, on the contrary, they demand a part of our own military means to secure us the possession of them. Nothing is to be drawn from them in the way of taxes; for all the proceeds of those are to be swallowed up by the persons deputed to rule over the conquered; and, if we want any proof of this fact, it is found in the experience of our colonies, not one of which ever yet sent a shilling to the Exchequer. Far different, therefore, are the conquests which the conqueror annexes to his own dominions than those which he holds *at a distance*. And this is the difference between the conquests of France and those of England. The former gives strength to the conqueror and the latter weakness. The former are like fresh battalions brought up to join the main army; the latter like towns captured in a country where the battle is not to be fought... [782] Some persons think, that these distant conquests will, at any rate, be worth something to us, as objects of exchange in the negotiating of a peace. Did colonies tell in this way at the *last* peace? Did they purchase a single yard square of European territory? Did they take one jot of power out of the hands of France? No man will say that they did; and why should they do it at another peace? If, indeed, the taking of the Empire of Java would afford us even a chance of diminishing the power of Napoleon at a peace; if it would make him, for one week, cease his ship-building at Antwerp, I should say that there was some national advantage in it; but, it will not do that; and will, on the contrary, sharpen his desire to destroy the power of England. During the Anti-Jacobin war, when that profound pair of statesmen, Pitt and Dundas, were conquering sugar and coffee islands, the orators in the French tribune promised their country, that they would reconquer those islands on the continent of Europe. “Let the English capture and guard and cultivate and improve our colonies” said they, “we have something else to attend to; and at the peace we will make them deliver them up with their improvements.” And were they not as good as their word? – The conquest, of which we are speaking, cannot, however fail to give an additional degree of desire to Napoleon to destroy the power of England. He sees, as well as we, that there is not a French flag flying in any quarter of the world except Europe; and he cannot see this without a strong desire to put an end to the cause, and to force into action all his resources for that purpose. We do not go about to nip the ramifications of spreading weeds; we do not even give ourselves the trouble to trace to their points the numerous shoots; we look for nothing but the root; and having found that and cut it off, we leave the rest of the work to the ordinary operations of nature and time. The root of all these colonial conquests is here in England. Our enemy will never attempt to reconquer colonies from us; he will leave us the ramifications to [783] themselves; but, as he sees them increase, he will see the necessity increase of getting to the root. In this view of the matter, therefore, I am inclined to think, that, if the conquest of the Empire of Java answers no other purpose, it will not be likely to fail in answering that of rendering the great conflict here even more desperate,



more expensive, more bloody, and of longer duration. I do not know that it is possible for Napoleon to make our commercial exclusion from the continent of Europe more complete than it is; but if it be possible, I am sure that this new conquest will be a reason for attempting it; and, indeed, it is folly not to believe, that no exertion will be spared to affect against us all possible mischief, in which Napoleon's measures will, doubtless, be cordially approved of by the Dutch. – Such is my view of the nature and probable consequences of the Empire of Java. I am aware that I differ from many persons respecting it, and especially from the editor of the Morning Chronicle, who observes, that our success here points out the sort of warfare that we ought to pursue; but, if he were asked, whether he believes, that the possession of the Empire of Java is equal in value to the possession of any one of the forts at the mouth of the Scheldt, or into that of a single farm in Switzerland or in the late Austrian Flanders, I hardly think that he would venture to answer in the affirmative.

# COBBETT'S WEEKLY POLITICAL REGISTER.

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## SUMMARY OF POLITICS.

CONQUEST OF THE EMPIRE OF JAVA.—  
On Monday, the 16th instant, intelligence was received by our Government, that the ships and troops, sent against the Empire of Java, under Rear Adm. Sir Robert Stopford and Sir Samuel Auchmuty, had succeeded in taking the city of Batavia and also the greater part of the Dutch and French European forces in the Empire of Java. The troops landed, it seems, on the 4th of August, Batavia surrendered at discretion on the 8th, and, on the 26th, the intrenched and fortified works of Cornelis were forced. The enemy are stated to have lost two thousand in killed and five thousand in prisoners, including amongst the latter two generals. Our loss is stated to have been considerable. The Governor of the island, whose name was JANSENS, was a Dutchman, and his troops, about 10,000 in number, were Dutch. The amount of our force, which went from our East India possessions, is not stated in gross; but, from the detail of the several corps engaged, it would seem to have amounted to between 15 and 20 thousand land troops, exclusive of the sailors and marines belonging to the squadron employed on the expedition, which, to have conveyed such an army, must have been considerable, though its force is not particularly stated, an omission so common to all our dispatches of this nature, that it cannot fairly be attributed to accident. The contest seems to have been very sanguinary; for Sir Samuel Auchmuty states, in his dispatch,

“ General Jansens made his escape with  
“ difficulty, during the action, and reach-  
“ ed Buitenzorg, a distance of 30 miles,  
“ with a few cavalry, the sole remains of  
“ an army of 10,000 men. This place  
“ he has since evacuated, and fled to the  
“ Eastward.”—Lord Minto himself, the  
Governor General of India, repaired to  
Batavia, the capital of the Empire, and  
thence he writes his dispatches, dated on  
the 1st of September. Directly after his  
arrival there he took formal possession of  
the sovereignty of the country and of  
sovereign sway over all its inhabitants, by  
the following proclamation:—“ PRO-  
“ CLAMATION. In the name of his Ma-  
“ jesty George the Third, King of the  
“ United Kingdoms of Great Britain and  
“ Ireland.—In consequence of the glorious  
“ and decisive victory obtained by the  
“ British Army under the Command of his  
“ Excellency Lieutenant General Sir Sa-  
“ muel Auchmuty, Commander in Chief,  
“ on the 26th of August, by which the  
“ French troops were driven out of the  
“ strong position at Meester Cornelis,  
“ upon which their Generals placed their  
“ sole reliance, and by which their whole  
“ army, with hardly any exception, either  
“ fell in the field, or were made prisoners  
“ of war; Lieut. Gen. Jansens fled in  
“ great disorder to Buitenzorg; but, know-  
“ ing that the victorious troops would soon  
“ pursue him, he has precipitately quitted  
“ that post also, and has directed his  
“ flight, in despair, to some other quarter,  
“ after having refused a second time the  
“ invitation of the English, to enter into  
“ arrangements for the benefit of the

*Cobbett's Weekly Political Register, dated 21 December 1811. (Author's private collection.)*

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