

Rosie Llewellyn-Jones. *Empire Building: The Construction of British India, 1690-1860*. London: Hurst and Company, 2023. vii+239. Hardcover, £30.

If the British “conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind” as JR Seeley claimed in the nineteenth century, what then about how the British built the world that they conquered? Historians have spent the last century complicating Seeley’s claim, using a myriad of analytical tools designed to examine the political, social, cultural, and religious worlds of the British Empire. One of newer tools available to historians is examining the physical and spatial history of colonial spaces. Rosie Llewellyn-Jones’ *Empire Building: The Construction of British India, 1690-1860*, uses these tools to describe the “political architecture” of the British East India Company in hopes of expanding our understanding of how the Company shaped the lives of Indians, and Britons, in the eighteenth century. The British did not invent political architecture in India, the Mughals were quite adept at using public spaces to convey political and religious meaning, but the British did shift how these ideas were conveyed in very specific ways. British East India Company engineers constructed new buildings, new communities, and new ways of living and working in India. Llewellyn-Jones uses her case studies to argue that the company, “often got things wrong; but it got some things right too” (p. 207).

Empire Building is a loosely constructed narrative history of engineering works in India undertaken by the East India Company, beginning with Old Fort William and ending with the African Asylum, built in Bombay in the 1850s. Each chapter moves in chronological order, and the individual topics can be read as a stand-alone case study of sorts. For those expecting an in-depth study of ‘important’ buildings, they will be disappointed. Llewellyn-Jones is more interested in the wider notion of built environment of India, as opposed to grand pieces of architectural design. It useful at this juncture to take a moment and examine what Llewellyn-Jones means by terms such as “political architecture” and built environment. As she argues in her

introduction, “every structure erected by the British, although using Indian contractors and labour, made a political statement, even if unconsciously” (p. 6). Essentially, buildings aren’t just buildings, they can tell us a lot about the people who built them, and equally importantly, the people who used them. Crucially this equation is not just about power, it’s about how people live in the world around them, i.e. their built environment. This means that the roads, trees, houses, gardens of Simla are just as important as its Viceregal Lodge.

Llewellyn-Jones is at her best talking about the seemingly small things of history, the planting of a grove of trees or the layout of a cantonment house. Her writing style is engaging and her narrative compelling. Her focus on cantonments and the early history of Calcutta are particularly strong and would be useful to general reader and professional academic alike. Ultimately *Empire Building* is trying to do two things: a narrative history of the East India Company’s efforts to ‘build’ India in its own image and a rescue effort of the Company’s history from the forces of “retro-liberalism” (p. 22). In her first goal Llewellyn-Jones is quite successful, as her architectural history is engaging and useful. She is unfortunately less successful in rescuing the Company from the condemnations of history. Her presentation of the current state of historiography is incomplete, which renders her overall argument less effective. As she describes it historians present the Company as “static but malevolent organization,” which seems to be a loaded oversimplification of the work of many historians working in the field. In the end, Llewellyn-Jones has presented the reader with a compelling narrative, one that did not need the added complication of a rescue narrative for a Company that by most historical accounts does not need to be rescued.

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