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Cover Sheet

Orientalism at work?: Dundee's response to competition from Calcutta, circa 1870-

1914

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Orientalism at work?: Dundee's response to competition from Calcutta, circa 1870-1914

From the 1870s Dundee's staple jute manufacturing industry faced increasingly serious competition from the expanding jute industry of Calcutta.¹ The Scottish industry responded to this competition by cost containment in both wages and raw jute, the search for greater efficiency, and movement into higher quality products. But beyond these business responses, the industry sought in a variety of ways to shape the competitive environment, both by seeking protective trade policies and by influencing the conditions under which jute manufacture in Calcutta took place. This paper focuses on these latter activities.

Responding to Indian competition by collective action necessarily involved Dundee developing understandings of the workings of India and its economy. These understandings were, of course, influenced by the status of India as a British imperial possession. So we need to place Dundee's evolving beliefs about the India it was competing with in the context of wider British beliefs about Empire and 'the Orient'.

The starting point for thinking about such beliefs is the concept of orientalism, first advanced by Edward Said in his book of that name, and developed particularly in his *Culture and Imperialism*.² In these works Said sought to combine Foucauldian

¹ The most important work on the Calcutta/Dundee jute connection is Stewart, *Jute and empire*, which focuses on the Scots who dominated the Calcutta industry up to the Second World War; also Cox, *Empire, industry and class*, a comparative labour history of the industries.

² Said, *Orientalism; Culture and Imperialism*

notions about knowledge as power and Gramscian notions of hegemony to construct a notion of Orientalism which sees Western knowledge of the 'East' as built around a binary of an all-knowing and all-powerful 'us', and an always misunderstood and subordinated 'Other'. Such an approach has found much support in the academy, especially amongst literary scholars, but a much more sceptical response amongst historians.³ This binary essentialism tends to suggest that Western understandings of 'the Orient' had a unified and unchanging character which seems hard to reconcile with the complexities suggested by the historical evidence. In relation to the Indian case, historians have long pointed out the shifts in British beliefs (and related policies) which took place from the 'orientalism' of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which in many ways valued highly notions of Indian traditions, to the much more critical approaches brought about by the rise of British evangelicism and utilitarianism from the 1820s. Later in the nineteenth century more overtly racist notions of European superiority, and denigration of Indian civilization, seem to have held sway. Especially after the 'Mutiny' of 1857 there was a reduced willingness to challenge Indian 'traditions', and this political stance was linked to analyses which often rested on highly problematic accounts of an allegedly unchanging 'Indianness', linked to institutions such as castes⁴.

A major purpose of this article is to analyse how far 'Orientalism' helps us understand the specific understandings about India propagated in Dundee from the 1870s onwards. The scale of such propagation was substantial. The local Chamber of

³ MacKenzie, *Orientalism*.

⁴ Rendell, 'Scottish Orientalism'; Stokes, *The English Utilitarians*. Metcalf, *Ideologies*, pp.43-52, 114-122; Dirks, *Castes of Mind*.

Commerce (DCC), dominated by jute interests, often discussed issues relating to India. The two local newspapers also frequently carried material on the topic, and in other ways provided local readers with understandings of the sub-continent.⁵ Local politicians talked about India, and such interventions included an important report from an Indian visit by one of the City's MPs in the 1890s.⁶ More generally, Indian issues were an important issue in Dundee parliamentary elections.

As the range and quantity of these diverse sources suggest, the need to understand the British Empire in India was greatly felt in Dundee because Calcutta competition was a mortal threat to juteopolis. This need can be related to ongoing debates about the degree to which empire impinged on the everyday lives of ordinary Britons in the years of high imperialism. That it impinged greatly has been a key theme of the work of John MacKenzie. He argues that the culture of empire intensely permeated British society, and he has argued this in wide ranging studies of education, newspapers, literature, exhibitions, art and almost every aspect of both 'high' and 'low' culture.⁷ This argument has been challenged. Bernard Porter in particular has questioned how far empire impinged on the lives of ordinary Britons, suggesting that while undoubtedly much imperial propaganda was disseminated, there is little evidence that the mass of the population was much affected by this.⁸

⁵ Articles from the *Advertiser* were collected together in the *Dundee Year Book*. In the 1890s the *Courier* sent two women journalist around the world, and their reports included substantial commentary on the Indian portion of their journey: Keracher, *Dundee's Two Intrepid Ladies*.

⁶ Leng, *Letters*.

⁷ MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire*; 'Popular Culture of Empire'.

⁸ Porter, *Absent-Minded*; 'Further thoughts'.

This dispute has focussed on cultural matters, and has largely been innocent of economic issues. Porter expresses scepticism about how far Imperial economic connections impinged on ordinary workers: he writes: ‘the fact that cotton cloth made in Lancashire was going to India, therefore, may not have impacted on the operatives’.⁹ But in Dundee’s case there is at least a *prime facie* case that empire mattered because it related directly to the everyday livelihoods of most Dundonians. That case is examined here. The approach is broadly chronological, seeking to chart the changing responses of Dundee to Indian competition, and how these related to understandings about India.

The great bulk of work which analyses British knowledges of India focuses on those closely interconnected with the governance of the Raj.¹⁰ But for Dundee’s jute employers there was no such close nexus of ‘knowledge’ and ‘power’. Developing understandings about the nature of the competition they faced was a necessary condition of making a response. But the power these knowledges brought was seriously curtailed by the political weakness of the jute employers. As many of their laments were to illustrate, they saw themselves as largely excluded from the decision-making about British imperial policy in India, and there was a deal of truth in this calculation of relative impotence.

Because of this gap between ‘knowledge’ and ‘power’ this essay will combine an analysis of the understandings developed in Dundee with a ‘political economy’

⁹ Porter, *Absent-Minded*, p.33.

¹⁰ For example, Bayly, *Empire and Information*; Cohn, *Colonialism*.

assessment of the extent to which Dundee's employers could make themselves effective in shaping events in Calcutta.

I

Concern with Indian issues is evident in the DCC's records from the 1850s, but at this time the focus was not on jute, but flax, previously Dundee's key raw material import.¹¹ By the time of the 1867 British Association meeting in the city, awareness of Calcutta competition in jute was growing, but the tone was complacent: 'There are also several large works for the production of the same class of goods in Calcutta, and these places compete with Dundee in the home markets, as well as in foreign countries. Dundee has several disadvantages to contend against when competing with these places, but she also has various compensating advantages which enable her to hold her own against all competitors, and jute fabrics can nowhere be better or cheaper made than in this town'.¹²

Complacency was still evident in the first significant reference to jute in the DCC records in 1869, when the Chamber made representations to the India Office calling for the abolition of the 7.5 per cent duty on jute goods imported into India, arguing that though purportedly for revenue purposes, this duty acted 'as a protection to native industry, and more so, as jute goods manufactured in India are now competing with

¹¹ Dundee City Archives (DCA), GD/CC/4/3 DCC AGMs 30 March 1859, 28 March 1860, 27 March 1861.

¹² 'Local Industries of Dundee' in BA, *Meeting*, p.11.

those of this country in some of the markets of the world'.¹³ These agitations seem to have been successful, as the duty was quickly repealed.¹⁴

The tone of Dundee discussion in the 1870s was mixed. For example, in a *Courier* editorial of 5 November 1874, the late Governor of Bengal, Sir George Campbell, was cited as offering reassurance that 'there is no rivalry between the jute factories of Dundee and Calcutta' because the latter 'have never attempted to manufacture the finer class of goods which are produced in Dundee'. But such complacency was challenged when a wage dispute in Dundee was put in the context of Calcutta competition. The idea that Dundee's wage earners should moderate their wage demands because of Indian competition was to become a key, recurrent link made between this competition and life in Dundee, an early example coming in letters to the *Courier* in August 1875.¹⁵

In 1880 the *Advertiser's* special correspondent in Bengal published a series of articles collected in book form as 'The Jute Mills of Bengal', offering a negative assessment of investment prospects for European investors in Indian jute.¹⁶ This scepticism about investment in India was a common trope in the rather dismissive attitude

¹³ DCA, GD/CC/4/4 AGM 1869; representations were also made to the House of Commons Select Committee on Indian Finance: AGM 27 March 1872.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, GD/CC/4/5 Letter from India Office 3 September 1874. This campaign paralleled an earlier one by Lancashire's cotton producers. The issue of free trade and especially the role of the Lancashire cotton industry in seeking to shape trade policy in India is an important part of the history of the Raj: see Dewey, 'The end of the imperialism of free trade'.

¹⁵ *Courier* 31 August 1875.

¹⁶ *Jute Mills of Bengal*, p.3.

commonly adopted in Dundee at this time to the fledgling rival. But others argued that though the Calcutta industry was poorly managed, its fundamental advantages in wage costs posed enormous problems for Dundee: ‘If factories in India were held and managed similarly to those in Dundee—say with an expert commercial manager and a mill manager working together—then the words’ “Dundee to Let” which went the round of the papers the other day as a joke, would be no joke indeed.’¹⁷

These attitudes show how Dundee’s responses to what was happening in Calcutta were a blend of cultural assumptions and simple economic calculations. The first of these may be partly explained by an ingrained sense of Dundee superiority, with clear racist/Orientalist overtones¹⁸. The second often emphasized the differences in wage costs as a fundamental factor (a point explored in more detail below), but was also linked to more transient issues. From the 1870s the financial uncertainties involved in foreign investment in India were greatly exacerbated by the depreciation of the silver-based rupee against gold-based currencies like sterling, a depreciation which lasted into the 1890s.¹⁹

The depreciation of the rupee was invoked in Dundee as yet another reason for wariness about improving the working lives of local jute workers. The *Courier* pointed out the competitive advantage gained by Calcutta mills by depreciation of the rupee, and went on to ask: ‘are the men who are blindly agitating for making the expensive plant here productive for only eight hours out of the four-and-twenty, while

¹⁷ Communication from ‘An Indian Shareholder’ *Advertiser* 22 June 1877.

¹⁸ Stewart, *Jute and Empire*, *passim*.

¹⁹ Tomlinson, *Economy of Modern India*, p.117.

Calcutta plant is productive for thirteen or fourteen hours, aware of the peril in which they put—not the interests of capital, which can quickly shift for itself—but the interest of all dependent for work and wages upon a trade which is met by such extraordinary and in many respects unfair competition already.’²⁰

Regulation of working hours and conditions was central to the Dundee response to Indian competition. On the one hand this competition was used by employers and their allies to try and resist improvements driven by either trade union action or statutory regulation in Scotland. On the other hand, Dundee employers were involved in a long drawn out struggle over Factory legislation in India.²¹ This struggle was strongly shaped by prevalent ideas about the character of Indian competition and how Calcutta jute production fitted into Indian society. It was also shaped by the political economy of British rule in India.

On the first of these, much of the pressure from Dundee (and other British employers) invoked notions of fairness of competition as between British and Indian producers (what today we would probably call a ‘level playing-field’ argument). On the second, it was recognized that British Factory Acts, of which the Indian version was largely a copy, were designed for British conditions, conditions which might not exist in India. The incompatibilities suggested were readily rendered as a distinction between Eastern ‘culture’ and Western ‘efficiency’.²²

²⁰ *Courier*, editorial 13 September 1892.

²¹ The development of this legislation, and the role of British interests in shaping its form is summarised Kydd, *A History of Factory Legislation*; Das, *Factory Legislation in India* ; Clow, ‘Indian Factory Legislation’ ; Gilbert ‘Lord Lansdowne’.

²² Robb, *Empire, Identity and India*, pp.199-201.

The Dundee debate about the Indian Factory Acts began in the 1870s. In 1877 the DCC approached the British government highlighting the fact that, unlike in Scotland, the Calcutta industry was wholly unregulated by such legislation. The *Courier* editorialised that ‘The British Government can as easily limit the factory hours at Calcutta as it can the hours of operatives at home’; but this was to prove a wholly naïve view of the possibilities. On this occasion the India Office told the Chamber that legislation for India had been under consideration for some time ‘for the sake of the physical well-being of the workers in Calcutta’. In the light of this response the DCC decided to step back as ‘any action of the Chamber was likely to be ascribed to merely interested motives...’.²³ Prior to 1877 the DCC had been seemingly unaware of the existing discussions about possible legislation, and the role of Lancashire cotton manufacturers in pressing the issue.²⁴

The sensitivity reflected in the comment cited above reflects the complex politics of Dundee’s relationship to Calcutta wages and conditions. Liberal politicians were worried that calls for intervention from Dundee were motivated not by concern for the conditions of Indian workers, but by desires to limit competition. An early example of this sensitivity came in the mid-1880s, when the local Liberal MP, Lacaita, said that he would support the extension of Factory Acts from Britain to India only if it was clearly to the advantage of Indian workers: ‘If such a measure should clearly be to the loss and ruin of the factory-workers in India, he was sure no English, Scotch or Irish

²³ DCA GD/CC/4/5 DCC Minutes 2 August 1877; *Courier* 21 June 1877.

²⁴ *Courier* 27 September 1877.

electorate would impose it upon them'.²⁵ As we shall see, this theme was to recur when the issue sharpened in later decades.

Throughout the years from the 1870s to 1914 the DCC was concerned with issues surrounding the quality and price of raw jute.²⁶ This had a number of aspects, but one with a clear imperial dimension was the desirability or otherwise of pressing for an export tax on Bengal's raw jute, and remitting this for exports to Britain.

Responding to the increase in tariffs on jute goods imported into European countries, a proponent of such a measure argued in 1883: 'I think it is utterly preposterous that we should do nothing in the way of retaliation. Why should we not impose a duty on jute exported from jute to those counties?...India is a colony of Great Britain. By the present system we are just taking our own heads off. Such a proposal would, I suppose, savour of protection, but I think it is only reasonable'. The sentiments expressed in this way seem to have found a sympathetic hearing in the Chamber, but the Chamber's overall view was that such proposals were likely to fail in the face of the India Office commitments to free export of Indian produce.²⁷

II

²⁵ *Courier* 22 October 1885.

²⁶ Suggestions for growing outside India ranged from the Nile to Uganda to Sierra Leone: DCA GD/CC/44/6 AGM 1881; *ibid.*, GD/CC/4/7 Minutes 23 November 1892; *ibid.* GD/CC/4/8 Minutes 28 December 1905.

²⁷ DCA GD/CC/4/6 DCC Minutes 26 September 1883.

The issue of Indian competition came to prominence in Dundee when the industry faced its periodic downturns.²⁸ In the mid 1880s a recession across British industry underpinned a revival of protectionist sentiment, and similar circumstances in Dundee occasioned a much more extensive debate about free trade. Like many industrial employers, the jute owners had traditionally been strongly Liberal, and Dundee had not elected a Conservative MP since the 1832 Reform Act. But the debates in the DCC show growing questioning of Liberal free trade doctrine from the 1880s. There was increasing support for ‘doing something’ about foreign competition, though precisely what was to be done was contentious.²⁹ Attention focussed not only on responding to Indian competition, but also to that from continental Europe, where jute manufacturing grew quickly behind tariff walls from the 1880s.

Discussion about the competitive state of the industry was stimulated in the mid-1880s by a request for the DCC to give evidence to the Royal Commission on the Depression of Trade and Industry.³⁰ In the resulting debates, the advocacy of a duty on raw jute exports was again raised, but the majority view seems to have been to oppose such a plan, as smacking

²⁸ ‘We can hardly say there is any normal level of the jute trade. You have either very good or very bad trade’: Chairman of DCC, DCA GD/CC/4/6 22 September 1885.

²⁹ The first stirrings of this can be found in 1881: DCC 22 June 1881; *Courier* 28 January 1881 on French sugar bounties; 1 August 1881, editorial entitled ‘The Protectionist Revival’; S.K. Masrani, ‘International Competition and Strategic Response in the Dundee Jute Industry during the inter-war (1919-1939) and post-war (1945-1960s): The Case of Jute Industries, Buist Spinning, Craiks and Scott & Fyfe’, (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of St-Andrews, 2010).

³⁰ *Second Report*: Memorandum from DCC p.81; Minutes of Evidence Qs. 6175-6271.

of protection. Proposals for pressing for a Factory Act for India faced no such principled opposition, but there was hesitation about this issue, presumably because of worries about how Dundee's motives would be portrayed, as noted above.³¹ When it came to the Memorandum presented to the Royal Commission, the jute employers put most of the emphasis on tariffs as the cause of their current problems, while also noting the adverse effects on their competitiveness of the recent British Factory Act, though this was coupled to recognition that wages in Dundee had fallen recently, and were lower than they had been since 1872. The fact of duty free export of raw jute from India was contrasted with the tariffs imposed on manufactured goods in Europe and the USA, but no proposal to change this was made.³²

By contrast, the minutes of evidence of the Commission reveal some of the ambiguities in Dundee employer's views of the conditions of labour in Calcutta and the relevance of the Factory Acts. This passage of evidence from a jute merchant representing the Dundee jute industry is worth extensive quotation:

(Mr Julius Weinberg) There was something said about extending the Factory Act to India, they have a kind of Factory Act there. Sir Richard Temple went to Calcutta about three years ago and made an inquiry into the matter, and since that time children from about 7 to 10 years of age are examined by a doctor, and only allowed to work 6 hours a day. There is no registration in India to ascertain the age of children the same as we have in this country, and the consequence is that when they want to find out their age the doctor opens the mouth and looks at the teeth, as we do with a horse.

³¹ DCA GD/CC/4/6 DCC Minutes 22 September 1885.

³² *Second Report*, Memorandum from DCC. This suggested that 1869, following the opening of the Suez canal, was a key moment in expanding the scope of Indian competition.

They work as shifters in the mill 6 hours a day, for which they get from 1s 3d to 1s 9d wages per week; weavers are about half what they get in this country, and mechanics also rather less than half. That is one reason of (sic) the bad state of the Dundee trade. Before I leave that subject I may mention that the women and boys, 12 and 16 years of age, in India do not work more than 9 hours a day, so that no Factory Act would give you more than that...so that I do not myself think that if there were a Factory act they would gain anything by that'.³³

The following year a speaker at the DCC tied most of the issues together in the following way: 'Britain and her Indian possessions supplied the Continent with the material duty free, and if any of them wanted to erect a factory they came across to this country, and their worthy friend, the President, he had no doubt, would be glad to supply them with the latest improved machinery to oppose Dundee manufacturers (laughter) as they went back to their homes and worked 72 hours a week against the 54 or 56 as the case might be in this country.'³⁴

Of these matters, that of working hours was least contentious. Dundee employers were simultaneously keen to resist any further restriction in Scotland, but keen to see legislation introduced in India. On the first half of this policy, they seem around this time to have found acquiescence or even support from the local unions.³⁵

³³ *Second Report*, Minutes of Evidence, Q 6187.

³⁴ DCC 29 September 1886. The President of the DCC at this time was J.F.Low, head of the biggest textile machinery company in the Dundee area.

³⁵ DCC 24 December 1890; 25 June 1891.

While the Chamber was moving, albeit gradually, in a protectionist direction, the City's parliamentary representation remained firmly Liberal and free trade.³⁶ On the issue of protectionism the senior local MP, John Leng, was unbending, showing strong hostility to protectionist sentiment.³⁷ But it was the issue of the Indian Factory Acts that drew Leng most directly into the issue of how to respond to Indian competition.

The first of such Acts dated from 1881, a very conservative piece of legislation, that only restricted the working hours of children (to 9 hours per day), with a minimum age of 7, and provided for the fencing of machinery.³⁸ The Lancashire cotton producers strongly pressed for this legislation, and this was part of a two-pronged struggle by these producers against competition from India, the other being the fight to reduce Indian duties on cotton good imports.³⁹ The second of these struggles has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention, because of what many historians have seen as the key role of arguments about free trade and protection in defining the relations between Britain and her colonies, including India.⁴⁰ That attention has focussed on the cotton industry both because of the significance of cotton goods to the British economy, and the crucial role of exports to India in sustaining the Lancashire

³⁶ A Labour MP, Alexander Wilkie, was elected in 1906, but he was a 'Lib-Lab' firmly in favour of free trade.

³⁷ DCA DCC GD/CC/4/7 Minutes 29 September 1891, 18 January 1894, 23 February 1894, 20 September 1894, 26 February 1895.

³⁸ Chow, *Indian Factory Legislation*, pp.1-11.

³⁹ Das, *Factory Legislation*, pp.7-8.

⁴⁰ Harnetty, 'The Indian Cotton Duties Controversy, 1894- 96'. On the high politics of these debates Gopal, *British Policy in India*.

industry.⁴¹ In the case of jute much less has been written, and this in part reflects the fact that Indian tariffs were never a major preoccupation in Dundee. There was a brief spat in the 1860s, as already noted, but the Indian market was never a major one for Dundee's exports; her problems with Indian competition lay overwhelmingly in third country markets. This helps to explain why so much more of Dundee's attention was on the Factory Acts, as opposed to Lancashire, where there was this 'two-pronged' approach.

Dundee's presence was not felt either in the coming of the initial legislation of 1881, nor in the debates of the following decade down to the amending Act of 1891. In the 1880s the Manchester Chamber of Commerce continued to call for the toughening of the 1881 Act, and the 1891 Act did strengthen the existing provisions.⁴² The 1891 Act was being criticised as early as 1893, and this round of controversy drew in Dundee.⁴³ An article in the *Advertiser* at the beginning of that year initiated a debate which was to draw Dundee into a sharp exchange of views with Calcutta jute interests.⁴⁴ The Calcutta jute employers, through the Indian Jute Manufacturers Association (IJMA), denounced the hypocrisy of the Dundee jute owners, stressing the poor conditions in Dundee mills.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Tomlinson, 'Anglo-Indian Economic Relations'.

⁴² Das, *Factory Legislation*, pp.40-41; Chow, *Indian Factory Legislation*, pp.18-19, 22. For the complex of forces at work in this particular Act, Gilbert, 'Lord Lansdowne'.

⁴³ As all the commentators note: Chow, *Indian Factory Legislation*, p.24; Das, *Factory Legislation*, pp.94-98; Kydd, *A History*, pp.71-79.

⁴⁴ *Advertiser* 28 January 1893; Stewart, *Jute and Empire*, pp. 63-73 recounts this episode in detail, largely from the point of view of the IJMA.

⁴⁵ *Advertiser* 7 March 1893.

In the following year debate on the issue was exacerbated when the Hastings Mill in Calcutta installed electric light, which Dundee interpreted as incompatible with the restrictions on hours imposed by the 1891 Act. At a time of desires to restrict output, the IJMA was unhappy with this innovation, but united behind responding robustly to Dundee's further criticisms.⁴⁶ By June 1894 the DCC was approaching the Chambers of Commerce of other textile centres in Lancashire and Yorkshire about making representations to the India Office, with the issue already having been raised in the Lancashire cotton towns. The DCC argued that, in particular, the clauses on the employment of women were not being followed.⁴⁷ In addition, the matter was raised in the House of Commons by Sir John Leng.⁴⁸

The nature of Dundee's complaints was well summarised by the *Courier*. Noting that the Dundee trade was depressed, it went on 'The Indian Factory Act, the real nature of which is not thoroughly understood in this country, gives the Calcutta and Bombay mill-owners enormous advantages over Dundee and Manchester, which are the principal sufferers from Indian competition. Lads and men engaged in mills working on the shift system may be employed by day and night for six days in the week, or 144 hours a week without rest, and for 141 hours in mills using the electric or other artificial light but not working on the shift system. In mills not using artificial light, men and lads are kept at work from dawn to dusk, about fourteen hours a day, in the hottest season of the year. Lads and men are only protected by the Act of 1891 in so

⁴⁶ Stewart, *Jute and Empire*, p.64.

⁴⁷ DCA DCC Minutes 27 June 1894.

⁴⁸ *Hansard* vol 25, cols 179-80, 1 June 1894.

far as they are allowed one day's rest in the seven, and in factories not working on the shift system, half an hour's interval for the meals at noon. Against this the British 56 ½ hours a week appears a most liberal measure.'⁴⁹

Debate at the DCC in 1894 revealed some of the political tensions surrounding Dundee's role in pressing for strengthening of the Indian Act. There was an attack on the perceived hypocrisy of Liberals in supporting factory legislation at home, but not in India, and an urging that Dundee electors should put pressure on their two Liberal MPs (Leng and Robertson) to take action. In response Leng sought to depoliticise the issue, and advocated allying with Lancashire to bring pressure to bear: 'He did not think it would be difficult to show that the factories in this country were placed at a most serious disadvantage in comparison with the factories founded in India, a part of the British dominions, by British men, and worked under British management for British interests. Why they in India should have such immense preponderating advantages over them in Dundee or their friends in Lancashire, seemed to him utterly unreasonable'.⁵⁰ This position put Leng in seeming alliance with his political opponents, the local Liberal Unionist party, who favoured toughening Indian factory legislation, though as suggested below, his position remained equivocal.⁵¹

Other speakers insisted any such action would be motivated entirely by philanthropic motives. The Lord Provost, after reminding his listeners that the British Factory Acts

⁴⁹ *Courier* 23 June 1894

⁵⁰ Report of DCC meeting 26 December 1894 in *Courier* 27 December 1894. A few weeks later Leng was quoted as having told his constituents that on this issue 'it was necessary that change should be made': *Courier* 10 January 1895.

⁵¹ *Courier* 29 January 1895.

‘were brought into operation on the grounds of humanity’, went on to ‘and that was one of the grounds on which they should approach the Secretary of State for India’. While recognising that ‘the Indian factory system was most injurious to industry here’, he proclaimed ‘they did not want protection’ and the grounds for action were that ‘the worker in India were (sic) fellow-citizens under the Crown.’⁵²

Another contributor made the link between ownership of the Dundee mills and Factory Acts, arguing that unlike a situation where capital was invested in a foreign country, where the investor was reasonably subject to the laws of the country invested in, in the Calcutta case the jute mills ‘had not been established by the natives of that country, but by the people of this country—people who were amenable to the laws of the United Kingdom; and their property ultimately depended on the protection on the protection of the British force, supported by taxation in this country’.⁵³

Readers of the Dundee newspapers were made well aware of the Calcutta response to Dundee’s agitation on the Factory Acts. The *Courier* of 27 March 1895 quoted ‘The Englishman’ published in Calcutta, summarising the chairman of the IJMA, George Lyell, recent comments on the idea of applying the British Factory Acts to India: ‘conditions of labour in India, and especially on this side of India, are so wholly different from anything obtaining in Dundee as to make a common law, or system of work, impossible of operation in the two cities’. Lyell went on to argue that, if, under pressure from home, shorter hours are to be insisted on in India, ‘then Indian manufacturers will exact, and must exact, more labour from each individual than they

⁵² Report of DCC meeting 26 December 1894 in *Courier* 27 December 1894.

⁵³ Report of DCC meeting 26 December 1894 in *Courier* 27 December 1894

have hitherto done; the result will be that pressure from home, so far from reducing Indian competition is likely to make that competition more and more effective’.

Further attacks on the Dundee jute owners were reported in the local press through 1895. In October an article from the Calcutta newspaper *Capital* was reported as suggesting that the Dundonian proponents of tougher Factory Acts for India had given up the pretence that their motives were philanthropic: ‘The motive was shown to be as pure and unsophisticated as Keiller’s marmalade’. Later the same month the Elgin Mills company in Cawnpore was reported as saying that ‘working in the leisurely manner usually followed by women and children in India, the maxima of 11 and 7 hours respectively, with compulsory intervals now ruling, are in comparison with English rules, certainly not too great.’ A similar theme was evident in the comments of Messrs Dyer of Simla, who argues against assimilation of Indian to British rules because ‘the native if India, they say, prefers working lazily for a rather longer number of hours, instead of more briskly for a shorter period, and the existing system is no doubt better suited for the Indian climate and people’.⁵⁴

In the wake of this controversy Leng visited India in 1895/6, and published a series of letters in the *Advertiser*.⁵⁵ He argued that the biggest advantage of Calcutta in competition with Dundee was much lower wages (somewhere around one-sixth of Dundee levels, he suggested). But this did not translate into lower living standards for Indian workers, because of the much reduced demand for clothing in the Indian heat,

⁵⁴ Courier 11 October 1895.

⁵⁵ Leng, *Letters*; see Stewart, *Jute*, pp. 73-4 for the conduct of this visit.

low food prices (especially for the prevalent vegetarian diet), and ‘nominal’ rents. Citing some illustrative family budgets, he argued that wages in Calcutta were such that a family of five, all working in the industry, could meet all their needs and save up to forty per cent of their income.⁵⁶ Similarly, Leng argued that the shift system worked in the Calcutta mills fitted with the local norms: ‘the habits of the natives, consequent on the greater heat during nine months of the year, their weaker constitution, the distance in some cases of their dwellings, and their love of bathing led them to prefer working in what may be described as alternating shifts, so that they might work at two different parts of the day with a pretty long interval between’.⁵⁷ His conclusion was that Dundee could not hope to compete in the basic products of bags and sacking, but could prosper by combining movement ‘up-market’ to more sophisticated products, and searching for new, less coarse and more versatile fibres than jute.⁵⁸

These themes were reiterated when Leng returned to Dundee and addressed the DCC. He stressed the advantages of Calcutta: ‘The astonishing cheapness of native labour, wages being on average less than one-fourth what they are here, and although one-third more hands are required, and the cost of European superintendence is heavy, the low wages bill on the aggregate tells immensely in favour of Indian mills’.⁵⁹ He

⁵⁶ Leng, *Letters*, pp.57-59.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.63-64.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.111-116. Leng argued that the most important reform to working conditions would be to ban Sunday working, a point he pressed in the House of Commons: *Hansard* vol. 37 col. 1217, 27 February 1896; also vol. 40 cols 1580-1585, 18 May 1896.

⁵⁹ DCA, DCC GD/CC/4/8 Minutes 7 April 1896. This speech is reproduced in *DYB* 1896 pp.91-94. An attack on Leng’s failure to support assimilation of the Indian Factory Acts was published in the

linked this to the argument that the Factory Acts were largely irrelevant to the competition issue. While accepting that the Indian Act conferred a greater ‘elasticity of working’ than in Scotland, he went on: ‘I am satisfied that the Indian method of working by shifts is adapted to the climatic conditions and the habits of the people, and is not open to attack on humanitarian grounds, since the hours any of the women and children are employed not only do not exceed but are often fewer than in our own mills’.⁶⁰

Leng linked the genesis of the Calcutta industry in Dundee to a view that ‘it would not benefit Calcutta, as the phrase is, to wipe out Dundee, from which its own vitality has been and is being largely drawn’. More practically he argued Dundee could survive by developing the finer end of the jute business, but alongside this advocated developing the use of a different raw material, rhea. But more generally he urged energy and perseverance in seeking out new commercial opportunities. There is no clear evidence on how this talk was received by the industry in Dundee, though one respondent noted that while Sir John spoke of energy and perseverance, ‘unfortunately, energy and perseverance alone will not suffice to do away with the stubborn facts.’ Leng was undoubtedly increasingly out of step with the growing protectionist views of the Chamber. Shortly after Leng’s address the Chamber got a long-delayed response from the India Office, saying that the Government of India was

Courier, 9 April 1896. On the same day Leng wrote to the paper stressing that contrary to the claims of a previous correspondent ‘I have not one penny of interest in any Calcutta mill.’

⁶⁰ Ibid.

not prepared to modify the Factory Acts. This, for the time being, seems to have closed the matter.⁶¹

These intensive debates of the mid-1890s, and their outcomes, allow us to assess most of the key issues in how Dundee came to think about Indian competition, as well as suggesting why the current political economy of the Raj restricted the impact of Dundee's views and actions.

We can start by noting Metcalf's argument that the British in the time of the Raj never had a single view of India. Rather, there existed, he contends, 'as the British contemplated India, an enduring tension between two ideals, one of similarity and the other of difference...At no time was the British vision of India ever informed by a single coherent set of ideas. To the contrary, the ideals sustaining the imperial enterprise in India were always shot through with contradiction and inconsistency'.⁶² Metcalf is concerned with understandings that underpinned the *governance* of India, and he does not deal with economic issues. However, his broad framework gives us a way of thinking about the peculiarities of the Dundonian response to Calcutta.

A key part of the rhetoric of those Dundonians who believed that the Indian Factory Acts should match the British was the idea of 'equality within the Empire'. In this view Calcutta capitalists, most of whom were at this time themselves British, should work their mills under a common legal framework; as the IJMA's Clarke had suggested, what was being suggested was an assimilation of Indian rules to those

⁶¹ DCA DCC Minutes 25 June 1896.

⁶² Metcalf, *Ideologies*, p.x.

prevailing in Britain.⁶³ The alternative view, which Leng, after some equivocation came to, was an approach which emphasized *difference*. In this account any such assimilation would be entirely inappropriate, because Indian society and the economic activity it supported were fundamentally distinct from society and economy in Scotland. This distinctiveness was partly a matter of climate, with significant impact on hours and intensity of work, but also ‘cultural’, relating to attitudes to work. Hence the idea that Indian workers did not conform to European norms in which there was a total separation of workplace from all other activities, and whilst at the workplace an intense focus on work was to be expected.⁶⁴

Such views were not new. In 1879 Alexander Robertson had given two speeches in Dundee on ‘Our Indian Empire’, in one of which he spoke of India ‘as a country essentially different from our own in all that pertains to modes of life, its customs, its laws, and its religion’.⁶⁵ But such notions were especially strongly believed in Dundee by many of those who were compelled to come to terms with Indian competition. For example, one of the most extensive accounts of Calcutta mills embodying a powerful sense of difference was given by the *Advertiser’s* correspondent in Calcutta in 1894.⁶⁶ Drawing on the experience of the Hastings Mill,

⁶³ Though some wanted to differentiate between ‘fairness’ and assimilation: DCC Meeting 26 June 1895 in *Courier*, 27 June 1895.

⁶⁴ Historical analysis of the actual conditions of workers in Calcutta jute mills is very extensive, two of the most important contributions being: Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working –Class History*; Sen, *Women and Labour*.

⁶⁵ Robertson, *Two Speeches*, p.84.

⁶⁶ These articles were gathered together into an article entitled ‘The Calcutta Jute Mills’ in the *Dundee Year Book* (DYB) for 1894, pp. 93-130.

he argued that the Calcutta workers welcomed ‘paternal despotism’ in the factory, and that because the work patterns suited their needs, they desired neither to belong to a trade union nor to see tightened legal intervention in their working lives. The possibility of shiftworking did not mean long hours for Calcutta workers: ‘no individual woman or child works more hours per week than the corresponding class of worker does at home’.⁶⁷ The existing Factory Act was, it was argued, were largely a dead letter. However, the correspondent went on to argue that almost all Europeans working in the mills would favour a cut in the working week because: ‘They would be more efficiently supervised, they would make more money than they now do, and the mills would be kept up to the mark, and be more valuable properties at the end of the year than they can possibly be under such wear and tear as they undergo at present’.⁶⁸

This same article contains a characteristically confusing picture of working conditions in Calcutta mills. On the one hand it conjures up an almost Utopian picture: ‘The shifters are as merry a set of youngsters as one could wish to see, and not a whit behind their white brethren and sisters in Dundee in the time they take to shift a frame’. This happy picture is extended to working mothers who ‘suckle their children for two years at least, and take them to the mill with them. It is no uncommon thing in the preparing department to see a lot of youngsters lying sleeping among the jute while their mothers are attending to the breakers and finishers. When the youngsters waken up they run a get a little refreshment from the maternal breasts, and then sit together and play with some broken bobbins they had captured’.⁶⁹ But elsewhere a

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.95.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.96.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p.97, 98.

more negative picture is given, where working patterns are seen as oppressive rather than happily adapted to local conditions: 'Many of the women are practically, if not actively, employed hanging on to the work from dawn to sundown'.⁷⁰

Everyone knew that wages in Calcutta were lower than those in Dundee, though many also pointed out that the jute mills on the Hooghly paid considerably higher wages than most occupations in Bengal. These lower wages posed problems for Dundee's understanding of India. Unsurprisingly, employers in Scotland were generally no more likely to regard Calcutta's wage levels as exploitative than did Calcutta employers; on this matter capitalist solidarity seems to have generally dominated over any desire to attack the conduct of competitors. (The same reticence plainly did not operate with regard to working conditions—hence the issue of the Factory Acts). On the other hand, Dundee's employers were keen to stress that wages in Dundee would have more scope for increase in the absence of low- wage competition from India.

Estimates of how much lower wages were in Calcutta were invariably accompanied by a 'difference' narrative, which told how Indian life styles meant that such low wages actually delivered a high standard of living to 'native' workers. Leng, who suggested Calcutta wages were somewhat less than a quarter of those in Dundee, but that 'It is most incredible of all that the wages they receive are considerably in excess of their requirements, and that they can, if they choose, and most of them do, save as much in some months work at the mill as enables them to go home and live at ease for a considerable time, until they have spent their money, and return to work for more.'⁷¹

⁷⁰ Ibid., p.114.

⁷¹ Leng, *Letters from India*, p.57.

The high standard of living on low wages was explained by Leng as a result of the climate, reducing the need for shelter, clothing and food. But beyond that, he argued, ‘the habits of their lives are the results of centuries of experience. Their wants are few and easily supplied...they have never been used to working steadily eight, nine, ten hours a day, or day after day, week after week. Short spells of work and long intervals of rest are what they and their fathers before them have been familiar with. The, to them, comparatively high wages of the mills are necessary to compensate them for an unpleasant change of habits.’⁷²

This analysis, in which any objection to low wage competition is undermined by stressing how in Indian conditions such wages bought high standards of living, is common in contemporary European representations of Calcutta. It was strikingly evident in another, distinctive, ‘report back’ to Dundee from India, that by two women journalists, Marie Imandt and Bessie Maxwell, sent on a tour round the world, by the *Courier* in 1894. This is distinctive in its gender dimension—not only were the journalists women, but when they reported on conditions in Indian industry they put

⁷² Leng, *Letters from India*, p.57. This kind of argument links directly to much later academic and policy arguments in the field of development economics as it flourished after the Second World War. In this literature a key concept was the idea of a ‘backward-sloping demand curve for labour’, suggesting that workers in poor countries did not follow European norms in which labour supply increases as wages increase. Rather, it was argued, workers in poor countries supplied enough labour to achieve a target level of income, and if wages rose this target could be achieved with fewer hours of work. Enormous efforts went into investigating this alleged phenomenon, seen by some as major cultural obstacle to ‘modernization’, but by others as based on structural aspects of underdeveloped economies, especially the attachment of rural labour to the land.

special emphasis on the women workers.⁷³ The first relevant report was from Bombay: 'Dundee working girls work for a few shillings a week. Rents are high and coals dear, a great deal of clothing is needed merely to keep out the cold. At prayer meetings these girls give their substance to send to India to convert the heathen. Why? These heathen, the very poorest of them, have a thousand things our starving people at home do not have.'⁷⁴

Assertions about the superiority of worker's living conditions in India over those in Scotland were also made in their reports from Calcutta. Innadt explicitly drew this comparison from a women's point of view, arguing that 'When I declare that women working in Calcutta for 1 rupee 8 anas (2d) a week, there will not be wanting those utterances of amazement will involve visions of women starving in Dundee on 8 shillings. To draw a parallel is not possible for those who have not seen the two sides of the question. It is scarcely conceivable, but true, that circumstances forge a chain mighty enough to render the woman 1r. 8a. a week, happier, more comfortable, and in some ways even the superior to the 8s Dundee woman'.⁷⁵

How did these approaches to understanding India map on to Dundee's views on the practical response to Calcutta competition? Here there are some important ideological positions evident. Most (but not all) members of the DCC seem to have supported a policy of assimilation in factory legislation, emphasizing 'level playing field' within

⁷³ Keracher, *Dundee's Two Intrepid Ladies*.

⁷⁴ *Courier* 24 May June 1894 (this article is not included in Keracher's collection).

⁷⁵ *Courier* 16 July 1894, quoted Keracher, *Dundee's Two Intrepid Ladies*, pp.56-7.

the Empire style arguments.⁷⁶ Conversely, Leng and the opponents of assimilation portrayed the toughening the Indian Factory Acts as a protectionist measure, undermining the ‘natural’ advantages that India had in producing jute goods in accordance with its own societal norms. This went along with emphasizing differences in cultural conditions, so that any notion of complaint about ‘unfair’ competition based on lower wages paid in Calcutta was pre-empted. In that sense Leng, though not an ally of the DCC in what he saw as their protectionist tendencies, allied himself with the employers (both in Calcutta and Dundee) against any notion that workers in Calcutta were underpaid.

Many factors were in play in deciding the form of India’s Factory Acts, but one element in limiting their scope and effectiveness was the ‘difference’ narrative, which undermined the drive for assimilation. The difference narrative, while not always coherent, clearly suggested that legislation akin to the British Factory Acts would be an alien imposition in a fundamentally different environment. As a result, it was argued, if imposed, they would undermine the ‘natural’ rhythms of factory production in Calcutta, rhythms adapted to the climatic, cultural and economic norms of the sub-continent. The motives of those who put forward such arguments were undoubtedly mixed. Some, most obviously Calcutta employers, used such notions to defend the *status quo*, and this was very much the official view of the IJMA. However, as noted especially by the *Advertiser*’s correspondent in 1894, there were those who saw the

⁷⁶ This was at a time when the Chamber was becoming noticeably more protectionist in orientation, but protectionism was put forward primarily in the form of allowing *retaliatory* tariffs, and so could be reconciled with the idea that such protection would deliver ‘true free trade’ by forcing down the tariffs of protected countries.

imposition of such Acts as a desirable impetus to ‘modernization’ in India; these were people who wanted to supersede India’s ‘difference’ with European modernity.⁷⁷

From a political economy perspective Dundee employer’s desire to toughen the Indian legislation was not helped by the city’s having Liberal MPs who coupled this difference narrative to a suspicion of any measure that might be deemed protectionist. Of course, Dundee’s political weight would in any event have been small, even if its spokesmen had been united. Allowing for the districts around the city with close economic connections, the largest number of MPs likely to see themselves as needing to represent jute interests would have been seven or eight—compared with 58 in Lancashire in 1895.⁷⁸ This disparity suggests why Dundee’s employers sought co-operation with Lancashire on Indian matters, though as suggested above Factory Acts were more important to Dundee than Lancashire because Lancashire had a direct stake in keeping open the Indian market for its goods. But even when the two textile areas were united, they were up against a major and growing obstacle in the political economy of Britain’s rule in India.

Britain never had a strategy of ‘economic development’ in India—indeed the term itself would be anachronistic if applied to the Raj. Insofar as the Government of India encouraged economic development, its chief motive was fiscal not developmental. The aim was to raise sufficient revenues to pay the costs of Britain’s civil and military

⁷⁷ The argument that regulatory legislation of this kind is often welcomed by the more efficient producers as a way of forcing less efficient competitors out of business is a standard theme in some economics literature.

⁷⁸ Clarke, *Lancashire*, p.7.

presence in the sub-continent. In addition from the late nineteenth century London wanted to conciliate Indian opinion and major interest groups, by not being seen to block employment-creating and expansionary economic activities.⁷⁹ This dynamic created strong opposition within the British government in India, and at the India Office in London, to acting, or being seen to act, as a tool of British textile interests; cotton and jute were major Indian industries with huge employment effects, and very substantial economic linkages.⁸⁰ These pressures were clearly at play in run up to the 1891 Act, when the Viceroy, Lord Lansdowne, negotiated between his masters in London, pressure from Lancashire, and domestic Indian politics, leading to an Act which fell far short of assimilation.⁸¹

The arguments of the mid-1890s, detailed above, were unsuccessful in bringing about any significant change in the 1891 Act. There continued to be no appetite in government circles in London or Calcutta to accede to pressures from British textile interests, not least because of the concurrent controversy over imposing import duties on cotton goods.⁸² Concessions to Lancashire on Indian duties reduced the likelihood of acceding to British industries pressures for changes in factory legislation, and the India Office gave an explicit repudiation of Dundee's claims about the failings of the 1891 Act in 1896.⁸³ There was no significant legislation for twenty years after 1891,

⁷⁹ Tomlinson, *Political Economy*, pp.13-17,

⁸⁰ Bagchi, *Private Investment*, chapters 7, 8.

⁸¹ Gilbert, 'Lord Lansdowne'.

⁸² Harnetty, 'Indian Cotton Duties'; Das, *Factory Legislation*, p.99.

⁸³ Details in *Courier*, 8 May 1896.

though from 1905 a ‘period of investigation’ laid the basis for a new Factory Act in 1911.⁸⁴

IV

The Indian Factory Acts issue never loomed so large in Dundee’s thoughts and actions after the 1890s, though the issue came back to some prominence around 1911, (see below). In the early 1900s the setting up of the Tariff Commission enabled the jute employers to rehearse their complaints about the weaknesses of the Indian Factory Acts, alongside their complaints about protectionism in American and European markets.⁸⁵ But in the years after the turn of the century it was the issue of trade protection which predominated in the employers’ concerns.

While protectionist sentiment was growing amongst the jute manufacturers from the 1880s, the DCC was wary of getting directly involved in the political contention over free trade. In 1902, a special meeting decided against protesting against the newly imposed registration duty on corn, which many free traders saw as beginning down the slippery slope to protection.⁸⁶ But in 1904 this reticence diminished, following Joseph Chamberlain’s initiative in re-opening the fiscal question, and setting up a Fiscal Commission. Early in that year the first protectionist motion got through the Dundee Chamber, though this reiterated support for the principle of ‘unrestricted free

⁸⁴ Clow, *Indian Factory Legislation*, pp.23-45

⁸⁵ LSE archives TC1 2/7 *Report of the Tariff Commission vol. 2 The Textile trades. Part 7-Evidence on the Flax, Hemp and Jute Industries* (London, 1905) Questions 3926-3927, 3943.

⁸⁶ DCA DCC GD/CC/4/8 Minutes 22 April 1902

trade', before going on to support 'freedom of action in fiscal negotiations'.⁸⁷ Most of the discussion at the Chamber was on European competition. The political impossibility of getting direct restrictions on Indian competition was clearly recognised, though the possibility of addressing that issue through Factory legislation was held out by some as an alternative response. Thus one opponent of protectionism asked whether 'any responsible statesman prepared to propose that the Mother Country should be protected against the competition of its own great dependencies' before going on to deplore the impact of the British Factory Acts in increasing Dundee's costs. He also pointed out that Chamberlain had said little about Calcutta, but 'but they might take it that he had no idea of favouring them at the expense of Calcutta'.⁸⁸

In supporting the anti-protectionist minority, Leng stressed that Britain had no overall trade problems, although 'a few particular trades were not as prosperous as they once were'. Changing patterns of production were normal: 'one fails and another prospers. One rises and another decays'. The problems of jute were down to local conditions, and in the case of jute the problem was clearly Calcutta. 'The mills on the Hooghly, several of which have been built by Dundee capital, and most of them planned, engined, spindled, and loomed by Dundee engineers, financed and directed from Panmure Street, within a few yards of this Exchange—these Dundee-owned and managed mills have been the chief invaders of Dundee markets, and in a sense the most formidable dumpers of cheap jute goods in competition with those made in

⁸⁷ DCA DCC Minutes 15 January 1904. The vote was 92 to 45. For a broad view of local jute employers' opinions on protection see 'The Protectionist Revival' *DYB1903*, pp.160-176.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, speech by JC Buist.

Dundee mills'. He went on to ask whether 'any responsible statesman prepared to propose that the Mother Country should be protected against the competition of its own great dependencies?'⁸⁹

Others pointed out how problematic an emphasis on protecting colonial trade was for an industry like jute, which sent eighty per cent of its exports to markets outside the Empire. On India, the stress on the fact that India was a free trade country went along with an attack on the Indian Factory Act: 'But India has more than Free Trade. It has a Factory Act which is an injustice to Britain, and calls for something more like an equality of conditions within the Empire, or, in other words, an approach to fair play'. He went on to cite the long hours worked in one Calcutta mill, albeit accepting that 'under the shift system they work fewer hours than is done here'⁹⁰

Despite the vote in favour of retaliation in 1904, the Chamber seems to have been wary of being embroiled in the political arguments about protectionism. In September 1905 they agreed to 'sit on the fence' on the issue in the run up to the 1906 general election.⁹¹ That election took place in exceptionally buoyant conditions for the Dundee jute industry, and this may have reduced the intensity of concern about Indian competition, and the Factory Act question was notably absent from election contention.⁹² By contrast, the 1908 by-election in Dundee, which brought Winston

⁸⁹ Ibid., speech by Sir John Leng.

⁹⁰ Ibid., speech by Mr G. Thom.

⁹¹ DCA DCC GD/CC/4/8 Minutes 29 September 1905.

⁹² *DYB* 1906, pp.14-25. After the election, the *Courier* carried an editorial calling for assimilation, on the grounds that 'It is in the cause of humanity that factory laws have been framed, and humanity has quite as strong claims in India as in other parts of the British Empire', but this comment was

Churchill in as the Liberal MP was fought in much worse economic conditions, and the issue of free trade figured particularly prominently in the political debate. The Unionist candidate, Sir George Baxter, head of one of the largest jute and linen companies, and sought to make the protectionist case, though his biggest emphasis was on the Irish Home Rule issue. Strikingly, he focused attention on European not Indian competition.⁹³

The Dundee jute industry recovered from a little after 1908, but it was not until 1912 that boom conditions temporarily returned. The years immediately prior to the First World War were notable, in Dundee as in much of Britain, for a much greater degree of industrial unrest than had previously been usual. While jute was never the epicentre of labour discontent in the city, there were major disputes, and industrial relations issues seem to have gained much greater prominence in the concerns of the jute employers as a result.

But Indian issues still stimulated debate. It had long been perceived in Dundee that co-operation and price-fixing amongst Calcutta manufacturers would reduce competitive pressure.⁹⁴ But some regarded this co-operation as inhibited by activity in the raw jute market. A highly racialized account of this activity appeared in the *Advertiser* in 1911, in an article titled 'Marwaris and the Jute trade' which explicitly attacked that group. They were alleged to have been 'gradually tightening their grip'

occasioned by a speech by the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, not local politics: *Courier* 4 September 1906.

⁹³ Tomlinson, 'Responding to Globalization?'

⁹⁴ The IJMA had sought to raise prices and profits by short-time working and other forms of co-operation since the 1880s, though with vary variable success; Stewart, *Jute and Empire*, pp.55-60.

on the raw jute trade, and their speculative activity was said to have ‘upset all industrial calculations.’ These remarks were made in the context of considerable instability in the Calcutta industry, including mill closures which led some to say ‘Good to Dundee may come out of the evil to Calcutta.’⁹⁵

In 1911 fresh provisions were proposed for the Indian Factory Act, and a new argument about this Act was made in Dundee. This accepted that the new clauses would not have a significant impact on Calcutta’s cost advantages, but averred that the amended legislation would for the first time bring European supervisors into direct contact with mill-hands, who previously had been dealt with through the janadar.⁹⁶ But the key contention came from those in Calcutta opposed to the measure once again deploying the difference argument. They suggested that the measure was aimed at protecting the interests of manufacturers in England (sic) at the expense of Indian factory owners, and that ‘the proposed legislation is unsuited to India, as it is more or less a parody of English law’.⁹⁷ The proposed amendments to the Factory Act led to a suggested compromise between the Calcutta millowners and the Government of India, in which tighter controls on adult hours would be combined with a small lessening of limits on child labour. The *Advertiser* opined that ‘After the undisputed revelations regarding the grave abuses of child labour in Indian made at two separate official enquiries, it is surprising that such a proposal should have been entertained at all’. The paper went on to say that ‘the fact that the Calcutta “jute interest” is largely under

⁹⁵ *Advertiser* 3 January 1911.

⁹⁶ *Advertiser* 24 January 1911.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* In the event this compromise was rejected: *Advertiser* 20 March, 10 April 1911.

British control should be an additional incentive to refrain from any compromise which might afterwards seem to place its good faith under suspicion'.⁹⁸

In the spring of 1911 the export tax on Calcutta jute was agreed.⁹⁹ As previously noted, discussion of this tax was linked to the Dundonian advocacy of a differential export tax, favouring imperial users. A long article in the *Advertiser* argued that such a discriminatory tax would yield significant benefits for Dundee, whilst not harming Calcutta, because in practice the duty would be paid by the continental European purchaser. This was contrasted with what the author believed to be the serious damage the an undiscriminating new duty would do to both Calcutta and Dundee. The author invoked the events of 1865 and 1866, when, he suggested, the imposition of a similar tax had been quickly reversed by Dundee pressure: 'Dundee was then a power in the State, and might again become so'. But in fact Dundee was unable to resist the new duty, while on the differential tax its own views were divided, with the Liberal *Advertiser* continuing to oppose on anti-protectionist grounds.¹⁰⁰

1911 saw the Durbar in Delhi, a ceremony following the Coronation in which the new King visited Delhi with full imperial splendour. This event occasioned significant reflections in Dundee on the wider issues of India and empire. These reflections tended to follow broad difference narratives, typical of contemporary British writing

⁹⁸ *Advertiser* 7 March 1911.

⁹⁹ In March 1912 the DCC was pressing Churchill to find out how long this tax was intended to last: DCA DCC GD/CC/4/9 AGM 28 March 1912.

¹⁰⁰ *Advertiser* 16 December 1911, 23 December 1911 (these dates are inaccurate-it should be 1869).

However, by January 1916 such a tax found 'overwhelming support' in the DCC: DCA DCC GD/CC/4/9 EGM 20 January 1916; see also, *ibid.*, AGM 26 March 1917.

about India. One argued about the dangers of elementary education in India, in a country lacking the 'Western climate of thought and morality.' This was linked to a classic statement of the post-Mutiny consensus on how to approach India: 'It would be a mistake to attempt- and it could only be an attempt- to occidentalise India in the manner contemplated by Macaulay and the administrators of his day. India possesses a many strated civilization of her own, and the path of wisdom lies in developing, not crushing it—developing its best features, which is to say, developing those traits which link it to the civilization of Europe.'¹⁰¹ One trait which, happily for the British, India did not possess was apparently the idea of a nation. In an article significantly titled 'A People of Caste and No Nationality', the standard British view that caste was the bedrock of Indian society, and wholly differentiated it from Europe, was strongly re-asserted.¹⁰²

In 1912 the British Association held its annual meeting in Dundee, and, as in 1867, a booklet was prepared telling the delegates about Dundee. One piece in this booklet suggested the 'unwisdom of the indiscriminate extension' of Calcutta production in recent years evident in most of them working on short-time. It noted that the restrictions imposed by the 1911 Indian Factory Act took the place of this short-time working 'but there seems to be in this prolonged depression experienced by the Indian mills a compensatory nemesis rebuking an author who published in 1909 a booklet , wherein with 'Maharajic' scorn, reference is made to 'harmless wails of their competitor on the Tay'.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ 'The King-Emperor in India', *Advertiser* 4 December 1911.

¹⁰² *Advertiser* 30 November 1911.

¹⁰³ Ritchie, 'Textiles', in *British Association 1912*, pp.266-282, p.280.

These wails had indeed been largely 'harmless'. Dundee's pressures were largely ineffectual in shaping the rapid development of the Calcutta industry, which by World War One had grown to three times that in Dundee. While that development had been far from smooth, and accompanied by major instability, it had in particular been little affected by the Factory Acts. The political weight of Dundee in the imperial scheme of things was much too small for its views to have much impact.

But, in addition, Dundee employers' response to Calcutta's competitive pressure was weakened by their lack of agreement about the nature of the competition they faced, and how far Indian conditions justified treating this imperial possession on a par with the home country. As noted above, many adhered to a difference narrative which was not necessarily compatible with a view that both countries should be subject to a uniform legal framework as befitted components of an empire. Liberals like Leng saw that this narrative could be used to undermine what he saw as the protectionist intent of this assimilation strategy; and the evidence suggests a significant minority of Dundee's jute employers shared his views.

In adhering to a difference narrative in seeking to understand Indian industrial activity Dundee's employers were not alone. When a sophisticated social commentator like Beatrice Webb assessed the economic effects of such difference she wrote of the worker in the cotton mills of Agra: 'He does not care enough for his earnings. He prefers to work away in semi-starvation rather than overwork himself. However low

his standard of life his standard of work is lower—at any rate when he is working for an employer he does not like. And his irregularities are baffling.’¹⁰⁴

This difference narrative may usefully be contrasted with approaches which see the ‘culture’ of Indian industrial workers as akin to those in more advanced European industrial economies, but driven by different incentives to behave differently. Thus, for example, Gupta argues, in the case of the Indian cotton industry, that lower effort and lower productivity were the worker’s a rational response to lower wages.¹⁰⁵ This contrast helps us to see that, seen in a broader context of debates about ‘orientalism’, the difference narrative was by no means unambiguous in its implications. On the one hand it presented Indian worker’s (purported) behaviour as a product of their culture and society; and in that sense emphasized the embeddedness and unchanging nature of the difference. On the other hand, as deployed in Dundee, ‘difference’ did not necessarily imply a sense of European superiority. Indeed, as we have seen, for example in the case of Imandt (and who had perhaps less of an ideological axe to grind than Leng), this difference could be used to contrast Dundee’s economy and society *unfavourably* with that of the imagined Calcutta.

As regards the issue between Mackenzie and Porter regarding the degree of consciousness of empire amongst ordinary Britons, the evidence from the debate about jute in Dundee suggests two conclusions.¹⁰⁶ First, the fact that for Dundonians empire had clear negative aspects in the form of competition hitting the local economy (and the Empire connection making a protective response to that

¹⁰⁴ Feaver, *The Webbs*, pp. 255-6.

¹⁰⁵ Gupta, ‘Wages, unions, and labour productivity’.

¹⁰⁶ For discussion of this issue for the inter-war period, see Thompson, *The Empire Strikes Back?* pp.78-82.

competition implausible) meant that Dundee was *not* like Liverpool, an ‘imperial city’ in the sense suggested by Haggerty et al.¹⁰⁷ This competitive aspect also differentiates it from Glasgow, to which in a Scottish context it is perhaps too easily coupled.¹⁰⁸ But second, as the contributors to this volume stress, this status is not simply determined by economics. While the significance for Liverpool of trade with the empire is rightly emphasized, so also is the importance of a powerful local pro-imperial politics in shaping popular consciousness.¹⁰⁹ Such a politics was absent in Dundee. Indian imperial competition, we may argue, *inhibited* the emergence of such a politics. Pro-empire politicians had to try and avoid addressing the issue of Indian competition because for them it posed an acute dilemma: how could local prosperity be safeguarded if doing so by the most obvious means, some kind of protective device, was ruled out by the bigger demands of imperial rule? Hence the focus on the very indirect mechanism of the Indian Factory Acts. Hence, also, Baxter’s characteristic focus on *European* rather than Indian competition in the 1908 election. Stress on the glories of Empire was common enough in Dundee, as elsewhere in Britain, in this period; but a locally resonant politics of empire was much more difficult to formulate.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Haggerty et al (eds.), *The Empire in one city?*

¹⁰⁸ Finlay, ‘National Identity, Union and Empire, c.1850-1970’, pp. 297,312.

¹⁰⁹ Steele, ‘Transmitting the Ideas of Empire’, pp. 138-9; J. Mackenzie, ‘Afterword’, pp.212.

¹¹⁰ When a local Empire-minded journalist composed an article for the British Association visit in 1912, he focused overwhelmingly on the city’s contribution to military manpower and empire emigration. The jute issue was passed over rapidly, with the comforting conclusion that even without Dundee’s role Calcutta jute would have developed, and indeed that their role in its development was evidence of the prescience of Dundonians: Templeton ‘What Dundee contributes to the Empire’.

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