

*The Last War of the Romantics: De Quincey, Macaulay, and the First Opium War with
China, 1840-42*

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In October 1839 a secret cabinet meeting was held by the British government at Windsor Castle. Among those included were the prime minister, Lord Melbourne, the foreign secretary, Viscount Palmerston, the president of the Board of Control, overseeing the governance of the Indian government, John Cam Hobhouse, and the newly-appointed secretary of war, classical scholar, historian, poet and essayist, Thomas Babington Macaulay. At that meeting a crucial decision was taken to dispatch a naval and military expedition from British Bengal to Qing China to obtain redress by force for a perceived series of insults to the national honour by imperial commissioner Lin Zexu at Canton (Guangzhou). Thus, the very first war between China and any western power in world history began; though the Daoguang emperor seems to have had absolutely no idea that his empire was at war with the British until their naval forces appeared off the South China coast in June 1840. It was not until well into August that Palmerston's letter containing the British government's ultimatum and demands that the Chinese court finally realised to its surprise that a serious conflict was actually occurring. Until then, it seems, the emperor's view was that Commissioner Lin's bold and resolute actions had finally solved the vexed problem of the opium trade.

It is from the date of the commencement of hostilities in June 1840 that the China today marks its traumatic, *Century of National Humiliation*, finally ending with the

foundation of the People's Republic in 1949 and the retrieval of Chinese national sovereignty. The First Opium War, as it quickly became known and as historians have referred to it ever since, has remained a less urgent topic of conversation for British historians and literary critics. Far less traumatic for nineteenth-century British public than the debacle of the First Afghan War of 1839-42 and its disastrous but heroic retreat from Kabul, the China war was much less palatable to domestic tastes with its accounts of heavily asymmetrical military and naval encounter and tales of remorseless butchery, what became the first of two nineteenth-century opium wars had little to inflame the patriotic imagination yet much to trouble and perplex. It seldom features in our contemporary literary and cultural accounts of the period, and yet it was a war that involved several leading literary figures in the national public debate it occasioned about the war's morality, justice, and even its very legality. At that meeting of the government in October at Windsor, perhaps one literary ghost still hung in the damp autumnal air while these men, connected as they were by the usual homosocial networks of nineteenth-century educational, social and public life, discussed exactly what should be done about the troublesome matter of China, and, more importantly, who was to pay the two or three millions of pounds that Sir Charles Elliot had inconveniently and unilaterally requisitioned from the British crown to compensate the private merchants for their Indian opium handed over to Commissioner Lin and subsequently destroyed.

The wife of leading Whig statesman, William Lamb, 2nd Viscount Melbourne, Caroline Lamb had been involved in a notorious public affair with Byron in 1812, leading to her attempted suicide and the publication of her salacious and spiteful gothic *roman à clef*, *Glenarvon* in 1816. Though Caroline Lamb had died some ten years earlier, Melbourne remained much affected by her death. Hobhouse, was Byron's close friend and best man at his wedding. Accompanying Byron on his tour of the Levant in 1811-12, he later provided the notes for the fourth canto of *Childe Harold* (1817) to whom the poem was dedicated. He

was Byron's literary executor who, notoriously, oversaw the burning of his friend's personal diary and the secrets it contained. Thomas Macaulay, only five years younger than Keats, made his name by writing a series of essays on literary subjects for the *Edinburgh Review* in the 1820s and 1830s especially those on Milton and Byron. In many ways, the Opium War was Macaulay's war and his intervention in the Commons debate of March 1840 was crucial to the survival of the government. Although perhaps long since exorcised, the spectral memory of the personality Britain's most celebrated poet of the literary orient, who died of fever at Missolonghi in the struggle for Greek independence, shared by these four men tempts us to reflect on the ways we might think of the First Opium War of 1839 [1840]-1842 as one of the last wars of the romantic period, or even, a romantic war itself. Not present at that cabinet meeting was another literary figure, a Tory and not a Whig, living an impoverished life some three hundred miles away in Edinburgh, yet someone who retained a very keen personal interest in opium and China, and who contributed most notably to the public debate on the origins of the war via the pages of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, certainly one of the most powerful prose writers of the nineteenth century, Mr Thomas De Quincey, now known to all as the "opium-eater." Absent also but closer to government was the romantic satirist, essayist and close friend of Percy Shelley, Thomas Love Peacock. Since 1836, Peacock had been the Chief Examiner of Indian Correspondence for the East India Company, succeeding James Mill. A keen enthusiast and evangelist for the new technology of steam navigation, in that year of 1839, Peacock convinced the secret committee of the Company to commission and construct six powerful, heavily-armed iron steamboats from the Glasgow shipbuilders Lairds. One of these new leviathans, the 660-ton *Nemesis* was sent across the world to China. Its terrifyingly destructive Congreve rockets devastated any Chinese shipping unfortunate enough to come within the range of its armaments and its shallow draught and steam power made it mobile and deadly (Marshall, 1-19).

The causes of the First Opium War with China are complex and the subject of much historical debate. Indeed, the naming of the war as either the “Opium War” or the “Chinese War” is itself much contested then and now. The phrase was coined at least as early as January 1840, though it was frequently attributed to Karl Marx who excoriated the hypocrisy and venality of merchants and the “Christianity-canting and civilization-mongering British Government” in a series of articles for the *New York Daily Times* on the two Opium Wars (Marx, “Opium Trade,” [September 25 (1858)], 191). For Marx the “antiquated” empire of China “vegetating in the teeth of time” was “prompted by ethical motives” while “modern” society fights for the privilege of buying in the cheapest and selling in the dearest markets.” Marx accused the British of “openly preaching free trade in poison” while secretly defending the monopoly of its manufacture” in Bengal. The “corruption that ate into the heart of the Celestial bureaucracy [...] was, together with the opium chests, smuggled into the empire from the English storeships anchored at Whampoa” (Marx, “Opium Trade [September 20 (1858)], 188). Very quickly, however, the designation of “Opium War” was challenged. Another contemporary pamphlet objected that, “[o]pium has nothing to do with it. It is not an opium war—it is a war to obtain redress for the grossest outrages that have ever been offered to English merchants” (Bell, cited in Chen, 133, 133-44). Famously, John Quincy Adams in 1841 claimed that the cause of the Anglo-Chinese conflict was not opium, “a mere incident to the dispute,” but the imperial ceremony of the kowtow (*ketou*), “the arrogant and insupportable pretensions of China that she will hold commercial intercourse with the rest of mankind not upon terms of equal reciprocity, but upon the insulting and degrading forms of the relations between lord and vassal” (cited in Gelber, *Dragon*, 188). Adams had been secretary of state at the time of the “Terranova Affair,” in which an American sailor had been given up to the Chinese and executed by strangling for an accidental homicide. Now chairing the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs, he arrived at the conclusion that opium was not

the *casus belli*, but the Chinese denial of the norms of international law and diplomacy. He claimed that opium was no more the cause of the war than the throwing overboard of the tea in Boston harbour was the cause of the American revolution (Chen, 240-41). Behind both events in Boston and Canton was East India Company tea and global networks of imperial trade.

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 Lin's conduct and the wisdom of the actions of 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."¹ 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.² 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."³ 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 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?⁴

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.⁵ 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.”⁶

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 Peking with tottering knees and pallid faces.”⁷ 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."⁸ 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.⁹

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.

III

Thomas Babington Macaulay, the newly appointed secretary for war (1839-41) and Whig MP for Edinburgh spoke powerfully in the Commons debate of April 1840 on the government's China policy. Historian, scholar, poet and essayist, the liberal statesman was in many ways another of those figures viewed by Thomas De Quincey as one of his literary doubles. De Quincey's hostility to Macaulay may well have begun in the latter's childhood. De Quincey's mother could not resist praising the ten-year old prodigy she encountered at one of Hannah More's Bristol soirees when she wrote to son in June 1811 that the "little Macaulay is a clever Boy, and puts me in mind of the elder Coleridge, but he says such extraordinary things that he will be ruined by praise [...] he travels post, and amuses me inexpressibly with his motions and emotions" (De Quincey, *Memorials*, 2: 94). In 1827, De Quincey had penned a particularly vicious review in the *Edinburgh Saturday Post* of a Macaulay essay on George Canning's liberal Tory administration in 1827. Macaulay's essay attacked those Tories refusing to serve under the new prime minister, including Sir Robert Peel and De Quincey's idol, the Duke of Wellington. De Quincey depicts the young Macaulay as the precocious champion of the Whigs, a gorgeously arrayed knight avidly challenging his adversaries to break a lance with him if they dare. He accuses Macaulay of participating in a "vulgar system of political pugilism" but nevertheless steps forward himself as a worthy Tory opponent (De Quincey "Review," [July (1827)], 27-40). Although De Quincey's riposte may have gone unnoticed by Macaulay, it remained in De Quincey's consciousness. These connections and comparisons between the two men persisted. Macaulay, towards the end of his life and on the eve of the Second Opium War with China, was discomfited to find himself accused in the American press of resembling the elder De Quincey, a superannuated opium-eater who destroyed his faculties by using the drug. Macaulay vehemently denied this calumny claiming that "all the opium that I have swallowed in a life of fifty-three years does not amount to ten

grains,” adding he never “took a drop of laudanum, except in obedience to medical authority” admitting only to having taken some in the year 1849 during the cholera epidemic (Macaulay, *Journals*, 99). Thus, De Quincey already identified the successful young Whig rising star as an object of serious envy before his writing on the Opium War of 1840. No doubt his criticisms of Melbourne’s government were coloured by his long-standing jealousy of the much more successful politician and man of letters. Though eclipsed by De Quincey in the eye of modern critics of romantic period writing, Macaulay had made his name with powerful literary essay for the *Edinburgh Review* on “Milton” (1825) and “Byron” (1831) and many other subjects. He established himself as a master of English prose and an outstanding classicist. In many ways, Macaulay had become the voice of the new reforming Whig and educated middle classes of the 1830s which had displaced the Tories and inaugurated a wholesale decade of reform, beginning with the electoral system in 1832. His outstanding rhetorical skills, enormous classical erudition and devastating wit established him as a leader of the reforming movement and the new laissez faire brand of economics and trade. No wonder De Quincey detested him. Macaulay was already by 1840, rich, successful, powerful and lionised, a *parvenu* politician whose new understandings of global modernity had influenced government and society in both Britain and the Indian subcontinent, and whose liberal imperialism chimed well with the march of the mid-nineteenth-century progressive mind. His role in anglicizing Indian government and intellectual life is well-known and still hotly debated, and his legacy remains potent and contested. He had been heavily involved with the drafting of the Charter Act of 1833, which had finally removed the East India Company’s monopoly of the tea trade with China and centralized the British government of India. The act gave British India its own legislature, the Governor-General-in-Council, and provided a new Law Commission to reform and codify Indian law. Unlike De Quincey, Macaulay really had visited the “East,” not just dreamt about it, working in India for six

years, reforming Indian education and government along Bentham-ite utilitarian lines, under the administration of Lord William Bentinck, notably making the English language the linguistic medium of government and made himself a very wealthy man in the process. In his brief tenure as secretary of war, he would manage to initiate three important wars in China, Egypt and Afghanistan.

Macaulay understood something of the poisonous effects of opium and the political implications of its use. In his major speech on the “Government of India” of 10th July 1833 to the House of Commons, he argued for the modernization and liberalization of the Indian government. It was important, he argued, that the benefits of European civilization were also given to the people of India even at the risk of Britain’s Indian subjects outgrowing their need for British guidance. To make his point he used an unusual but very potent analogy:

It was, as [François] Bernier tells us, the practice of the miserable tyrants whom he found in India, when they dreaded the capacity and spirit of some distinguished subject, and yet could not venture to murder him, to administer to him a daily dose of the *pousta*, a preparation of opium, the effect of which was in a few months to destroy all the bodily and mental powers of the wretch who was drugged with it, and to turn him into a helpless idiot. The detestable artifice, more horrible than assassination itself, was worthy of those who employed it. It is no model for the English nation. We shall never consent to administer the *pousta* to a whole community, to stupefy and paralyse a great people whom God has committed to our charge, for the wretched purpose of rendering them more amenable to our control [...] We are free, we are civilised, to little purpose, if we grudge to any portion of the human race an equal measure of freedom and civilisation (Macaulay, “Government of India,” 717).

Metaphorically, poisoning a nation with opium to render it helpless and pliable, making a subject people malleable through a form of ideological drug dependency and thus a fit and easy subject for colonialism, was “no model for the English nation,” according to Macaulay; yet six years later, this was exactly what Macaulay’s liberal government was accused of literally doing to China via the opium trade. One should also not forget, as the novelist Amitav Ghosh has recently reminded us in his engaging Ibis trilogy of novels that countless Indian opium addicts were indeed created by the British monopoly of Indian opium production.¹⁰ Charles Alexander Bruce who pioneered the East India Company’s tea plantations in Assam, and therefore nineteenth-century British tea commerce, was quite desperate to prevent the production of opium from spreading to there and degrading its people. Bruce expostulated that the people should be harvesting the newly-found, wholesome Indian tea plant variety, *Camelia assamica* and not forced into growing the pernicious *Papavaer somniferum*, the white opium poppy. He feared that the new province would become “infected” with the “opium mania,” that “dreadful plague that has depopulated this beautiful country.” For Bruce the “vile drug” has physically deformed the population, “the women have fewer children compared with those of other countries, and the children seldom live to be old men” (cited in Fry, 32-33). Another critic of 1840 angrily denounced the British for “demoralizing their own subjects in India; ONE-HALF OF THE CRIME IN THE OPIUM DISTRICTS, MURDERS, RAPES, AND AFFRAYS, HAVE THEIR ORIGIN IN OPIUM-EATING” (cited in Fry, 37-38). It could be argued that the British were already accomplishing in India what Bernier had accused the “miserable tyrants” of the Moghuls of trying to achieve with their poisonous “*pousta*.” Macaulay can hardly not have been familiar with the business and effects of the British opium monopoly during his extensive service in India. His opium metaphor of the “*pousta*” rhetorically undermines his reasoning on several levels. Macaulay had also written in his celebrated biographical essay on Robert Clive of

January 1840 concerning Clive's late opium addiction and death. In order to obtain ease from severe pain Clive "called in the help of opium; and he was gradually enslaved by this treacherous ally" and "after sitting silent and torpid for hours, [he would] rouse himself to the discussion of some great question, would display in full vigour all the talents of the soldier and the statesman, and would then sink back into his melancholy repose" (Macaulay "Lord Clive", 371). Ironically, Clive who put down a revolt against the British and did so much to secure the opium monopoly for the British in India, picked up the opium habit and became "enslaved" by the drug like countless Indians and Chinese and, much nearer home, De Quincey.

In his powerful speech on the "War with China" of 7th April 1840, Macaulay returns ineluctably to the issues of this "treacherous ally" opium and the colonial politics associated with it, recounting how one of the Chinese imperial advisers during the emperor's debate about whether to legalize or prohibit the opium trade of 1836 had argued that "opium is the weapon by which England effects her conquests," persuading "the people of Hindostan to smoke and swallow this besotting drug, till they became so feeble in body and mind, that they were subjugated without difficulty" (Macaulay, "War with China", 218). While this might not apply to India, the relevance to China was more pronounced. Macaulay's official position on opium as a contraband trade was simply to distance the British from it. He argued that if the British state was famously unable to prevent the smuggling of tobacco and brandy at home, then putting a stop to the opium traffic in China was impossible:

Remember what powerful motives both the buyer and the seller would have been impelled to deal with each other. 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 [...] and do you imagine 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?’ (220-221)

Macaulay appears here to accept the argument that opium is both a highly addictive and very poisonous drug which is damaging the Chinese state. The user here is subject to “fierce and impatient” cravings and tortures. The British would thus not be able to put down this contraband trade even if they wanted. In any case, they had been under the strong impression that legalization of the trade by the Chinese was possible by 1837. Macaulay, paradoxically, also stresses the drug, rightly used, is “one of the most precious boons vouchsafed by Providence to man, Powerful to assuage pain, to sooth irritation, and to restore health” (223),

Macaulay seeks to separate the opium issue from that of the war. He argues that Commissioner Lin’s intimidation of the British marks the key moment of breakdown between the two nations, not the expansion of opium trade prior to the war. He uses the word “rupture” ten times in his speech to emphasize this point. He denies that his government is “making war for the purpose of forcing the Government of China to admit opium” which would be an unambiguous atrocity. Instead, he focuses on the issue of British national honour. This is a case where “the liberties and lives of Englishmen are at stake” (Macaulay, “War with China”, 226). It is not for the British to instruct China what it may or may not do about international trade. According to the law of nations, the emperor has

[A] perfect right to keep out opium and to keep silver in, if he could do so by means consistent with morality and public law [...] But, when finding that they could not suppress the contraband trade by just means, they 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 (224).

Macaulay falls back on a spurious analogy with the British suppression of the slave trade in the 1830s, never mentioning throughout his speech that the opium smuggled into China was actually produced by a British Indian government monopoly and specifically cultured for smoking within the Chinese market, a fact of which his six-year residence in Calcutta surely would have made him aware. He falls back on the argument that Lin in confiscating British property and in detaining British merchants, both the innocent and the guilty, was acting “in a manner inconsistent with the law of nations.”

The Imperial Commissioner, emboldened by the facility with which he had perpetrated the first outrage, and utterly ignorant of the relative position of his country and ours in the scale of power and civilisation, has risen in his requisitions. He began by confiscating property. His next demand was for innocent blood. A Chinese had been slain. Careful inquiry was made; but it was impossible to ascertain who was the slayer, or even to what nation the slayer belonged. No matter. It was notified to the Superintendent that some subject of the Queen, innocent or guilty, must be delivered up to suffer death. The Superintendent refused to comply. Then our countrymen at Canton were seized. Those who were at Macao were driven thence: not men alone, but women with child, babies at the breast. The fugitives begged in vain for a morsel of bread. Our Lascars, people of a different colour from ours, but still our fellow-subjects, were flung into the sea. An English gentleman was barbarously mutilated. And was this to be borne? (226).

Macaulay skilfully exploits Lin's actions to picture him as acting completely outside of international law, desirous of spilling 'innocent blood' and of ruthlessly terrorising British women and children. Alluding to the notable "Lin Weixi incident" in which a Chinese local had been killed during an affray with other Chinese and British sailors, Macaulay exploits the long-running issue of the incompatibility between Chinese and British understandings of "accidental homicide" that had dogged Sino-British relations since the infamous *Lady Hughes* incident of 1785. Macaulay also refers back to the "kowtow" (*ketou*) controversy dismissing it as a matter of mere etiquette in the larger, more serious context.¹¹

When our ambassadors were required to perform a prostration, which in Europe would have been considered as degrading, we were rather amused than irritated. It would have been unworthy of us to have recourse to arms on account of an uncivil phrase, or of a dispute about a ceremony. But this is not a question of phrases and ceremonies. The liberties and lives of Englishmen are at stake: and it is fit that all nations, civilised and uncivilised, should know that, wherever the Englishman may wander, he is followed by the eye and guarded by the power of England (226).

Macaulay's speech finishes with one of his grand Cromwellian perorations about how British citizens are protected around the globe by a nation that "has not so degenerated since the Great Protector vowed he would make the name of Englishman as much respected as ever had been the name of Roman citizen," invoking the horrors of white slavery and the notorious "Black Hole of Calcutta" (227). Macaulay's jingoism and xenophobia succeeded. Melbourne's fragile ministry won the division by a majority of just nine votes (271 to 262), eventually losing office in August 1841, by which time Macaulay could congratulate himself

on what then looked like three very successful wars across the east. He left office in high optimism convinced that his government had “placed England at the head of the world”, having dictated peace “at once in the heart of Bactria, at the mouth of the Nile and in the Yellow Sea” (cited in Masani, 168).

III

Thomas De Quincey certainly knew of Macaulay’s apologia for the forthcoming war with China when he wrote his “The Opium and the China Question” in June of 1840. As a Tory, he despised the Melbourne government and, as we have seen, was highly resentful of its powerful propagandist and secretary of war. The topic of opium was a feature in both the writings and lives of the two men. But then again, De Quincey was terrified by all things Asiatic and had a visceral and almost pathological hatred of the Chinese. As we shall see, he also may have had a personal and interested hope that his family might prosper from the coming conflict and that the war might make the family fortune and thus pay for his ruinously expensive opium habit. All these factors, personal, professional and political informed his writing about opium and China.

De Quincey actually penned four essays on China over the period 1840-1857, a brace each on the circumstances relating to the two opium wars of 1839-42 and 1856-60. It is important that scholars of De Quincey and his response to China should pay close attention to the very different historical moments that produced the two sets of texts, composed twenty years apart, and not simply to conflate them within a seamless continuum demonstrating an essentialized “romantic” or representative nineteenth-century British understanding of China. The first two pieces (and one is a brief postscript) were published in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, a major nineteenth-century journal with a singular, highly self-referential and frequently perverse view of the world and a subscription of around nine thousand in the

1830s, though with a cultural influence much beyond what those numbers suggest. The second were published in *The Titan, A Monthly Magazine*, a short-lived (1856-59) and much less influential magazine, and then re-published in an enhanced pamphlet form with a preface and additions (Palmigiano, 591-96). John Barrell, among others, has convincingly demonstrated that De Quincey's hostility to Asia was overdetermined by his peculiar psychological and class identity in which underlying fears and anxieties about the working classes, revolution and specific personal family issues were displaced, via his celebrated opium dreams, onto the "East," so one must always make allowances both for De Quincey's idiosyncrasies and the extraordinary personal biographical and publishing circumstances which he faced as well as the specific literary politics of the journals he published within (Barrell, 1-30, 155).

Similarly, one must make allowance for the different historical moments of the two opium wars in literary and cultural history and history more generally. Although the possibility of getting out of the opium trade was discussed as a serious prospect by the British and Indian governments in 1840, by the 1850s the government in India was far too dependent revenue from the trade to even countenance the possibility of disinvestment (Wong, 333-456). The rise of what we know of as "jingoism" was certainly more pronounced in 1856 when the ageing Palmerston won a landslide election victory over decision to go to war with China for a second time. This certainly would not have been the case in 1840 had Melbourne's government lost the debate on its handling of this unpopular war. Although the First Opium War is a highly significant and important historical event it is seldom, if at all, discussed by romantic period scholars and when it is, it is as a kind of side-show in the larger development of nineteenth-century British orientalism (especially India and the Levant), or with reference to, arguably, the period's most powerful writer of prose, De Quincey. In such cases, it is frequently brought up as a supplementary discussion of his earlier *Confessions of*

an English Opium Eater (1821), most notably those sections dealing with his opium nightmares and what has, in many ways, become the epitome of the romantic east-west encounter, the visit of the uncanny Malay to Wordsworth's Dove cottage, which De Quincey's then rented. There are a substantial number of critical discussions of this encounter, for example, most recently, David Simpson's *Romanticism and the Question of the Stranger* (2013) 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 (Simpson, 54-81; Jenkins, 105-31). 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. 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 *The Opium War* appeared in 2011 and an English language translation of Mao Haijian's enormously detailed *The Qing Empire and the Opium War* appeared in 2017. A new biography of the most famous (or notorious) opium merchants, William Jardine and James Matheson by Richard Grace also appeared in 2014.

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" (Lovell, 19). 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" (Gelber, *Opium Soldiers and Evangelicals*, 88).

Older histories are similarly reticent. In his *The Chinese Opium Wars* (1975), Jack Beeching cites De Quincey's *Confessions* as a headnote to his chapter on the prelude to the war but nothing else. Peter Ward Fay's *The Opium War* (1975), 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" (Fay, 204). 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 that the essay was authored by De Quincey (Chen, 321, 324).

The war turned bitter for De Quincey, though he could not know this when he penned his essay. One of his sons, Horatio (or Horace) died in the conflict, aged only twenty-two years. De Quincey and Horace's grandmother had raised the £900 required to purchase a commission as an ensign for Horace who joined the 26th Regiment of Foot, a Scottish infantry regiment of the British Army in 1840. The 26th Foot (or "The Cameronians") as it was known was stationed at Calcutta and the regiment embarked at Calcutta on 24 March 1840 with a strength of nine hundred men, bound for Singapore, where it rendezvoused with the rest of the expeditionary force being prepared for service in China. Horace left Scotland in October of 1841 arriving in Hong Kong, presumably via London and Calcutta, where he was to die just two months later. In August of the following year, De Quincey was formally notified, by the War Office, of his death from a malarial fever at Hong Kong. We cannot know for certain why Horace enlisted in the 26th Foot but if he did so, at this time, then he would be certain that the China war would be his eventual destination. His father is reported to have claimed he "advised him against going to China" (Morrison, 314, 322, 326-7). The key motive must have been financial with the possibility of substantial prize money or loot to be gained. China was a most lucrative posting and many

young soldiers made their fortunes from service there. Could it be that Thomas projected that Horace's involvement in China might actually save the De Quincey family from its perilous financial position made worse by the cost of De Quincey's addiction to the very drug that the war was being fought over? This might explain why De Quincey and his mother were willing and able to raise the substantial sum of £900 for his commission. The period 1840-42 was certainly a low ebb in De Quincey's family history, by 1842 De Quincey had lost four of his children and was emotionally exhausted.

De Quincey might have had additional more recent motives confirming his long-standing animus against the Chinese. In his later essay on China and the second opium war, published in the *Titan* in 1857, he accused the Chinese of a number of atrocities, including treacherously poisoning the wells used by the British for water. He writes that some eight hundred men died in the 26th Cameronian regiment on Hong Kong, "but the disease was mysterious; for the *stationary* inhabitants of Hong-Kong did not die." De Quincey here hazards a "reasonable conjecture that the men had swallowed a slow poison" (De Quincey, *China*, 103). Among those who died in Hong Kong at this time was Horace, and it seems probable that father had come to harbour a strong suspicion that Horace met his end through poisoning by the local Chinese rather than fever. If so, the issue of drugs and opium, cure and poison is once more present, as the Chinese poison De Quincey's son, while De Quincey's nation poisons the Chinese empire with its opium. De Quincey's suspicion is unlikely to have been correct. A soldier presents at the time, Lieutenant John Ouchterlony recounted how the deaths of the new the recruits from England arriving in Hong Kong was due to their "profuse indulgence in the use of samshoo, aided by exposure to the sun's mid-day rays and by the immoderate use of sea bathing" (Ouchterlony 215-16). In any case sanitary conditions among the British troops were appalling and most of the deaths among them were due to outbreaks of cholera rather than the Chinese. Yet if De Quincey had been correct in his surmise, the

Chinese poisoners would have not only murdered his son but deprived him of the opportunity to do his military duty and even to die a heroic and noble death. Blaming the Chinese for his son's death may also have deflected some personal guilt De Quincey may have had over the odd affair of his son's enlistment for China. One serious consequence of Horace's death from fever was that it precluded him from obtaining any share in the highly lucrative prize money awarded to troops at the end of the conflict. The cost to the embattled De Quincey family of Horace's death was both personally and economically severe.

So, what does all this mean for De Quincey's essay, "The Opium and China Question"? What status does it have as historical cultural or imaginative creative document? Charles J. Repka has, for instance, argued that "the opium eater came to promote the identification of 'real' literature with 'power' during the period of England's greatest military triumphs and most vigorous colonial exploits, especially those connected with China" (Repka, 37-45). It is certainly clear that De Quincey's response to the First Opium War is much more aesthetically and rhetorically sophisticated than any other of the many public statements. The essay, however, is not obviously self-referential (as many of De Quincey's writings are) in that the "opium eater" himself makes no dramatized appearance. The issue of opium abuse and addiction is quickly dealt with. 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." (De Quincey, "Opium and China Question," 535). Nevertheless, it is a luxury and therefore, 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). Abuse requires a continually increasing dose and

the resource to fund it, as the impoverished writer well knew. De Quincey claims that the Chinese have no interest in the health of the nation, but simply wish to stem the export of their silver, used in payment for the opium, as well as to protect their nascent domestic opium production by excluding the better-quality Indian product, ideal for smoking. It was East India Company policy to manufacture its opium with a view to Chinese consumption patterns maintaining the “the purity and strength” of the drug “when dried and smoked through a pipe” (Fry, 20). By the 1830s, Chinese domestic opium production was certainly substantial and significant, though of inferior quality and the Qing government made strenuous, though unsuccessful, attempts to eradicate it. De Quincey was also wrong to deny that the use of opium was a luxury. From the 1820s onward, its use in China spread inwards from the southeast China coast and downwards across class barriers at an alarming rate and there was plenty of evidence available to this effect (Zheng, 41-115). The Qing were especially and genuinely concerned about its habitual use by their troops who were becoming incapable because of its use. 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 to the Whig government of Melbourne, Palmerston and Macaulay. He argues for the justice of the war but also the “criminal want of foresight and provision in our own cabinet” (537). De Quincey is scathing about the Whig government. It gave Charles Elliot ambiguous orders and then disavowed his actions, not on any grounds of principle but simply with regard to expediency: there were not enough funds in the exchequer to make good Elliot’s pledge to the merchants. Therefore government intends to go to war to make the Chinese pay for the confiscated opium: ““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).

Yet despite his animus towards the government, De Quincey wishes to shift the ground of the argument away from the nature of opium as a drug and commodity, 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 argues in a series of powerful metaphors that China is completely "Other" to Britain (and the west), and that the legal systems of the two polities are antithetical and thus incompatible, as has been demonstrated time and time again: "The Chinese laws do not change. It is the very expression of their improgressive state that they cannot" (189). De Quincey argues that the emperor is a "sovereign who affects to make a footstool of the terraqueous globe, and to view all foreigners as barbarians, could not be approached with advantage by a body of manly Englishmen" (548; Kitson "Dark Gift", 56-82.) Here De Quincey departs from the consensus of British debate about the war, including that invoked by Macaulay, and develops his notion of an organic nation state, epitomised by the British nation, and opposed to the Qing empire which is a mere assemblage of parts, with no essential organic unity. 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," "improgressive," "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," and "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,

but for him, China is simply an aberrant state, the antithesis of the European nation state, established since the Thirty Years War unified by religion (Christianity) and language:

The English navy might as reasonably throw bomb-shells into the crater of Vesuvius, by way of bidding it be quiet, or into the Kingdom of the birds above us, as seek to make any deep impression on such a vast callous hulk as the Chinese Empire. 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 represents the China state as not an organic, unified nation as such, but rather as a body possessing no nervous system, no vital organs, in fact not a body as we understand it, or, if so it is so physiologically coarser and developed than that of the European. De Quincey here emphasizes China's lack of maritime and military infrastructure. In fact, the Chinese GDP in the 1840s was still much higher than that of all the European states combined. The Jesuit, Du Halde, had judged in 1735, that trade within China was vastly greater than that of all Europe combined, and Adam Smith famously declared in his *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) that China was "a country richer than any part of Europe" (Smith 2: 202). Certainly, China's prosperity was still legendary, leading Robert Markley to describe its enormous riches and revenues as representing to the eighteenth-century European imagination a confrontation with "a kind of socioeconomic sublime" (Markley, 75, 110).

De Quincey must have known this, yet he chose to present his readership with a China that was lacking in modernity. He denounces the Chinese empire as a “callous hulk” defended by “its essential non-irritability” or inability to flex its muscles. China requires the stimulation of modern trade, including that of opium, in much the same way as a lethargic body requires the stimulations of opium or tea to excite it (Leask, 170-228). It must be stimulated into action by a violent kicking, administered by British colonial and maritime forces. The symptoms of its imperial bodily torpor consist in the empire having no international commerce and no participation in a global commerce. De Quincey racializes commerce here, arguing that China’s lack of commercial activity results not from the stage of society which it has reached, but from the stereotypical moral characteristics associated with the oriental races in general. The romantic metaphor of the organic body politic is easily applied to the individual case. De Quincey sees China as ambivalently barbaric, in that it has degenerated from civilization and is morally savage. China is poised somewhere between savagery and barbarism, “incapable of a true civilization, semi-refined in manners and mechanic arts, but incurably savage in the moral sense’ (552, 554).

De Quincey’s contribution to the debate about First Opium War is to prescribe for all ‘Oriental powers’ like China in a disturbing pedagogic metaphor, “a full explanation of our meaning under an adequate demonstration of our power.” The efficacy of this will depend upon “our visible demonstration of our power contrasted with our extreme forbearance in using it” (193). In his war policy, De Quincey is closest to the bellicose British opium traders, such as William Jardine, James Matheson or Hugh Hamilton Lindsay. His essay, however suspiciously we regard it in ethical terms, is a *tour de force*, a highly knowledgeable, highly stylised, rhetorically powerful piece that combines detailed contemporary political satire on the Whig government, with an application of Ricardian economics, and an extremely mischievous and unreliable irony, very much a *Blackwood’s* essay and one to be approached

with extreme critical caution. It should not be regarded as a statement by a representative nineteenth-century public voice or as *the* quintessentially romantic view of China and the orient. This essay has tried to show how the essay is complexly imbricated with De Quincey's personal life, his own opium habit, his Tory politics, as well as his dark jealousy of Macaulay. Always a writer who could develop an intriguing metaphor, De Quincey came to regard the First Opium War later in life as a turning point from which "the great social swell, the restlessness, and the billowy state of insurrectionary uproars that have agitated China ever since" owe their origin. Borrowing a figure from Milton's *Paradise Lost* in 1857, he recounts how the archangel Ithuriel's spear dislodged Satan from the body of a toad and how "Great Britain, the Ithuriel of 1842" has simply reversed this trope: "that which, under old traditional superstitions, had masqueraded as a warrior angel, collapsed, at one touch of the mighty spear, into a bloated toad" (De Quincey, *China*, 36-7). The chief architect of the war and devoted Miltonist, Sir Thomas Babington Macaulay, who would die just two years later on 28th December 1859 only three weeks after his older and darker nemesis, the "opium eater," would surely have approved the comparison.

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Notes

¹ *The Times* 17th August 1839.

² For Thelwall and Coleridge see Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: the Early Years*. Oxford: OxfordUP, 1998).

³ *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Ed. E. L Griggs. Vol II. 1801-1806. Oxford: ClarendonP, 1956. 1019.

⁴ Algernon Sydney Thelwall, *The Iniquities of the Opium Trade with China*. London: Allen & Co., 1839. 133.

⁵ See Robert Morrison, “ ‘The Singular Wrought Out into the Strange and Mystical’: *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* and the Transformation of Terror.” Ed. Carol Davison and Monica Germana. *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Gothic*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2017). 129-141.

⁶ Samuel Warren, *Miscellanies, critical, imaginative, and juridical; contributed to Blackwood’s magazine*. 2 vols. Edinburgh: Blackwood’s, 1855. 2: 498.

⁷ Samuel Warren, *The Opium Question*. London: J. Ridgway, 1840. 107. Further references cited in text by page number.

⁸ Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater and Other Writings*. Ed. Barry Milligan. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003. 81.

⁹ 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). 94-95.

¹⁰ Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (John Murray, 2008); *River of Smoke* (John Murray, 2011); and *Flood of Fire* (John Murray, 2015).

¹¹ This controversy is discussed in Kitson, "Refusing to *kowtow*", 19-38.