

*Romantic Nationalism, De Quincey and the Public Debate about the  
First Opium War, 1839-42*

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This essay is concerned with romantic politics in the larger conceptual sense of period understandings of organic nationalism and romantic cosmopolitanism, involving concerns with British national identity; but also, with the more quotidian business of early nineteenth-century British party politics and public debate. Its subject is the debate about what is conventionally known as ‘the First Opium War’ between Britain and Qing China of 1839 to 1842. Although this is a highly significant and important historical event, it is seldom, if at all, discussed by romantic period scholars. When it is discussed, it is regarded as a kind of side-show in the development of romantic British orientalism, or with reference to Romanticism’s most powerful writer of prose, Thomas De Quincey. In such latter cases, it is often raised as a sort of supplementary subject to discussion of De Quincey’s earlier *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* of 1821, most notably those sections dealing with his opium nightmares and what has become the epitome of the romantic east-west encounter, the visit of the Malay to Dove cottage.<sup>1</sup> There are a substantial number of critical discussion of this encounter, for example, most recently, David Simpson and Eugenia Jenkins have powerfully interrogated the scene for its deployment of binaries of domestic and exotic, especially featuring those extraordinarily ambiguous and resonant commodity doppelgangers, opium and tea.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, we have new works on tea and empire by Markman Ellis and Erika Rappaport as well as new cultural histories of opium by Thomas Dormandy and Lucy

Inglis.<sup>3</sup> On the side of the discipline of historical enquiry numerous recent discussions of the opium trade and the opium war have been published. In particular, Julia Lovell's revisionist history of the war appeared in 2011 and Cambridge University Press published Joseph Lawson's translation of Mao Haijian's enormously detailed Chinese history of the war was translated into English in 2017.<sup>4</sup> A new biography of the most famous (or notorious) opium merchants, William Jardine and James Matheson by Richard Grace also appeared in 2014.<sup>5</sup>

In such historical writings, which take into the British public debate about the First Opium War, Thomas De Quincey's voice is seldom heard. Lovell has only one reference to him and it is parenthetical: '[t]he clichéd image of opium-smoking is of prostration and narcolepsy; to many (including Thomas De Quincey who walked the London Streets by night sustained by laudanum), it was a stimulant. Chinese coolie masses would refresh their capacity for backbreaking labour with midday opium breaks'.<sup>6</sup> An earlier study by Harry Gelber also has just one reference to De Quincey: '[n]o-one thought that Thomas De Quincey's famous "Confessions of an English Opium Eater", published in 1821, was evidence of anything remotely criminal'.<sup>7</sup> Older histories are similarly reticent. In his 1975 history of the Opium Wars Jack Beeching cites De Quincey's *Confessions* as a headnote to his chapter on the prelude to the war but nothing else.<sup>8</sup> Another, by Peter Ward Fay, writes quite inaccurately that De Quincey, 'living sick and solitary in Edinburgh—and making spasmodic efforts to cut his daily dose of laudanum from eight thousand drops to two or three hundred—did not so as far we know give China's numberless addicts a thought'.<sup>9</sup> This pattern was repeated in all the histories I checked. Only one study took De Quincey's *Blackwood's* essay of June 1840 on the war as a serious expression of a wider public opinion, but the author appears unaware the essay was authored by De Quincey.<sup>10</sup> At the time of publication believe the circulation of *Blackwood's* was around 8,000 though its cultural impact was more substantial than those figures would suggest. This was the second of two

significant publications on the 'Opium Question' in *Blackwood's*, the first appeared in March of 1840 and was authored by Alfred Mallalieu, a conservative writer on economic policy staunchly opposed to the free trade lobby of Richard Cobden and John Bright.<sup>11</sup>

De Quincey's involvement with the First Opium War was very personal. His son Horatio or Horace died in the conflict. De Quincey and his mother had managed to raise the substantial sum of £900 required for the purchase of his commission as an ensign in the 26th (Cameronian) Regiment of Foot, a Scottish infantry regiment of the British Army. The 26<sup>th</sup> Foot, as it was known, was currently stationed at Calcutta, embarking on 24 March 1840 with a strength of nine hundred men, bound for Singapore, where it was to rendezvous with the rest of the expeditionary force being prepared for service in the forthcoming war with China. Horace left Scotland in October of 1841 to join his new regiment, arriving on the island of Hong Kong (not yet a British colony), where he was to die just two months later, aged only twenty-two. In August of the following year, De Quincey was formally notified by the War Office of his death, apparently from a Malarial fever there. We do not know why Horace enlisted in the 26<sup>th</sup> Foot but in doing so he would be absolutely certain that the China war would be his destination. De Quincey is reported to have said later that he 'advised him against going to China', unhappy about service in the far east.<sup>12</sup> The key motive is not hard to guess. It must have been financial. A successful war against China would (and did) lead to the payment of substantial prize money as well as the possibilities of obtaining valuable 'loot'. China was a most lucrative destination and could make a young soldier's fortune and money was always short in the De Quincey household given De Quincey's opium addiction.

This essay is an attempt to restore De Quincey's 1840 essay on the opium trade and China to the public debate of its time, and to suggest ways in which, diverging from the consensus, it attempted to fashion what we might think if as one kind of 'romantic politics' in both a global and imperial context. It argues that, in many ways, the First Opium War was a

surprisingly romantic and literary war, perhaps as significant for the object of what we study as the wars of the French revolution and Napoleonic eras.

## II

Historians have long argued about the true causes of the First Opium War and the role played by the long-established triangular opium trade between Britain, India, and China; what was becoming the most important trade in the world in any single commodity.<sup>13</sup> It is well-known that throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the British demanded tea in ever increasing quantities for the beverage to assuage the nation's growing addiction. At that time, all the tea in the world came from China. The Qing was content to trade with British and other westerners but insisted on being paid in silver for the country's tea exports, thus causing a serious bullion to drain for the East India Company which had a monopoly (Until 1833) of the trade. The Company had to access large amounts of increasingly scarce Spanish South American silver dollars. The Chinese would not trade in significant volumes in any commodities with the British apart from raw India cotton goods, depending on the current level of demand. However, it became increasingly apparent that there was a steady and growing demand in China in the nineteenth century for opium, most of which was grown in British India and smoked mainly by the leisured classes for pleasure and relaxation. The opium trade had been formally illegal in China since 1729, although the prohibitions were regularly flouted. The Company, unwilling to breach Chinese law, auctioned its annual opium produce in Patna to independent private (or 'country') traders, the most famous of whom were William Jardine and James Matheson. The drug was then shipped to China on private vessels and sold off the coast in exchange for silver to Chinese smugglers who transported it to the mainland. The silver was then exchanged for bills by the Company in Canton and used to pay for its purchase of tea. The drain in silver and the problems

occasioned by the incrementally increasing use of the drug led to a series of attempts in the 1830s to enforce the prohibition of the trade, finally culminating in Commissioner Lin's imprisonment of the opium merchants at Canton and his destruction of their opium in 1839.<sup>14</sup> Opium in China was illegal and smoked, in Britain it was legal and generally 'eaten' in pill form or in a solution of alcohol, known as laudanum. The opium that was consumed in Britain was sourced from Turkey via Smyrna, although the 'Theban' or Egyptian variety was thought to be the best quality.<sup>15</sup> The well-known opium solution, 'Kendal's Black Drop' was reputed to be around four times stronger than laudanum and was favoured by serious connoisseurs, such as Lord Byron and S. T. Coleridge.<sup>16</sup>

The opium trade and increasing use of the drug with China first became seriously problematic in 1816 when the Jiaqing emperor issued new and severe penalties against those involved in supplying and consuming the drug. The cause of this increase in opium use was occasioned by the Company boosting the production of Indian opium, largely in an attempt to drive out of production the independently produced Malwa (Punjab) opium. This failed, and the supply of the drug grew exponentially, its cost plummeted and its affordability was enhanced. Chinese use of the drug now moved inward from the southern coast to the interior of the celestial empire and, given its reduced cost, across class boundaries. Faced with this crisis the Daoguang emperor (who inherited the imperial throne in 1820), initiated a serious debate between those who advocated the drug's prohibition and those who advocated its legalization. The prohibition school was victorious and Governor Lin Zexu was appointed as imperial commissioner to extirpate the trade.<sup>17</sup> Lin reached Canton on 10 March 1839. A week later, he issued an edict requiring all opium, including that being stored by the merchants in the outer Chinese waters, to be surrendered to the Chinese government immediately. In order to enforce obedience to this demand, Lin suspended all trade and detained the entire foreign community within their factories. He also demanded that all

foreign merchants sign a bond, the breaking of which was punishable by death. Learning of these events, the British superintendent of trade, Sir Charles Elliot eventually yielded to Lin's demands on 27 March. Believing that the safety of the merchants and their families depended on his decision, he ordered all British subjects to give up their opium stocks to Lin, with a promise to compensate them for the loss on behalf of the British government. 20,283 chests of opium were surrendered to the Chinese. Determined to drive the British entirely out of Chinese territory an armed confrontation with the British took place off the Kowloon peninsula on 4 September 1839. Serious intervention from the British government now seemed inevitable.

News of Commissioner Lin's activities had reached London in August 1839 (it took five months for intelligence to travel back). Palmerston as Foreign Secretary had then decided to send a fleet and troops. The government was weak, already facing loss of public confidence, industrial unrest, poor harvests. Abroad, they were confronted with rebellions in Ireland, Jamaica and Canada. The previous year a ten thousand strong force has been despatched to Afghanistan to replace the current, pro-Russian ruler with a British puppet, Shah Shuja. The idea of war with China, while popular with most, but not all, of the Canton merchants, was undesirable to the weak, unpopular, harassed and cash-strapped government, already facing a financial deficit of £2 million on the current account. The cabinet resolved to send an expeditionary force to China from India in November of 1839 without consulting parliament. Members of that cabinet included the president of the Board of Control of India, Byron's friend and executor, John Cam Hobhouse, and the new secretary of war, the poet, essayist and historian Thomas Babington Macaulay.

### III

The Chinese crisis of 1839 touched off a heated debate both within the British community in China and within British public opinion. Various opinions were advanced as to the fairness or injustice of Commissioner Lin's conduct and the wisdom of the actions of Sir Charles Elliot. The ethics of the opium trade and its legality were strongly questioned. The pro-Tory and anti-government *Times* attacked Melbourne's government, claiming that never before has 'our trading interests and our honour as a great and civilised nation have been brought into question country have been brought into question as in this instance'.<sup>18</sup> Among the many contributions to the debate, two of the most notable publications were the Rev. Algernon Sydney Thelwall's *The Iniquities of the Opium Trade* (1839), also serialised in the *Times*, and Samuel Warren's *The Opium Question* (1840), sponsored by the merchants Jardine and Matheson and expressing the pro-trade views.

High Church evangelical and hammer of Catholicism, the reverend Thelwall was the eldest son of the radical 1790s lecturer and poet, John Thelwall. Named after the great seventeenth-century republican and commonwealthman, Algernon Sydney, he was educated at Trinity College, Cambridge in 1818 and ordained the following year. Thelwall became curate of Blackford, Somerset in 1829 and founded the Trinitarian Bible Society in 1831 becoming its secretary from 1836 to 1847. His father, John, was, from the mid-1790s until around 1805, an intimate friend of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, then a fiery radical unitarian dissenter. So close were the two men that Coleridge had for a time cherished the hoped that Thelwall and family would join his west country circle with the Wordsworths.<sup>19</sup> Algernon Thelwall rejected his father's radicalism and materialism as well as Coleridge's unitarianism. Born in 1795, it is not likely that he remembered much of his personal encounter with Coleridge, but it is quite possible that his father in later life regaled him with anecdotes and recollections of his famous friend. It is interesting to speculate whether Algernon's staunch

opposition to the opium trade with China may have been initiated by harrowing tales his father might have told him as a young man of Coleridge's addiction to opium and the terrible consequences that the drug had on his later life. It does seem something of a coincidence that Algernon should espouse the anti-opium cause with such energy and success. As late as November 1803, Coleridge was writing to Thelwall requesting him to visit 'the best Druggist in Kendal [...] & purchase an Ounce of crude opium, & 9 ounces of Laudanum'.<sup>20</sup> This followed on from a protracted, yet failed, attempt to abstain from the drug. Algernon would then be only be eight years old but his visceral hostility to opium use was possibly another example of his repudiation of his father's free-thinking political views.

Thelwall presents the reader with a substantial collection of writings and documents about opium and the trade, from the very hostile, missionary perspective. concluding:

That opium, used as a stimulant or luxury, is a deleterious drug which ruins those who indulge in it, in mind, body, and estate—which depraves and enervates them, physically, intellectually, and morally, and finally brings them to an untimely grave: that it is introduced into China in such immense quantities, as to effect the ruin of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of the inhabitants: that thousands of acres of the most rich and fertile land, which might supply abundance of wholesome food for the support of many thousands of our fellow creatures, in health and comfort, are *worse than wasted* in the production of this poison, of which the tendency and effect is to ruin and destroy: that this baneful drug is smuggled into China by our countrymen in the East-Indies in direct and systematic violation and defiance of all laws both human and divine, and in a manner calculated to justify the Chinese government in excluding us from all the benefits of comfortable and unrestricted intercourse with their immense population and, finally that the baneful effects of



opium smoking, and the whole system of iniquity by which so much opium is smuggled into the country, are perfectly laid open and familiarly known to the Chinese authorities both provincial and supreme [...] What, then, shall be said of you—what will you in your conscience judge concerning yourself—if you (now knowing the fact, that the opium trade is every year destroying thousands and tens of thousands of the people of China) shall go on unconcerned and reckless, without lifting up either your voice or your hand, to protest against or prevent such wholesale murder?<sup>21</sup>

Thelwall's thundering against the trade are fairly typical of anti-opium propaganda. His tract attained a wide audience in Britain and India and was even came to the attention of Lin himself, who was delighted to receive a confirmation of his severe prohibitionist policies from a British sympathizer.

Thelwall's *Iniquities* was swiftly answered by Samuel Warren's *The Opium Question* (1840), commissioned by the pro-opium lobby. Warren's tract was extremely influential and one of the first to frame the issue as a case. De Quincey's later essay 'The Opium and the China Question' of June 1840 was just one of a number of essays that responded to Warren's publication. Warren set out a persuasive defence of the trade and the opium merchants, if not for the Melbourne government. Warren, like Algernon Thelwall, was a man with strong romantic connections. Trained in Edinburgh in the late 1820s as a medical student, he left Edinburgh in 1828 to study law and qualify for the bar in London. As a practising physician of six years' experience, Warren knew laudanum well. Although he never returned to Edinburgh he stayed closely connected to *Blackwood's*. Though largely and unfairly neglected today, Warren was very much the literary gentleman, the author of numerous romantic novels and stories. These were first published in *Blackwood's Magazine*, and often

presented sensational medical case histories, frequently featuring the supernatural, insanity and sensational deathbeds.<sup>22</sup> His most famous novel *Ten Thousand a Year*, a satire on the law, was serialised by *Blackwood's* in 1839 thought to have influenced Dickens' *Bleak House* (1852-53). Laudanum as a drug features prominently in his better-known novel, *Affecting Schemes being Passages from the Diary of a Late Physician* (1837) which is a collection of sensational case studies, one of which features laudanum prominently in the death scene of Eliza Herbert, a beautiful and delicate consumptive. Edgar Allan Poe was Warren's admirer and Eliza bears some resemblance to his doomed, opium-soaked Madeline Usher. Warren was also referenced in Poe's satirical story, 'How to Write a Blackwood Article' (1838).

Warren's engaging biographical essay, 'A Few Personal Recollections of Christopher North', recounted how, while a medical student at Edinburgh, he was introduced by John Wilson to De Quincey in 1828, who was then staying with North. Warren describes De Quincey as 'a little slight man, dressed in black, pale, care worn, and with a very high forehead [...] exceedingly languid'. While sitting opposite to De Quincey, Warren recounts how Wilson knowingly alerted him to the fact 'it will be a queer kind of *wine* that you will see him drinking'. After a few glasses of what is clearly laudanum, De Quincey became suddenly loquacious and thoughtful in his conversation:

It was on some metaphysical subject; and at length I well recollect that the discussion turned to the nature of *Forgetfulness*. "Is such a thing as forgetting possible to the human mind?" asked Mr De Quincey—"Does the mind ever actually lose anything for ever? Is not every impression it has once received, reproducible? How often a thing is suddenly recollected that had happened many, many years before, but never been thought of till

that moment! –Possibly a suddenly developed power of recollecting every act of a man’s life may constitute the Great Book to be opened before him in the judgment day.”<sup>23</sup>

Warren records that, entranced by De Quincey’s conversation, he ‘went almost supperless to bed’. De Quincey had already published similar speculations about the processes of ‘forgetting’ in the second part his *Confessions* published in October 1821 in the *London Magazine* and would notably return to them in his influential formulation of the notion of the ‘palimpsest’ in *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845). What fugitive influences may have derived from Warren’s observations of De Quincey and his peculiar wine might have had on Warren’s tract and his fiction more widely is pure speculation. When composing his own Opium War essay, did De Quincey ever recover from the palimpsest of his own subconscious mind, his evening with that entranced young medical student who hung upon his every word? De Quincey and the younger Warren it seems were never, as far we know, to meet again, Yet the connections forged by the great opium network globally and nationally also included these more intimate and fugitive patterns of connection and influence between Coleridge, Thelwall (*père et fils*), De Quincey and Warren.

Warren’s *The Opium Question* argues that the British government is honour-bound to compensate the merchants the cost of surrendering of the opium to Commissioner Lin. He believes that the Qing government has shown itself to be entirely capricious having allowed the trade to develop and that its objections are pragmatic not ethical, concerned with the drain of silver from the country and protecting its domestic opium production. He argues that the revenue from the trade is crucial to the economy of British India and that the Chinese were about to legalise the trade. Warren claims argues that the imprisonment of the merchants and the seizure of their opium was illegal under international law. He jeers about how ‘the bloated vain-glory and grandiloquence of the Chinese would probably collapse at the very

first prick of a British bayonet; their flimsy armaments fly like chaff before the wind at the sight of one single British man of war—portentous object making its appearance before her coasts, cleared for action. It is not impossible that the roar of her first gun would fill all Pekin with tottering knees and pallid faces'.<sup>24</sup> In his extended discussion of the qualities and effects of opium, Warren invokes the presence of De Quincey, whom he witnessed quaffing laudanum like wine at Wilson's soiree some ten or so years ago:

As to the fatally-fascinating qualities of this drug, a vast deal has been said, that is, it is suspected, based upon a gross exaggeration; and it may not be impossible to detect one subtle, and perhaps, unsuspected source of prejudice against everyone concerned in the supply of it. Ever since the year (1820) [*sic*] when Mr. De Quincey published his remarkable "Confessions of an English Opium Eater,"—a work which produced a thrilling sensation over all the country, owing to the extraordinary nature of its details—to the wild, dazzling, but often dismal splendour of his dreams; his unearthly ecstasies; the fearful mental re-action and physical agonies which he endured; all of which were described in a style enriched with evident fruits of universal scholarship—in a strain too, of very great power and pathos—OPIUM has been invested with a mysterious kind of interest and awe, producing an impression long retained by minds suffused with recollection of that extraordinary performance (pp. 83-84).

Warren pays tribute to the great imaginative and literary power of De Quincey's *Confessions*, but he suggests that De Quincey has been a tad disingenuous in mystifying opium and transforming a substance that was commonly taken for the relief of pain and stomach problems into something more dangerous and alluring. De Quincey has so inflected

contemporary understandings of opium that ‘almost any thing evil will now be received against’ this ‘potent and deadly drug’. In the context of China this has had some unintended and negative consequences:

[P]ersons of excitable fancy are presented with frightful pictures of —as it were—two millions of De Quinceys created in China, by the opium merchants, and represented in all stages of suffering, and frequency of death, infinitely transcending all that has been described by that accurate and minute observer, and faithful narrator of his own sensations and sufferings; (and who, moreover, took opium to an extent—namely, *eight thousand drops of laudanum a-day, equal to three hundred and twenty grains of opium*, utterly beyond the reach of any but the richer Chinese); the very mention of those who are accessory to so fearful an infliction of alleged suffering, excites feelings of indignation and aversion [....] The observation [...] as to the extent to which Mr. De Quincey took opium, leads one to hope and believe, that we have received very greatly exaggerated accounts as to the effects of opium upon the Chinese, in respect both of extent and intensity. The twenty or thirty thousand chests of opium which we distribute among three hundred and 70 millions of Chinese, surely produce scarcely a greater amount of physical suffering, and of immorality, than the ardent spirits sold openly and without complaint in all parts of our own virtuous and happy country (pp. 83-85).

Warren makes the familiar argument that the use of opium is no more harmful than that of spirits at home (a favourite notion of De Quincey’s) and he accuses his readership of reinscribing into the opium trade debate, De Quincey’s lurid *Confessions*. In so doing, he artfully plays with De Quincey’s famous trope of the East as the *officina gentium*, or the

place where humanity was formed: ‘It contributes much to these feelings, that southern Asia is, and has been for thousands of years, the part of the earth most swarming with human life: the great *officina gentium*’. De Quincey famously continues, ‘[i]n China, over and above what it has in common with the rest of southern Asia, I am terrified by the modes of life, by manners, and the barrier of utter abhorrence, and want of sympathy, paced between us by feelings deeper than I can analyze’.<sup>25</sup> Warren, a man of much literary ability, thus mischievously reverses De Quincey’s master trope here, imagining instead the opium merchants replicating two million Chinese iterations of De Quincey. This would be more than the entire population of London in 1841 which numbered some 1.8 million people in the most recent census.

De Quincey had a well-known horror of self-replication and the loss of personal identity and freedom, linked ineluctably with his enslavement to opium, a terrible negation of the manly free will and agency espoused by official nineteenth-century British thinking. This fear is deployed in the famous depiction of Giovanni Battista Piranesi’s prints, *Carceri d'invenzione* (Imaginary Prisons) (c.1749-50). De Quincey describes the multiplied figure of Piranesi,

Creeping along the sides of the walls you perceived a staircase; and upon it, groping his way upwards, was Piranesi himself: follow the stairs a little further and you perceive it come to a sudden and abrupt termination without any balustrade, and allowing no step onwards to him who had reached the extremity except into the depths below. Whatever is to become of poor Piranesi, you suppose at least that his labours must in some way terminate here. But raise your eyes, and behold a second flight of stairs still higher, on which again Piranesi is perceived, but this time standing on the very brink of the abyss. Again elevate your eye, and a still more aërial flight of stairs is beheld, and

again is poor Piranesi busy on his aspiring labours; and so on, until the unfinished stairs and Piranesi both are lost in the upper gloom of the hall (78-79).

Like Piranesi, De Quincey find that his self, consciousness and very identity is now taken from him and transformed into millions of opium smokers in a faraway and alien land, China, defined, like the opium eater himself, only by their dreadful addiction to the drug. Of course, Warren's underlying satirical point is that there is and could be only one Mr De Quincey, whom he knew personally. This powerful image of image, however, becomes a key point in the public debate about the opium trade and the China question.

Warren's work was answered by very many others. It is fair to say that this debate was conducted within the parameters of international law and economics, with China's defenders arguing that the empire had a perfect right to manage trade as it wished and to forbid the trade in opium if it decided. Defenders of the trade and the subsequent conflict seldom disputed this key point, but argued that China had unilaterally and precipitately terminated a long-established trade, only nominally illegal, and visited violence and illegality on peaceful British subjects, thus insulting Britain's national honour. China's defenders sought to emphasize the pernicious and poisonous aspects of opium, while those opposed either denied the trade was a factor in their calculations, or that opium was any more harmful than alcohol. De Quincey frequently featured in the public debate. Captain T. H. Bullock in his *The Chinese Vindicated or Another View of the Opium Question*, for example, poured scorn on Warren's arguments:

He declares that the pernicious qualities of the drug are not so bad, that the opinion is founded upon a gross exaggeration, and that our prejudice on this point is owing to Mr. De Quincey's remarkable "Confessions of an Opium Eater." It is natural that the

author “of the Diary of a late physician”, the verisimilitude of whose beautiful fictions so entirely duped even the members of the “Faculty,” that they really believed them to be the work of a brother of the craft: should suspect that the *Opium Eater*, was a work of imagination but there is unfortunately a mass of evidence, derived from several countries, all confirming the destructive effects of this pernicious drug. Mr. Thelwall quotes from several scientific, and other authentic works in France, Turkey, China, and elsewhere proof, more than sufficient, to convince the most incredulous, that the fascinating qualities of opium are nearly irresistible; and the details of the horrible effects upon a confirmed smoker, are absolutely revolting.<sup>26</sup>

Bullock vindicated China’s right to order their trade as it wished and reminded his readership that smuggling was severely punished by transportation in Britain. He finds Lin’s actions to be reasonable and even restrained in the circumstances. He defends De Quincey from Warren’s implication that the *Confessions* may have been overly sensationalised. De Quincey, his opium use and his literary character thus appears as a contested issue in the public debate about the opium trade and war itself. That the status of what is now a canonical literary text, should feature so prominently in a national debate about Britain’s new war with China allows one to think of the war as very much a romantic conflict.

#### IV

On 7 April 1840 the Tory opposition brought a formal vote of no confidence in the Melbourne government over its handling of the Chinese crisis. The new secretary of war, Thomas Babington Macaulay spoke powerfully and decisively in the debate. On the issue of the opium trade, he argued that if the British state were unable to prevent the domestic smuggling of tobacco and brandy across its own borders, it was hardly capable of putting a



stop to the Chinese opium traffic, the ‘buyer would have been driven to the seller by something little short of torture, by a physical craving as fierce and impatient as any to which our race is subject. For when stimulants of this sort have been long used, they are desired with a rage which resembles the rage of hunger’. Is it possible, he asks, ‘that the intense appetite, on the one side for what had become a necessary of life, and on the other for riches, would have been appeased by a few lines signed by Charles Elliott?’<sup>27</sup> However, Macaulay’s main argument focused not on international law but on the national honour of Britain, claiming that ‘the liberties and lives of Englishmen are at stake’. He argued that the Chinese government was justified in banning the import of opium and the export of silver if it so wished, according to both international law and public morality. However, when they could not do this by legal means the Chinese had ‘resorted to means flagrantly unjust, when they imprisoned our innocent countrymen, when they insulted our Sovereign in the person of her representative, then it became our duty to demand satisfaction. Whether the opium trade be a pernicious trade is not the question’ (5: 224). William Ewart Gladstone, then languishing on the opposition benches and ambitious for office, demurred. Fortified by his habitual beverage of coffee laced with laudanum (employed to stimulate yet steady his nerves before major speeches in parliament), Gladstone famously described the conflict as ‘a war more unjust in its origin, a war more calculated in its progress to cover this country with permanent disgrace, I do not know of and I have not read of’.<sup>28</sup> In the end, the government won the division by a majority of a mere nine votes and the war erupted on the south coast of China four months later in July 1840.

What then of De Quincey’s contribution to this public debate, ‘The Opium and the China Question’ published in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* in June 1840? His response is more self-consciously aesthetically and rhetorically sophisticated than others. It takes Warren’s form of the ‘case’ and dramatically stages, a legal enquiry with both plaintiff and

dependent. It is not obviously self-referential in that the 'opium eater' himself does not appear and the issue of opium abuse and addiction is speedily dealt with and passed over. De Quincey denies that opium addiction is problematic for any nation. He admits that opium is a special case of drug use due to 'a specific effect known to follow the habitual use of opium, by which it induces a deadly torpor and disrelish of all exertion, and in most cases long before the health is deranged, and even in those constitutions which are by nature so congenially predisposed to this narcotic as never to be much shaken by its uttermost abuse'.<sup>29</sup> Opium for De Quincey is a luxury and therefore is far too expensive for the labouring classes, '[u]sing much opium how can the poor labourer support the expense--using little, how can he suffer in his energies or his animal spirits?' (536). Habitual drug use requires a continually increasing dosage as De Quincey knew well. He claims, like Warren, that the Chinese simply wish to stem the export of their silver and protect their own nascent opium production by excluding a better-quality product. De Quincey was wrong both in denying that the use of opium was a luxury and that the Chinese were not suppressing their own domestic opium production. From the 1820s onward, the use of opium in China spread inwards from the south east coast as well as downwards across class barriers at an alarming rate. The Qing court was especially concerned about its habitual use by their troops. Nevertheless, for De Quincey the use of the drug among the higher classes is simply one of 'their habits of domestic indulgence' and the use among the lower, an economic impossibility (537).

De Quincey is clear at the outset that his views 'tend to the policy of war—war conducted with exemplary vigour' (533), though he is embarrassed that this policy is currently at odds with the stated position of the Tory opposition. He thus argues for the appropriateness of war but also for 'the criminal want of foresight and provision in our own cabinet' (537). The government gave Elliot ambiguous orders and afterwards disavowed his

actions, not on the grounds of principle, but simply with regard to expediency. There were not enough funds to pay for Elliot's promise of compensation for the seized opium:

They proceed to decree reprisals against the Chinese. But why? Very fit it is that so arrogant a people should be brought to their sense; and notorious it is that in Eastern lands no appeal to the sense of justice will ever be made available that does not speak through their fears [...] By all means thump them well; for it is your only chance—it is the only logic which penetrates the fog of so conceited a people. But is that the explanation of war given by Government? No, no. They offer it as the only means in their power of keeping faith with the opium-dealers and not breaking with Elliot. “What do you want?” they say at the Treasury,—“Is it money? Well, we have none; but we can take a purse for you on the Queen's highway, and that we will soon do.” (541).

The government thus intends to go to war to make the Chinese pay for the confiscated opium instead of Her Majesty's exchequer. De Quincey, however, wishes to shift the ground of the argument away from opium and the government's incompetence, arguing that there is ‘a ground for war which is currently growing more urgent; a ground which would survive all the disputes about opium, and would have existed had China been right in those disputes from the beginning to end’ (534). He declares, among other things, that the Chinese are ‘incapable of a true civilization, semi-refined in manners and the mechanic arts, but incurably savage in the moral sense’, they are ‘conceited’, ‘rascally’, ‘inorganic’, ‘stagnant’, ‘improressive’, ‘lazy’, ‘torpid’, ‘sedentary’, ‘wicked’, ‘vindictive’, ‘cruel’, ‘bestial’, ‘full of insolence, full of error, needing to be enlightened’, and, above all, ‘something to be kicked’. They are ‘ultrapusillanimous’, ‘the vilest and silliest among nations’ (554, 541, 542, 546, 550, 552,

553, 554, 557, 559, 561, 562). De Quincey's arguments against the Qing Empire are couched in the language of Ricardian economics and the conventions of trade and diplomacy. For him, China is an aberrant state, 'a vast callous hulk':

It is defended by its essential non-irritability, arising out of the intense non-development of its resources. Were it better developed, China would become an organized mass—something to be kicked, but which cannot kick again—having no commerce worth counting, no vast establishments of maritime industry, no arsenals, no shipbuilding towns, no Portsmouths, Deals, Deptfords, Woolwiches, Sunderlands, Newcastle, Liverpools, Bristols, Glasgows, -- in short, no vital parts, no organs, no heart, no lungs (542-3).

De Quincey discusses China in the common romantic metaphor, derived from Edmund Burke, of the organic state. It is an organism like a human body with organs that grows and develops over time according to a preordained teleology. Yet if China is to be compared to an organic body it is found grievously lacking. It is a body possessing no nervous system, or at best a nervous system so rudimentary and is physiologically coarser and less developed than that of the European. De Quincey's discussion of the Chinese empire as an insensitive 'callous hulk' which cannot feel, defended by 'its essential non-irritability' or its inability to contract its muscles without first needing to be swiftly kicked into action by the British military boot exploits this bodily metaphor. The symptoms of imperial torpor, inaction and lethargy point to the body politic possessing no international commerce nor any participation in a global free trade. De Quincey racializes commerce here, arguing that China's lack of international commercial activity results not from the stage of social development which it has reached but from the moral characteristics associated with the oriental races in his mind

and adumbrated in the *Confessions*. The metaphor of the body politic is thus easily applied to the individual case. That the Chinese were less subject to pain because their nervous system was less sensitive than white Europeans would become a racist cliché of nineteenth century colonial discourse.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For an exception to this Charles J. Rzepka's 'The Literature of Power and the Imperial Will: De Quincey's Opium War Essays'. *South Central Review* 8 (1991), 37-45.

<sup>2</sup> David Simpson, *Romanticism and Question of the Stranger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), pp. 54-81; Eugenia Zuroski Jenkins, 'Tea and the Limits of Orientalism in De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*', in *Writing China: Essays of the Amherst Embassy (1816) and Sino-British Cultural Relations*, (ed). Peter J. Kitson and Robert Markley (Cambridge: Boydell, 2016), pp. 105-31.

<sup>3</sup> See Markman Ellis et al., *Empire of Tea. The Asian Leaf that Conquered the World* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015); Erika Rappaport, *A Thirst for Empire. How Tea Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Thomas Dormandy, *Opium: Reality's Dark Dream* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2102); and Lucy Inglis, *Milk of Paradise: A History of Opium* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Julia Lovell, *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams and the Making of China* (London: Picador, 2011); Mao Haijian, *The Qing Empire and the Opium War. The Collapse of the Heavenly Dynasty*, (trs). Joseph Lawson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Richard J. Grace, *Opium and the Empire. The Lives and Careers of William Jardine and James Matheson* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Lovell, *Opium War*, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> Gelber, Harry G. *Opium, Soldiers and Evangelicals: Britain's 1840-42 War with China*,

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and *Its Aftermath* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 88.

<sup>8</sup> Jack Beeching, *The Chinese Opium Wars* (New York: Harvest Books, 1975), p. 94.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Ward Fay, *The Opium War* (New York: Norton, 1975), p. 204.

<sup>10</sup> Li Chen. *Chinese Law in Imperial Eyes: Sovereignty, Justice & Transcultural Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 231, 324

<sup>11</sup> Walter E. Houghton ed. *The Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals, 1824–1900*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966–1989. 1, p. 62. See Anna Gambles, *Protection and Politics: Conservative Economic Discourse, 1815-1852*. Boydell (1999), pp. 184-192.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Morrison. *The English Opium Eater: A Biography of Thomas De Quincey* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), pp. 322, 326-7.

<sup>13</sup> For an account of this trade, see Frederic E. Wakeman, Jr. ‘The Canton Trade and the Opium War’, in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 10, Late Ch’ing 1800–1911*, Part 1 (ed). John K. Fairbank (London: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 163–212.

<sup>14</sup> For an account of these events see, Lovell, *The Opium War*, pp. 17-77.

<sup>15</sup> See Victoria Berridge and Griffith Edwards, *Opium and the People: Opiate Use in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Allen Lane, 1987).

<sup>16</sup> Molly Lefebure, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Bondage of Opium* (London: Quartet Books, 1977), pp. 493-95.

<sup>17</sup> See James M. Polachek, *The Inner Opium War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>18</sup> *The Times* 17<sup>th</sup> August 1839.

<sup>19</sup> For Thelwall and Coleridge see Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: the Early Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L Griggs. Vol II. 1801-1806, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), p. 1019.

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<sup>21</sup> Algernon Sydney Thelwall, *The Iniquities of the Opium Trade with China* (London: Allen & Co., 1839), p. 133.

<sup>22</sup> See Robert Morrison, “‘The Singular Wrought Out into the Strange and Mystical’: *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* and the Transformation of Terror”, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Gothic* (ed. Carol Davison and Monica Germana (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 129-141.

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Warren, *Miscellanies, critical, imaginative, and juridical; contributed to Blackwood’s magazine*. 2 vols (Edinburgh: Blackwood’s, 1855), 2: 498.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Warren, *The Opium Question* (London: J. Ridgway, 1840), p. 107. Further references cited in text by page number.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater and Other Writings* (ed. Barry Milligan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003), p. 81.

<sup>26</sup> Bullock, T. H. *The Chinese Vindicated, Or, Another View of the Opium Question; Being in Reply to a Pamphlet by Samuel Warren* (London: W. H. Allen & Company, 1840), pp. 94-95.

<sup>27</sup> T. B. Macaulay, ‘War with China’ (April 7, 1840), in *The Miscellaneous Works of Lord Macaulay edited by his Sister Lady Tevelyan*. 5 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1880), 5: 221. Further references to this text will be cited by volume and page number in the text.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Lovell, *Opium War*, p. 107.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas De Quincey, ‘The Opium and China Question’ (June 1840), in *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*. 21 vols. London: William Pickering, 2000-2002): Vol 11: *Articles from Tait’s Magazine and Blackwood’s Magazine 1838-41* (ed. Julian North (2003), p. 535.

Further references are to this volume and cited by page number.