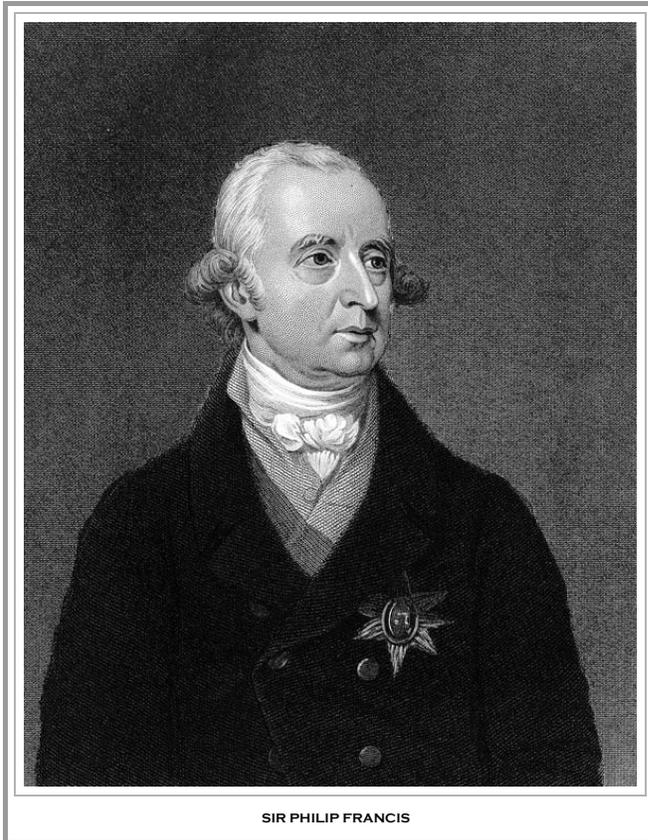


Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry

Part XIV: The Folly of Philip Francis



An engraving by H. Adlard, after a painting by J. Hoppner, R.A.

“I rejoice with you at being so long head of your class, and I hope you will enjoy your superiority over your class-fellows by condescension, compliance, and, if they desire it, by assisting them. Genius and abilities are in general very happy possessions; yet an injudicious use of them makes the possessor odious, and sometimes even contemptible.”

Excerpt from an undated letter from Dr. Francis to his young son Philip, who was then a brilliant student.

Failing to heed the wisdom of his father, Philip Francis used his “genius and abilities” to undermine and discredit Warren Hastings while serving on the Governing Council in India. It may have started as simple rivalry and differing opinions, but it degenerated into mutual contempt, ultimately leading to a pistol duel. The outcome of the duel was not as decisive as it first appeared. Rather than ending their war of wills, it only moved the battlefield from Calcutta to London.

As Parkes and Merivale state in their *Memoirs of Sir Philip Francis*, “[Francis] returned to England an unpopular and discountenanced man. ... It was reported, and the rumour shows at all events the general character of his reception at home, that when he first appeared at Court only two persons would speak to him, the King and Lord North.” In spite of his cool reception, Francis befriended important members of Parliament who shared his venomous views, and for seven painful years Warren Hastings was to stand trial for his alleged crimes in India.

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Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry, Part XIV

The Hastings years in India mark the most challenging period of the British Rule, popularly referred to as *The Raj*. Without Hastings's leadership and stamina, and without his acknowledged ruthlessness, the early structures and alliances that Robert Clive had formed would have crumbled within a few years after his departure.

Today, most historians consider Warren Hastings to be one of the great leaders of his time. But during his tenure, and for years following his death, his accomplishments were clouded in a fog of suspicion and animosity.

The role that Philip Francis played in the persecution of Hastings was significant. As we discussed in the last segment of our series, Robert Clive was critical of Hastings and coached Francis prior to his departure for India. This, along with Francis's own aspirations, may have provoked the initial friction, but the fire storm that ensued seemed to feed on itself.

In the early days, Francis had considerable leverage over Hastings. His influence over two members of the Governing Council, Colonel George Monson and General John Clavering, essentially allowed him to dictate policy over Hastings and his only ally on the Committee, Richard Barwell. During this time, letters sent by Francis back to England were so caustic toward Hastings and his sole ally that EIC directors voted in May 1776, to recall both Hastings and Barwell. The margin was only 11 to 10 in favor of the recall, so when stockholders challenged the decision, it was reversed. But it was only a brief reprieve from what Hastings saw as an increasingly difficult situation.

Even before Hastings learned of the Directors' vote and reversal, the laws of *natural selection* began to work in Hastings's favor. Monson's health began to fail and he was unable to attend Council meetings. He eventually died after a prolonged illness.

Many who ventured to India during the Clive/Hastings era were either lost at sea, or died within a few years of their arrival. Less than half returned to England. Monson met his fate on September 27, 1776, leaving Francis with only one ally, General Clavering. This paralyzed Francis and Clavering in their attempts to force their will on Hastings. With the casting vote, Hastings's vote automatically overruled any tie. Support from Barwell was stronger than ever, and he was again in command, at least until Monson was replaced.

Hastings made it known to all who would listen that he was unwilling to return to the contentious conditions that had prevailed for nearly two years. As a result of the poor state of communications between India and England, there was ample opportunity for misinterpretation and misrepresentation of his sentiments. Without actually receiving a formal resignation from Hastings, and without formally deposing him as Governor-General, the Directors of the EIC appointed one of their members (and formerly Chairman), Edward Wheler, to replace Hastings.

Hastings had not actually resigned. However, upon hearing the rumor that he had, Clavering independently appointed himself as Governor-General in June 1777. His attempt to seize control of the military failed when senior officers refused to take his orders and affirmed their loyalty to Hastings. According to Jeremy Bernstein, had Clavering managed to gain any real support, the struggle for power in British India would likely have resulted in civil war.

It is possible that Clavering's irrational behavior at this time was a result of his physical and mental health, which were rapidly deteriorating, likely due to stress, and perhaps an undiagnosed illness. His entire body was covered with boils, and two months later he was dead.

In the meantime, Edward Wheler, who was London's designation as Hastings's replacement upon his resignation, which never happened, recognized the absurdity of

his situation, and accepted a position as Council member, replacing Monson. Although Francis and Wheler were often in opposition to Hastings and Barwell, the casting vote of Hastings ruled and would do so until Clavering's position on the Council was filled. Affairs in British India were chaotic to this point, but they would only get worse. According to Jeremy Bernstein:

The period from the death of Clavering in August 1777 until February 3, 1785 when Hastings left India ... was the most complex of his entire service. It was a time when the British came close to losing their foothold in that country. It was a time when Hastings made a number of decisions and took a number of actions that certainly saved the British Raj but which, in the years that followed, cost him dearly.

The selection of the Directors for Clavering's replacement, the irascible General Eyre Coote, seems a bit odd compared to their prior appointments. Coote was one of the most respected Generals in India, and was second perhaps only to Clive in his overall effectiveness as a military commander. When not engaged in battle, however, Coote was exceedingly difficult. Hastings wrote to an associate, "...it is impossible for [Coote] to be on terms of peace with any man living who possesses a power either superior or equal to his own, unless the latter is forever at his elbow, and coaxing him into good humor." Francis had sharper words for him: "I despise him from the bottom of my spirit, and the moment it is in my power I shall treat the wretch as he deserves."

Although it was not through a spirit of cooperation, Coote's membership in the Council was supportive of Hastings. He abstained from any vote that was not military, and agreed with Hastings on most military matters. Hastings put up with Coote's childish and insubordinate behavior because there was no more capable General in all of India.

Hastings also raised Coote's salary to £18,000, which was considerably more than

that of other Council members. He would later be accused of bribing Coote for his support. Hastings, however, considered Coote's contribution as more essential to the success of the British Raj, since a capable General was far more valuable to him than any ordinary Council member.

Hastings's power over the Council was threatened when Barwell, his only true ally, took ill and decided to return to England. Barwell's wife had recently died and, without her support, life in India became unbearable.

Barwell's intention to leave India was kept secret, leaving Hastings enough time to reach a tenuous accord with Francis before he realized his impending advantage on the Council. By this time Francis had forsaken his ambitions to become Governor-General, and was also longing for a more peaceful life back in England.

Francis believed that his vote was essentially worthless under the current governing structure. Unaware of Barwell's imminent departure, Francis agreed to give Hastings *carte blanche* in executing war strategies, at least for a period of time.

The agreement was made on February 4, 1780, but within months Francis and Hastings were once again embroiled over the direction of war efforts. Harsh words were exchanged, and Francis challenged Hastings to a duel.

It is unclear whether the Francis/Hastings battle could have been decided in any other way. Bernstein likens Hastings and Francis to "two scorpions in a bottle". Each, at different times, seemed ready to give up the battle and return to England. But there was a driving force that prevented outright surrender to the other party. By this time, both appeared to prefer death at gunpoint to capitulation.

The pistol duel between Francis and Hastings proved indecisive. Francis was seriously, but not fatally, wounded. His subsequent departure from India only meant that he would move the Francis/Hastings war front to safer turf in England.

During the time that Hastings was Governor-General, no new territory was claimed for the British Empire. Hastings was, however, able to establish a reasonable order within the chaos that Clive had left. He was also instrumental in deflecting some of the prejudices that were rampant in British India. His respect and admiration for the diversity of India was not universally shared.

A few tea seeds were sent from China to Calcutta while Hastings was in office. Some of those were planted in a garden in Calcutta and the rest were sent by Hastings to Butan. It would be decades before Assam would come under British rule, eventually becoming the source of some of the finest British tea. But the crop that was to mark the Hastings era was opium, rather than tea. During his final years, the EIC was given a monopoly on the production of Indian opium. The role that opium played in the tea trade will be the topic of a future article in our series.

Hastings was Governor-General of India for twelve years. All during this time there was a constant barrage of accusations, contentions, and inquisitions. He finally resigned his position and returned to England in 1785, fully expecting to live a comfortable but not lavish life of retirement. He had saved a small fortune which, although it paled in comparison to that of Clive, was adequate to complete his childhood dream, the purchase and restoration of Daylesford, his family's former estate.

Hopes for a peaceful retirement with Marian, his beloved wife, were dashed long before the purchase of Daylesford was completed. Edmund Burke was spearheading an inquisition into the dealings of the EIC in India, with Hastings as the prime target. Fueled by the vitriol of Philip Francis, Burke had concocted a case against Hastings that would preoccupy Parliament for several years.

Treachery, extortion, fraud, bribery, squandering and pilfering of EIC funds, and incompetency topped the long list of accusations against Hastings, who made the naive

mistake of assuming that he could easily expose the preposterous nature of these accusations without legal support. This mistake cost him dearly. Edmund Burke and Philip Francis, along with others, had so thoroughly prejudiced Parliament that Hastings had no chance fighting the charges without legal help. For the next seven years a lengthy trial drained his entire savings.

In the end Hastings was acquitted of all charges, but his reputation was tarnished for years to come. When the EIC finally accepted that Hastings did not amass a vast fortune, as did Clive, he was granted a pension that allowed him to retain Daylesford, where he resided until his death on August 22, 1818. Jeremy Bernstein concludes his biography of Hastings with the following:

Hastings's health remained reasonably good until close to the end of his life. He was much more worried about Marian's welfare than his own. One of the truly moving features of Hastings's correspondence during these final years are his references to Marian's beauty. He loved her as much then as he had when he first met her on the voyage to India a half-century earlier. She, and her son Charles, were at Hastings's side when he died. The final days in 1818 had been an agony of pain, which he had accepted stoically. At seven in the evening of August 22, he placed a handkerchief over his face and died, a last private act.

Philip Francis died in December of the same year. Other than being the antagonist of Warren Hastings, he is best known as a possible author of a series of controversial letters published in the *Public Advisors* under a pseudonym of *Junius*. If this were fact, it would elevate his position in history dramatically, for even Samuel Johnson considered Junius a valuable lexicographical source. It is, however, more probable that Francis was merely the secretary and scribe of a more capable and mature leader. Francis is believed to have known the identity of Junius, and kept the secret to his death.

Our series on *Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry* will continue in the next issue of the *Upton Tea Quarterly*.