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William Thomas Thornton's Career at East India House: 1836–1880

Mark Donoghue

Bricks are undoubtedly an essential ingredient of civilization;
one gets nowhere at all without them.
—J. G. Farrell

Some recent work on William Thornton (1813–1880), culminating in Philip Mirowski and Steven Tradewell's recently published *Economic Writings of William Thornton* (1999), seeks to cement his place in the history of nineteenth-century economics (see Donoghue 2002). But despite the notoriety Thornton achieved through his role in the wage-fund debates of the 1860s and 1870s, few commentators have explored other aspects of his work, particularly his prescient remarks on the nature of economic, political, and social reform in India.[1] This absence is somewhat surprising because, for much of his professional career, Thornton

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1. In their editorial introduction, Mirowski and Tradewell add little to what was already known of Thornton's life and times. Even Jeff Lipkes (1999), who to date has provided the most thorough assessment of Thornton's intellectual biography, refrains from delving into his

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served the East India Company at its Leadenhall Street headquarters in London, and, in 1858, when the Crown assumed administration of the company's territories, he was appointed secretary of the India Office's Department of Public Works, an important position within the Home Establishment.

Thornton formed important relationships at East India House. For example, he met John Stuart Mill, who was employed there, and the two men's first discussion marked the beginning of a mutually warm and long association. On a day-to-day basis, the demands of drafting company dispatches and attending to other administrative duties were not onerous, so Thornton could pursue his own literary ambitions. The result was the publication of several commendable works on political economy and philosophy, as well as three volumes of poetry. In 1873, as a mark of his unbroken service to the India Office, Thornton was created Companion of the Bath on the recommendation of the Duke of Argyll. Yet, we have no account of his long and successful career.

The aim of this essay is to retrieve the broad outline of Thornton's East India Company career.[2] Section 1 examines his administrative responsibilities and duties with the company. Section 2 discusses his close friendship and professional relationship with John Stuart Mill. The two men influenced each other in a variety of ways. Here discussion focuses primarily on their professional activities at East India House before Mill's retirement in 1858. Section 3 explores whether Thornton's advocacy of public works programs in India was an expression of his own thinking on the subject, a manifestation of his work as a steward of empire, or both. Some concluding remarks follow.

1. From Junior Clerk to Company Mandarin

William Thornton's life journey does not seem unusual for a man of his time and social class, but it may strike the modern reader as without shape. Indeed, the reason he decided to join the East India Company is not easy to locate. One explanation is that he simply followed other

role in the complex administrative machinery of the East India Company. Donovan Williams (1983) and Martin Moir (1990) provide brief overviews of Thornton's administrative duties at India House.

2. Here, Thornton's "Company career" refers to the period before *and* after the East India Company's dissolution in 1858, when its administrative responsibilities were transferred to the India Office.

family members, perhaps on their advice, into a service that ensured a comfortable standard of living. Thornton's uncle, Sir Edward Thornton (1766–1852), enjoyed a long and successful diplomatic career and may have encouraged his young nephew to enter the permanent civil service (see Lipkes 1999, 116–17).

Or perhaps time spent abroad during adolescence whetted the young man's appetite for the strange sights and smells of distant lands and seas. When William Thornton was fourteen, his well-connected cousin, Sir William Henry Thornton (1786–1859), who was auditor-general of Malta, invited him to reside in Valetta for three years.[3] Another opportunity to live abroad materialized in 1830 when the consul-general of Constantinople offered Thornton a position on his staff. Thornton accepted and spent five years working in the Ottoman capital before returning to England to join the East India Company.

Another part of the explanation may stem from Thornton's parents, Thomas Thornton (d. 1814) and Sophie Zohráb (n.d.). Thomas Thornton was active for many years in the Levant consular service. He met Sophie Zohráb in Constantinople, where he was acquainted with her father, Paul Zohráb, whom he described in a letter to Sir Robert Liston as an interpreter "in the service of his Danish Majesty" in Constantinople.[4]

The couple were married in Constantinople, but the Thornton family returned to England in the early nineteenth century. In 1807, Thomas Thornton published an account of Turkish social, religious, and political institutions titled *The Present State of Turkey*. The book received favorable reviews and established its author as an authority on the Near East (Lipkes 1999, 116). On the strength of this literary success, Thomas Thornton was appointed to the position of counsel to the Levant Company. But he died on the eve of voyaging to Alexandria to assume his commission, leaving young William bereft of a father soon after his first

3. Sir William Henry Thornton wrote a biographical memoir of his experience in Malta titled *Memoir of the Finances of Malta*. It was written in 1836 but apparently never published.

4. In 1795, Paul Zohráb and his children—Sophie and her two brothers, Constantine and Peter Paul John—had escaped to Turkey from Persia, where the Zohráb family was being persecuted by the Shah of Persia, Aga Mohammed Khan. Constantine Zohráb eventually settled in Constantinople and became the first dragoman (interpreter) to the Dutch legation there. His brother Paul, who was also a dragoman, married an English woman, Elizabeth Hitchins, on 17 September 1807 in St. Pancras Old Church in London. Paul Zohráb married again in 1816. He eventually settled in Malta with his second wife, Frances Williams, and raised a family there. He died in Malta in 1852. Thus, when young William ventured to Malta in the 1820s and to Constantinople in the 1830s, it was in the knowledge that he had relatives on both sides of the family living and working there.

birthday. Nevertheless, the yarns of relatives recounting his father's swashbuckling adventures in the British Levant may have kindled the younger Thornton's taste for exotic foreign locations.[5]

Entering East India House

Wherever the original impulse may have come from, on 2 August 1836 William Thornton "entered a service which was to be the work of his life by obtaining a [junior] clerkship in the East India House,"[6] a vacancy created by the death of John Stuart Mill's father, James Mill.[7] In the obituary he wrote for his close friend Mill, Thornton (1873, 34) outlined the circumstances surrounding his appointment: "The death of Mr. Mill senior, in 1836, had occasioned a vacancy at the bottom of the examiner's office, to which I was appointed through the kindness of Sir James Carnac, then Chairman of the Company, in whose gift it was. Within a few months, however, I was transferred to a newly-created [marine] branch of the secretary's office."[8] The position of junior clerk was the lowest level in the clerical establishment of the Examiner's Office. In accordance with the East India Company's policy of the day, junior clerks served a three-year probationary period without salary, although they did receive a modest annual stipend of £80.

Thornton left no personal record of the duties he performed as a company clerk during the course of a working day. However, in the obituary he wrote for Mill, Thornton (1873, 31) compared the terms and conditions of Mill's employment at the East India Company with those of its other junior clerks:

5. For instance, in a letter to Sir Robert Liston dated 10 November 1803, Thomas Thornton relays the story of a dramatic heist during his return by stagecoach from Vienna to Constantinople: "My journey thru Turkey has been unfortunate. I was met by robbers soon after passing the Danube who took from me, besides my own property, more than £10,000 in jewellery which I was carrying to Constantinople to the address of Mr. Drummond."

6. The quotation is taken from the *Times* obituary notice that appeared on Friday, 18 June 1880.

7. James Mill had joined the East India Company in 1819 as one of three assistants to the chief examiner, William McCulloch, whom he succeeded in 1830. Meanwhile, in 1823 he had appointed his son, John Stuart Mill, a junior clerk in the Examiner's Office.

8. The official record of Thornton's appointment is as follows: "Resolved with reference to the Courts' Resolution of the 27 *ulto*, that Mr William Thomas Thornton be appointed Junior Clerk in the Established branch of the Examiner's Office on probation for one year, under the Regulations of the 9 March 1831" (Oriental and India Office Collections, L/AG/30/12).

> According to the ordinary course of things in those days, the newly-appointed junior would have had nothing to do, except a little abstracting, indexing, and searching, or pretending to search, into records; but young Mill was almost immediately set to indite despatches to the governments of the three Indian Presidencies, on what, in India House phraseology, were distinguished as "political" subjects—subjects, that is, for the most part growing out of the relations of the said governments with "native" states or foreign potentates. This continued to be his business almost to the last.[9]

An examination of the dispatch books preserved in the Oriental and India Office Collections suggests that Thornton did not draft any dispatches in the early stage of his career. (At least, he did not sign off on any.) It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that his daily routine revolved around more mundane clerical and administrative tasks, such as filing documents, retrieving correspondence, and writing précis.

In any case, Thornton was transferred, in December 1837, to the newly created Marine Branch of the Secretary's Office. The move rapidly improved Thornton's financial position, and, following the mandatory unsalaried probation period, his annual income rose to a very respectable £500. By 1839, he was making enough to be required to make compulsory contributions to the Widows' Fund (a type of pension scheme for surviving widows of company officers),[10] and in 1842 he began paying income taxes. In 1856, he was appointed assistant examiner in the Examiner's Office and in 1858 to the senior administrative position of secretary of the India Office's Department of Public Works. Both promotions brought him substantial salary increases: the first, from £600 to £900 per annum, and the latter £1,200 annually. From 1859 to the end of his career, Thornton's net salary rose slightly every few years, from £1,132 to £1,344, which afforded him "the modest prosperity of a colonial bureaucrat of a middling rank" (Mirowski and Tradewell 1999, 43).

Both promotions also brought Thornton increased responsibility and were linked to changes within the bureaucracy governing British India.

9. The court minutes explain that it proved possible to employ Mill "in preparing drafts of despatches, instead of performing the duties usually assigned to persons of his standing," because of "the great pains bestowed on his education" coupled with his own "acquirements which are far in advance of his age" (quoted in Moir 1990, xiii).

10. On Thornton's death, his wife, Elizabeth Evelyn (1818–1903), received an annual pension of £400, commencing 25 June 1880.

Between 1848 and 1856, Lord Dalhousie served as governor general of India. He came to India with an ambitious program to modernize and improve India's public works infrastructure. The railway, in particular, he thought an important tool of economic progress. Other key components of Dalhousie's economic and social reform agenda included postal improvements, telegraph and cable services, and the introduction of scientific education programs that would allow individuals to better appreciate the technological advances underway in other parts of the world (Zastoupil 1994, 140).[11]

Dalhousie's term as governor general of India marked a crucial watershed for British India—and for Thornton. Owing to the scale and success of the modernizing program, the Home Establishment created a separate correspondence department to handle the increased volume of official correspondence arising from Dalhousie's program of public works. John Stuart Mill insisted on Thornton's appointment to the position of assistant examiner of public works.

As the assistant examiner, Thornton was responsible for preparing draft dispatches and other policy documents relating to the company's public works activities. These documents, which dealt mainly with the construction of railways and roads, bridges, canals, and irrigation schemes in India, Burma, and the Straits Settlement, were then circulated for discussion within the India Office before being sent to the central administration in India. The chief examiner and his senior assistants exerted considerable influence in determining the substance of the dispatches, but before any could be sent to India they had to be approved by the Court of Directors of the company and then by the Board of Control, representing the authority of Parliament (Harris 1964, 186).[12]

Inspection of original draft dispatches and minute papers now preserved in the Oriental and India Office Collections makes it possible to quantify the dispatches a correspondence writer prepared in any given year.[13] Table 1 provides data on Thornton's drafting of public works

11. H. J. Habakkuk (1940, 788–89) notes that before 1850 expenditures on public works in India amounted to a paltry £250,000, but by 1854 they had grown to an impressive £4,000,000, largely due to the public works schemes initiated under Dalhousie's administration.

12. For a detailed account of the procedure by which drafts prepared in the Examiner's Office were submitted at various points to the company chairman, the appropriate committee of the Court of Directors, the Board of Control, and the Court of Directors as a whole, see Moir 1986, 140–50.

13. Dispatches prepared by Thornton are easily identifiable by his signature appearing on the inside page of an original dispatch, and by his handwriting in the case of minute papers, which replaced the dispatches in 1860 as policy documents.

dispatches between 1856 and 1880, the bulk of which centered on public works activities in the Bengal presidency. Most of Thornton's dispatches and minute papers were written in 1856–1861 and 1870–1872. The years 1860 and 1861 were particularly busy: he wrote eighty-eight and seventy in those two years, totals that reflect his increased responsibilities as the secretary of the India Office's Department of Public Works. In a more typical year, he would write fewer than ten. The length of the dispatches varied greatly: some were only a page or two in length, and generally these dealt with administrative matters of a peripheral nature, such as the confirmation of the delivery of stores in the Indian presidencies, or the extension of the appointment of a civil servant, or perhaps simply a letter of acknowledgment; others were longer, sometimes amounting to more than fifty handwritten pages, often addressing more serious policy issues, such as defense, trade, and public infrastructure.

Thornton's drafting at India House also reflected the scope of the company's and the India Office's economic and political interests elsewhere. For example, Thornton prepared draft dispatches on the construction of the Rangoon-Prome trunk road, which still exists today, and on the construction of Singapore's southern defenses to protect the British garrison in those pivotal water lanes. Of course, he also dealt with a host of public works proposals in the Bombay, Bengal, and Madras presidencies, either supervising the drafting of dispatches or preparing them himself, while he attended to more tedious matters of administration, such as departmental budgeting.

Moving Upward and Onward

Thornton's responsibilities were soon to grow. Throughout the 1840s and 1850s, the British government had been working to transfer to itself the East India Company's responsibility for the governance of India. At first, the company was successful in casting doubt on the wisdom of such a change, but its fate was sealed in 1857 when a group of indigenous soldiers in its army mutinied. The Sepoy Rebellion was eventually suppressed, but the political consequences were far-reaching. In September 1858, the British government transferred the administration of the company's territories to the Crown.

Table 1 Public Works Dispatches and Minute Papers Drafted by William Thornton

Year	India/Bengal	Madras	Bombay	Total
1856	10	3	1	14
1857	8	1	2	11
1858	8	3	4	15
1859	10	15	10	35
1860	50	26	12	88
1861	24	30	16	70
1862	2	1	0	3
1863	0	1	1	2
1864	0	0	0	0
1865	6	0	0	6
1866	0	0	0	0
1867	3	0	0	3
1868	2	1	1	4
1869	4	0	1	5
1870	15	0	2	17
1871	16	2	2	20
1872	10	1	1	12
1873	2	0	0	2
1874	5	1	0	6
1875	2	2	0	4
1876	5	3	1	9
1877	3	2	0	5
1878	5	0	1	6
1879	3	3	0	6
1880	3	2	0	5
Total	193	97	55	345

Note: Data derived from records preserved in the Oriental and India Office Collections, L/PWD/3 series.

The dissolution of the East India Company had a pronounced effect on Thornton's professional career. The general reorganization of the Home Establishment brought mounting pressure to abolish the public works department. Thornton was asked to prepare an appropriate

response. In late 1858, he wrote a minute paper making a persuasive case for retaining a separate public works department within the new administrative structure on the grounds that there had been a "great addition of business" in recent times, arising from "the undertaking of great [public] works in India." Moreover, he also said, the Board of Control lacked "the requisite knowledge and experience required for dealing satisfactorily with subjects of a scientific, as well as practical nature" (quoted in Williams 1983, 78).[14]

In the event, Thornton's argument proved decisive. The Department of Public Works was preserved within the new Home Establishment, and Thornton was appointed its first secretary.

For Thornton, the promotion was accompanied by an increase in salary and a widening of the range of his responsibilities.[15] His drafting of dispatches and minute papers increased noticeably between 1858 and 1861. After that period, he was aided by the several newly recruited correspondence writers, capable of training their minds on complex public works proposals (see Williams 1983, 96). Their arrival largely freed Thornton from having to draft the bulk of the public works dispatches, although he remained responsible for reading, editing, and commenting upon all policy documents emanating from the department. In the 1860s and 1870s, Thornton worked alongside a highly competent Public Works Committee. Although the committee occasionally disregarded Thornton's policy advice, his strength was that he "was [not] unduly troubled by decisions of the Public Works Committee which ran counter to [his] own convictions" (Williams 1983, 89).

Some of Thornton's unpublished letters provide evidence for connections with Lord Stanley, the first secretary of state for India, and with the Marquis of Salisbury (formerly Viscount Cranbourne), who served twice in that post. The two surviving letters from Thornton to Lord Stanley do not contain information on India House activities.[16] But the letters to the

14. The original document is now preserved in the Public Record Office series PRO/30/12/22.

15. In 1861 and again in 1870, Thornton received a personal allowance of £100 as a director of the Madras Irrigation and Canal Company (see the India Office Salary Records series L/AG/30/17/1 and L/AG/30/17/2 in the Oriental and India Office Collections).

16. The first, dated 16 June 1858, contains a sonnet dedicated to Lord Stanley on the occasion of his "temporary retirement from office." To the second letter, dated 15 April 1864, Thornton attached a copy of his *Westminster Review* article, "Strikes and Industrial Cooperation," a subject on which the letter said Lord Stanley had a "lively interest." Thornton incorporated the article unamended into chapters 2 and 3 of book 4 of *On Labour* (1870).

Marquis of Salisbury make several references to specific public works programs in India. For example, one contains information on the Soane canal project, an important irrigation project on which Thornton had earlier prepared a draft dispatch.[17]

Other letters provide hints of Thornton's interests and opinions. After Mill retired in 1858, Thornton kept his friend informed of news, personal views, and other snippets of information on the India Office. For example, in an illuminating letter that Thornton wrote to Mill on 8 January 1869, he characterized Sir Stafford Northcote as a person of little resolve. At the same time, he referred approvingly to the recent appointment of the Duke of Argyll as secretary of state for India:

> Here, at the India Office as far as I can yet judge, we seem to have made a good exchange of Sir S. Northcote for the Duke of Argyll. It is impossible to be much in contact with the former without liking him, but I never before met with a man of so much capacity joined with so little force of character. Over and over again, he would, on discussion with members of his council, chalk out an excellent course, assigning at the same time excellent reasons for it, and then giving up his own judgement in deference to the noisy opposition of men as incapable of judging of anything as Mills or Macnaughten. Now the Duke of Argyll looks and speaks as if he had a will as well as an opinion of his own—In truth his demeanour will not belie these appearances, for what we, office men, desire above all things in a Secretary of State is that he should preside over this council instead of letting them rule over him. (quoted in Donoghue 2000, 335)

The Duke of Argyll, who served as secretary of state for India between 1868 and 1874, acknowledged Thornton's support in connection with the establishment of a new railway network in the state of Punjab, in northwest India (see Argyll 1906, 274). Thornton later dedicated his *Indian Public Works and Cognate Indian Topics* (1875) to Argyll, and, as an acknowledgment of loyal service to the India Office, the duke

17. In a letter to Lord Salisbury of 11 December 1875, Thornton remarked that "a draft despatch . . . placed before your Lordship a week or two ago, contains in connexion with the Soane Canal Project, some remarks upon the new mode of estimating for Indian public works, which you have desired may be omitted as being too much of a controversial character." The Oriental and India Office Collections contain no record, however, of Thornton's having drafted a dispatch on the Soane canal project in late 1875, although he had some years earlier prepared a draft dispatch on this project. The draft is preserved in the Oriental and India Office Collections (L/PWD/3/305).

recommended Thornton for the Companion of the Order of the Bath (CB).

Donovan Williams suggests that Thornton "had the right dash of dedication to give drive to his calling to improve India." He elaborates on his punctilious character and on his strengths and weaknesses as secretary of the public works department.

> His combination of high idealism and practical administration contained certain contradictions, but these were inherent in the way people thought about the Indian Empire in the [eighteen] sixties. They can also be explained by Thornton's rather lethargic, even undisciplined approach towards the problems of colonial administration. He meant very well but could have done a lot better. His tardiness in dispensing praise perhaps reflected a lack of certainty in evaluating achievements. This tendency to understatement did not sit well with those who had been to India and thoroughly understood the situation. . . . Nevertheless, this tall, amiable Longfellow was respected in the East India House. (Williams 1983, 417)[18]

On the available evidence, it seems that Thornton enjoyed a generally comfortable working relationship both with his superiors and his subordinates. He was reliable and hardworking (if somewhat inefficient), and had an affable personality that made friends easily and enemies rarely. Several times throughout his life, he also had the good fortune of being in the right place at the right time.

2. William Thomas Thornton and John Stuart Mill: A Fervent Friendship

In early 1846, William Thornton and John Stuart Mill began a close personal and professional relationship at East India House. Their subsequent correspondence contains useful information on a range of topics of mutual interest, such as political economy, Continental travel, utilitarianism, peasant proprietorship, and poetry. From beginning to end, each respected the other's mind. Although Mill was the more famous thinker, Thornton was not a passive bystander in their intellectual discussions.[19] His writings on political economy, labor relations, cooperatives,

18. The description of Thornton as an "amiable Longfellow" is a reference to his having published three volumes of poetry in the 1850s.

19. Commenting on his criticism of the classical theory of value in *On Labour*, Thornton (1870, 62) himself declared that he felt "a little as Saul of Tarsus might have felt if, while

and peasant proprietorship led Mill to further modify his own views on these subjects throughout the 1860s and early 1870s.

The Beginning of the Friendship

Although Thornton worked at the same establishment as Mill in Leadenhall Street, he was only twenty-three when he joined the East India Company and very much Mill's junior. Owing to the rigid social boundaries of Victorian England and to their mutual shyness, for a decade the two men "seldom [came] into contact, scarcely ever spoke, and generally passed each other without any mark of recognition when [they] happened to meet in or out of doors" (Thornton 1873, 34).

Then, in early 1846, Thornton seized the initiative and sent Mill a copy of his recently published book, *Over-Population and Its Remedy; or, An Enquiry into the Extent and Causes of the Distress Prevailing among the Labouring Classes of the British Islands* (1846). Mill approached him "a day or two afterwards [and] came into [his] room to thank [him] for it." Thornton (1873, 34–35) later wrote there ensued a "half-hour conversation" that marked the beginning of an "intimate friendship, of which I feel that I am not unduly boasting in declaring it to have been equally sincere and fervent on both sides." From that time, he recalled,

> a day seldom passed for the next ten or twelve years, without, if I did not go into his room, his coming into mine, often telling me as he entered, that he had nothing particular to say; but that, having a few minutes to spare, he thought we might as well have a little talk. And what talks we have had on such occasions, and on what various subjects! And not infrequently, too, when the room was Mill's, Grote, the historian, would join us, first announcing his advent by a peculiar and ever welcome rat-tat with his walking-stick on the door. (35)

We have no further details of Thornton's and Mill's workplace conversations. Mill's published writings and their private letters suggest, however, that they discussed the progress of their respective work. For example, in the first and second editions of the *Principles of Political Economy*

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sitting at the feet of Gamaliel, he had suddenly found himself compelled by a sense of duty to contradict his master."

(Mill [1848] 1965), Mill praised Thornton's *Over-Population and Its Remedy*. He saw Thornton's proposed solution, which entailed the colonization of Irish wastelands by indigenous peasants, as "distinguished from most others . . . by its rational treatment of the great questions affecting the economical condition of the labouring classes" (Mill [1848] 1965, 3:997; cf. 996–1002).[20]

In addition, Mill showed a strong interest in Thornton's study of peasant properties in the Channel Islands. In the second (1849) edition of his *Principles*, he identified Thornton's *Plea for Peasant Proprietors* (1848) as "the standard work on that side of the question" (Mill [1848] 1965, 2:272).[21] Indeed, Mill's first biographer, Alexander Bain (1882, 86 n), credited Thornton with having "first awakened him [Mill] to the question of peasant properties." And in Mill's series of articles on the "Irish land question" in the *Morning Chronicle* between October 1846 and January 1847, he said that "the excellent work of Mr. William Thornton" had "anticipated" his plan for Ireland (Kinzer 2001, 55).

The two men were constantly looking for alternative models of peasant proprietorship in other European countries. Thornton's views on peasant proprietorship were partly formed by his extensive travels in Belgium and northern France, and his letters to Mill in the 1860s and early 1870s invariably contain information on the subject. In October 1869, for example, Thornton wrote to his friend describing one of his walking tours in Europe. The peasant properties he encountered there were not comparable to those of Britain in terms of agricultural productiveness:

> I took the railway to St. Nicolas . . . and then walked back for six miles through the thick of its peasant properties—I am sorry to say the reality did not in all respects come up to my expectations. . . . They are not to be compared with those which one sees either on well tilled English farms, nor in other parts of Belgium. (quoted in Donoghue 2000, 336)

20. In correspondence, Thornton and Mill exchanged information on peasant proprietors (see Donoghue 2000, 332, 336–37; and Mill 1972, 17:1587–88).

21. Mill praised Thornton's book in a letter to John Elliott Cairnes, to whom he sent his personal copy (Mill 1972, 15:930, 948–49). Mill later encouraged Thornton to publish a second edition of the book, which duly arrived in 1874 with two additional chapters, one dealing with the "social and moral effects of peasant proprietorship" (chap. 4), and the other with Ireland ("Ireland: A Forecast from 1873" [chap. 7]).

Promotion of His Career

After 1848, Mill played an important part in advancing Thornton's literary career. He believed the younger man could best make his way by writing articles about British economic history, preparing book reviews, and holding public seminars, and Mill took action to forward these efforts. For example, in a 12 February 1850 letter to William Hickson, editor of the *Westminster Review*, he suggested Thornton as a contributor to the journal and enclosed one of his recent papers (Mill 1972, 14:47). Hickson published it as "Equity Reform: The Probate Courts." At about the same time, Mill proposed Thornton for membership in the Political Economy Club, where he would meet leading economists; he eventually became friends with several of them.

Mill also played an important role in advancing Thornton's career at the East India Company. When the two men met, Thornton was still a junior clerk. In early 1856, however, Mill (1991, 97) strongly recommended him for a post as an assistant examiner in the new public works department. Later in life, Thornton (1873, 35) recorded how Mill secured his promotion:

> When, in 1856, [Mill] became examiner, he had made it, as I have been since assured by the then Chairman of the East India Company, a condition of his acceptance of the post [of chief examiner of Indian Correspondence] that I, whose name very likely the Chairman had never before heard, should be associated with him as one of his assistant examiners; and I was placed, in consequence, in charge of the Public Works Department. (see also Foster 1924, 224)

Thornton became responsible for the daily operation of the public works department and for the preparation of its dispatches. Between mid-1856 and mid-1857, however, Thornton suffered a mysterious illness that, he later recalled, "for nearly a year absolutely incapacitated me from mental labour." He faced early retirement until Mill quietly took on "for the space of twelve months . . . the whole of my official duties, in addition to his own" (Thornton 1873, 35). That assistance meant Mill prepared "some forty-eight Public Works drafts between May 1857 and April 1858, after which Thornton recovered his health and gradually was able to resume his regular duties" (Moir 1990, xxxii).[22]

22. On 13 March 1857, Mill (1972, 15:528) wrote Edwin Chadwick lamenting the fact that he was "too busy" to continue with his own writing, "having all Thornton's work to do in addition to my own."

Occasional Ruffles

Late in life, Thornton (1873, 35–36) claimed his "own friendship with [Mill] was, from first to last, never once ruffled by difference or misunderstanding of any kind." This claim reflects fond but selective memory. As with any close friends, difficulties arose occasionally between the two men. For example, Thornton once "[took] the liberty of addressing one [poem] to [Mill] by name" in his book *Zohráb; or, A Midsummer Day's Dream, and Other Poems*.[23] Mill, being a very private person and not much impressed with the book (which he thought barely "better than common"), demanded and received both an explanation and an apology from Thornton. The older man thought the apology "very insufficient," and he consulted his wife, Harriet Taylor, who had already admonished Thornton for the same offense. His letter to her suggests the depth of his umbrage.

> With regard to Thornton I do not think what you say too severe—he has suddenly plumped down to the place of a quite common person in my estimation, when I thought he was a good deal better. There are in the book itself many proofs of excessive, even ridiculous vanity, not much the better for being, as in his case it is, *disappointed* vanity. He is far from the first instance I have known of inordinate vanity under very modest externals. His misjudgement of me is so less than you supposed, as he has not put in any flattery *proprement dit*, but the fact itself is a piece of flattery which he must have thought would be agreeable or he would not have taken so impertinent a liberty. There are so few people of whom one can think even as well as I did of him, that I feel this a loss, & am like you angry with him for it. (Mill 1972, 14:139–40.)

This passage clarifies several points. First, the redoubtable Harriet Taylor exerted a considerable influence over Mill's life. She was jealous of his friends and more or less successfully distanced him from them. Second, Mill's reticent and introverted nature did not encourage publicity, and Thornton, although certainly acting in good faith, had overstepped the mark by dedicating a poem to Mill. However, Mill himself was not a person to nurse a grudge. He forgave his friend, and any residual resentment

23. The dedication reads: "To John Stuart Mill, Esq. In Imitation of an Epistle of Horace to Maecenas, *ibid*., pp. 132–149, with the Latin of Horace on facing pages."

eventually dissolved. Indeed, their friendship seemed to strengthen, particularly as Mill aged.[24]

The strength of their bond can also be gauged from a poignant letter Mill sent Thornton in 1858 following Harriet Taylor's death. Thornton was the first friend with whom Mill shared his grief. From the Hotel d'Europe, Avignon, he wrote:

> My Dear Thornton—The hopes with which I commenced this journey have been fatally frustrated. My wife, the companion of all my feelings, the imprompter of all my best thoughts, the guide of all my actions, is gone! She was taken ill at this place with a violent attack of bronchitis or pulmonary conjestion—the medical men here could do nothing for her, & before the physician at Nice who saved her life once could arrive, all was over.
>
> It is doubtful if I shall ever be fit for anything public or private, again. The spring of my life is broken. But I shall best fulfil her wishes by not giving up the attempt to do something useful, and I am not quite alone. I have with me her daughter, the one person besides myself who most loved her & whom she most loved, & we help each other to bear what is inevitable. I am sure of your sympathy, but if you knew what she was you would feel how little any sympathy can do.
>
> We return straight to England but shall be detained here for some days longer & I beg of you the kind office of inserting the inclosed notice twice in the Times & once in the Post, Herald & Daily News & in the principal weekly papers. Believe me my dear Thornton, very sincerely yours. (Mill 1972, 15:574–75)

Following his wife's death, Mill purchased a cottage in Avignon to be nearer her grave. He spent increasingly less time in London in his final years and entertained fewer visitors at Avignon. Thornton was an exception, and Helen Taylor, Mill's stepdaughter, regularly invited him to stay with her and Mill in Provence.[25]

When Mill died in 1873, Thornton prepared a moving tribute in which he charted his friend's rapid ascent at India House. Speaking candidly of their attachment, he remarked that the only time they came close to "anything of an unpleasant character" was on an occasion immediately before

24. An indication of Thornton's close relationship with Mill and his family is suggested by Harriet Taylor's naming him trustee of her first husband's estate (Mill 1972, 15:504 n. 5).

25. In a letter to Thornton dated 16 January 1869, Mill (1972, 17:1549) refers to the ongoing refurbishment of "*your* room" at his Avignon cottage.

Mill's retirement in 1858. His colleagues had planned to purchase a silver inkstand to celebrate Mill's distinguished career. When Mill learned of the surprise gift, he reproached Thornton and refused to accept the testimonial.

> In some way or other, Mill had got wind of our proceeding and, coming to me in consequence, began almost to upbraid me as its originator. I had never before seen him so angry. He hated all such demonstrations, he said, and was quite resolved not to be made the subject of them. He was sure they were never altogether genuine or spontaneous; there were always several persons who took part in them merely because they did not like to refuse; and, in short, whatever we might do, he would have none of it. In vain I represented how eagerly everybody, without exception, had come forward; that we had now gone too far to recede; that, if he would not take the inkstand, we should be utterly at a loss what to do with it; and that I myself should be in a specially embarrassing position. Mill was not to be moved. This was a question of principle; and on principle he could not give way. There was nothing left, therefore, but to resort to a species of force. I arranged with Messrs. Elkington that our little testimonial should be taken down to Mr. Mill's house at Blackheath by one of their men, who, after leaving it with the servant, should hurry away without waiting for an answer. This plan succeeded; but I have always suspected, though she never told me so, that its success was mainly due to Miss Helen Taylor's good offices. But for her, the inkstand would almost certainly have been returned, instead of being promoted, as it eventually was, to a place of honor in her own and her father's drawing room. (Thornton 1873, 36–37)

The incident highlights Mill's determination to retire gracefully and quietly from professional life. He was from beginning to end a private person.

Mill and Thornton often discovered wide divergences in their views on such substantive subjects as the U.S. Civil War, the religion of humanity, and, more importantly, utilitarianism. However, the closeness of the two men was not affected by those views of Thornton's that were completely anathema to Mill. He could tolerate philosophical differences with individuals whose general social and political viewpoints were congruent with his own.

Overall, Mill's close relationship with Thornton, although occasionally punctuated by private disagreements, was never seriously compromised. Thornton held Mill in the highest esteem, and Mill, in turn, reciprocated the affection. In an illuminating letter to John Elliott Cairnes, Mill (1972, 15:958) once described Thornton as "a person in perfect candour, sincerity, and singleness of mind, few men come near."

3. Thornton and the Public Works Experiment in India, 1858–1880

As already noted, when the administration of the East India Company's territories was transferred to the Crown, William Thornton was named the first secretary of the India Office's Department of Public Works. From 1858, until his death in June 1880, he emerged as an important critical voice in the area of Indian public works and finance.[26] His contributions appeared in many leading periodicals of the day, in the letter columns to the *Times*, in papers presented to members of the Society of Arts, and as evidence before a parliamentary committee of inquiry on "East India Finance" in 1871.

Some contemporary commentators argued that the purpose of Indian public works was to give order, structure, and routine to an otherwise disorganized and undisciplined society (see Ambirajan 1978, 247–66, for further discussion of this point). This line of thinking had a powerful effect on those who worked for the India Office's Department of Public Works, particularly Thornton, its energetic secretary.

The department supplied what were often called the "bricks and mortar" of Britain's "imperial design," providing "substance" to Britain's "mission, duty and interest" in India, which was to imbibe its people with the "English spirit." For Thornton, social and economic improvement would come to India through the provision of great public works,

26. In a review of *Indian Public Works and Cognate Indian Topics* (Thornton 1875), the writer said that "Mr. Thornton's book will naturally be regarded as an authoritative exposition of the subject" (Minchin 1875, 574). John Stuart Mill also acknowledged Thornton's expertise in matters of Indian public works. On several occasions, he advised correspondents to contact Thornton, who, as Mill (1991, 188–89, 197–98) told one of them, "knows everything that is doing in India in the way of public works." Sir Leslie Stephen (1886, 197–98) observed that Henry Fawcett benefited from Thornton's knowledge of public works and used, in his *Manual of Political Economy* (1883), "some statistical information about Indian products and railways" that Thornton had supplied. Sir Leslie also noted that Fawcett, "in later days, often discussed Indian questions with [Thornton]" (342).

such as roads and railways, schools and hospitals, navigable waterways and harbors. The transformation of the social, physical, and economic environment that surrounded individuals as they went about their daily lives would help to create the conditions in which the Indian people would become responsible citizens. This environment would, by turns, advance the moral level of the citizenry as a whole.

Public Works in India

Although no evidence suggests that Thornton ever visited Britain's jewel in the crown, it is hardly surprising that, as a long-serving company mandarin, Thornton devoted several publications to economic, social, and political reform in India. This culminated in 1875 in his final book titled *Indian Public Works and Cognate Indian Topics*.[27] It was a subject with which he had become exceedingly familiar after almost two decades as secretary of the India Office's public works department.

Thornton opened his book by extolling the potential economic advantages of a large-scale public works program in India: "Not only are old markets made more cheaply accessible, access to new markets afforded, and production stimulated by enlarged demand for its fruits, but capital in search of investment discovers fresh fields, and producers are placed in possession of better implements and made better acquainted with better processes" (49). Thornton also thought that the government of India had a "national duty" to undertake "great public works" without always closely considering whether or not they would be profitable (see Ambirajan 1978, 247–48, for further discussion of this point).[28] This view reflected Britain's moral and providential obligation to improve and civilize through public works:

> India never has been, nor, apart from some tremendous visitation against which human foresight would be of no avail, is never likely to be, without sufficient food for all its inhabitants, provided only

27. Segments of this book were previously published in the *Westminster Review* (Thornton 1869) and the *Cornhill Magazine* (Thornton 1871).

28. Thornton's discussion of the importance of public works as an instrument for social character formation and as a determinant of economic development in India bears a striking resemblance to the general principles that Mill outlined in the *Principles of Political Economy*, as when he said that government had a "duty" to provide goods and services that were "chiefly useful as tending to raise the character of human beings" (Mill [1848] 1965, 3:947 and, more generally, 913–71).

> the means exist of transporting food from districts from which it can be spared to those in which it is lacking. Such means of distribution would be afforded by a complete network of railways, adequately supplemented by common roads; and this consideration will fully justify Government in extending the iron reticulation into many tracts in which such costly undertakings might otherwise be indefensible. (Thornton 1875, 57)

Thornton was also much interested in canals and irrigation.[29] In addition to the railway network and arterial roads that the British constructed in India to promote commerce, the major conduit of inland trade was the system of navigable canals, dikes, and drainage systems. These pivotal waterways were the primary means of transporting cotton from the interior to the seaports, bound for the great mills of Britain. India's traditional irrigation system was based upon small-scale wells and inundation canals. It was not designed to accommodate a significant increase in the volume of inland cotton trade. Since India lacked enough indigenous capital and technical skill to support the construction of large-scale irrigation schemes throughout the land, Thornton proposed that the public works department embark upon an extensive program of irrigation works.

This proposal rested on four considerations. First, wrote Thornton, irrigation works, coupled with an extensive railway and road network, would alleviate the distress caused by famines. Second, the construction of irrigation canals and modern drainage systems would bring under cultivation previously unirrigated parched land, increasing agricultural productivity, the volume of inland freight moving along the waterways, and the "annual profits of the agricultural community."[30] Third, while the inland canals opened up for cultivation vast tracts of previously arid and uninhabitable terrain, they would also expose the inaccessible interior of India and provide an outlet for its raw materials, particularly cotton. Fourth, the widespread propagation of irrigation and drainage systems would improve "the sanitary condition of villages and towns," providing

29. In 1876 and again in 1878, Thornton read papers on Indian irrigation works at the Society of Arts. The first received a generous notice in the *Times* (8 May 1876, 5).

30. In contrast to the railways, the major irrigation works undertaken by the Indian colonial regime generated, in many instances, an attractive rate of return on capital. "Thus," wrote Thornton (1875, 116), "the Cauvery canals are reported to pay 23½ per cent. on their cost. The Godavery and Kistnah works are credited, somewhat extravagantly, perhaps, with 45 and 16 per cent. respectively; and the Western Jumma canal probably pays quite 30 per cent."

new settlers with "the means of supporting themselves with some comfort" (Thornton 1875, 118).

The first and last considerations seem to have been strongly motivated by Thornton's conception of the "civilising mission," which was to establish a connection between the economic importance of public works schemes and the "moral obligations of a Government to its subjects . . . to see that all *necessary* public works are provided" (6; emphasis added).[31]

Land Tenure Reform

Another important element in Thornton's plan to improve India was his proposal to reform the land tenure system. His tenancy reform program had two primary objectives: first, to offer security of tenure to peasant farmers, and second, to regulate the share of output that was paid as rent on farm productivity. In this proposal, Thornton echoed his own reasoning from *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors* (1848), where he had argued that

> to secure the welfare of agricultural labourers, it seems indispensable that they should not be entirely dependent on the hire of their services, but should be owners or tenants of pieces of land sufficient to afford them occupation and subsistence when they cannot procure employment elsewhere. (185)[32]

Indeed, one of the interesting features of Thornton's views on land tenure reform in India was the way that he looked to his earlier writings on peasant proprietorship in Britain and in other European countries to guide the direction of his thinking. Now, however, he tempered his views to match a different set of indigenous customs, laws, and institutions. An important example of this synthesis is found in his discussion of how peasant

31. Thornton included under "necessary public works" the provision of "roads, railways, bridges, canals of irrigation or navigation, embankments, harbours, docks, lighthouses, law courts, barracks, and a variety of other edifices subservient to purposes of general administration, civil or military." It did not include "monuments of personal ostentation," although he admitted that the "Anglo-Indian Government [had] not been particularly remiss in providing palatial residences for its presidents" (22).

32. In his *Over-Population and Its Remedy* (1846) and *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors* (1848), Thornton refers to an earlier golden age (from the late fourteenth century to the early sixteenth century) in which the working class had enjoyed a degree of civil rights and personal freedoms (see Lipkes 1999, 126–27, for further discussion).

property rights were established and land rents were collected in the subcontinent.[33]

In some parts of India, most notably the province of Bengal, the land tenure system, wrote Thornton (1875, 200), had "fallen greatly into decay," creating the conditions in which "different kinds of *zemindars* [landed elites] came into being"; their main activity was "keeping to themselves whatever surplus they could screw out of the peasantry." "The zemindars of Bengal," he wrote, were the "close counterparts . . . of Irish landlords"[34] and were "practically at liberty to extort whatever the *ryots* [peasant farmers] can, by threats of eviction or otherwise, be induced to pay" (204).[35] The heart of the problem, which was largely the making of the British administration, was that the ryots were increasingly losing their occupancy rights because of the lawless activities of the zemindars.[36] Without recourse to the political or legal system, the peasant farmers received little protection from the exploitation and appropriation of the landed and political elite. As a result, they were "entitled to an indefinite, or at all events very ill-defined, share of the gross produce of the land within [their] jurisdiction" and had little incentive to work hard (197).

Thornton saw the zemindar land tenure system, which was riddled with corruption, as a barrier to social progress and economic development. What was required, he declared, was a credible set of rules that regulated rents, neutralized the intrusions of the predatory elites, and ensured that the cultivators were secure in their property rights.

To this end, he identified an alternative system of land tenure known as the "ryotwari system" and adopted in other parts of India, under which the ryots were secure in their landholdings. This system, of which

33. Thornton (1875, 196) was aware that the "customary rights" to land tenure exhibit "very different degrees of vigour in different parts of India."

34. Thornton's comparison here mirrored the mature view of Mill in his *Principles of Political Economy*, which compared Irish land reform with land tenure reform in India under British rule (see Thornton 1875, 194–204; and Mill [1848] 1965, 2:319–20).

35. The British, who had attempted to transform the zemindars into good landlords following Lord Cornwallis's Permanent Settlement reforms of 1793, had succeeded only in "creating aristocrats after the Irish model" whose "interests were harmful to the general good" (see Zastoupil 1994, 15–17, 130–33, for further discussion).

36. Zemindars were responsible for collecting and accounting for land revenue within a specific jurisdiction. Thornton (1875, 199–200) categorized them as local agents "whose remuneration consisted of a fixed proportion of the gross receipts"; "native princes," who retained the "management of their ancestral domains"; and the descendants of "military leaders and robber chiefs."

Thornton did not entirely approve but saw as "an immense improvement" on the revenue system administered by middlemen, featured customary limits to the rents that could be collected from rural cultivators. The government made direct revenue settlements with the ryots, the assessment was generally "moderate," and the rent was "fixed for a period of thirty years" (205, 214). In addition, the ryots were protected from intermediaries, such as the zemindars, in the revenue settlement and enjoyed the benefits of their hard work and initiative.[37]

Once predatory landlordism had been restrained, Thornton wrote, "the ryots would participate abundantly in the good done by canals of irrigation in increasing the fertility of the soil, and by railways in facilitating access to market. Their fair share in returns from these investments of public money would no longer be, as at present, almost entirely intercepted by the zemindars" (243). Although Thornton said that the ryotwari system was an improvement over the Cornwallis reforms of 1793,[38] he thought it too had shortcomings, most particularly its not extending to the rural cultivators "any species of beneficial ownership," as did peasant proprietorship (206).[39] He conceded, nevertheless, that the "Bombay plan" represented "the next best position, that, viz. of perpetual lessees," because the revenue settlement between the government and the farmer was "always equally light though not stationary," the property rights of the tenants were well established, and the intrusions of the landed elite were curbed (208).

Home Rule

Thornton's call for land tenure reform also stressed the need to preserve India's rich cultural and political heritage. Although Thornton

37. The ryotwari land settlement plan had been implemented in the 1820s by Thomas Munro when he was governor of Madras and by the governor of Bombay, Mountstuart Elphinstone. The two men had pushed ahead with the plan because they thought it "designed to preserve the indigenous political structure" and eliminated the need for middlemen in collecting land revenue (Zastoupil 1994, 17). Thornton gave their plan qualified support. In identifying several different types of "ryotwaree settlements" throughout India, he noted that "the prevailing settlement" in the Bombay presidency was "one of a far better pattern" to most other alternatives (Thornton 1875, 207).

38. For Thornton's criticism of the Permanent Settlement of 1793, see Thornton 1875, 201–4, 220–23.

39. Although the ryotwari settlement was likened in official circles to peasant proprietorship, Thornton felt that "so honourable an appellation" was not applicable (205).

acknowledged the benefits to be derived from the introduction of Western legal and democratic principles, he felt it was best to move slowly and cautiously until more was known of India's people, languages, customs, and institutions (see Williams 1983, 421–23, for further discussion of this point).

The motive for the view was partly imperial pragmatism, stemming from fear of unrest, but it also grew out of a genuine desire to preserve India's traditional political and cultural institutions. Thornton had inherited a vision of empire from the East India Company and believed that Britain possessed an inherently superior legal and political system.[40] For the moment, then, it must retain ultimate political control in India and continue to direct its economic, social, and political reform agenda. But eventually the Indian empire would have to be abandoned in favor of home rule. The first step in this process was to draw Indian people into the highest echelons of government, permitting them to accomplish on their own what the British thought needed to be done (see Zastoupil 1994, 197–98).[41] In short, India should be administered by Indians and in accordance with their own custom:

> If British rule in India is to be permanent, it must become popular with the natives, which it plainly cannot be while continuing to seethe them, as it were, in their mother's milk, shutting them off from advancement in their own land, avowedly because they were born and bred there. We need not hope to reconcile the children of the soil to the presence amongst them of us strangers, unless we admit them to equality of privileges, and afford them equal facilities of access to, and equal chances of success in, every honourable career; unless every branch of the public service, covenanted or uncovenanted, be thrown open to them, and native birth and parentage cease to be

40. India scholars have noted that the push to Westernize, or modernize, India emerged as a dominant force in British imperial policy in the early nineteenth century (see Zastoupil 1994, 13).

41. John Stuart Mill's influence on Thornton looms large here. In the period after James Mill's death, the younger Mill developed a more sophisticated vision of his father's "direct rule" project for improving India. He came to realize that permanent improvements could never be imposed on India but had to be crafted by Indians. In testimony delivered to a parliamentary committee in 1858, Mill (1990, 39) made clear his mature view that the Raj rested upon both its ability to govern well and the support of the Indian people: "I think that the permanence of the connection between India and England depends upon our being able to give good government to India, and to persuade the people of India that we do so" (see Zastoupil 1994, esp. 117, 129–31, 167, and 199–207, for further comment).

> disqualifications for any local dignity whatever, even for that of Governor-General or of Commander-in-Chief. (Thornton 1875, 274–75)

Thornton thought Britain was still capable of doing more for the Indians than they could do for themselves, although the time would come when India would be self-governing.

> Unless ours be a mission of civilisation, there is no warrant for our continued presence in India as rulers. As long as we retain that position, we are bound to accept all its responsibilities, on condition, too, of abdicating if we find ourselves unequal to them. (246)

And, he wrote:

> The sole way in which England can justify her retention of India is by availing herself of it for the benefit of the people, and doing more for them than they are capable of doing for themselves. But of the obligation thus incumbent on her, she can acquit herself only in proportion as she renders India worthy of independence, and she will not have acquitted herself of it completely unless, whenever India shows herself worthy and desirous of political freedom, she consents to set India free. (273)

For Thornton, the eclipse of the authority of the British Raj was both inevitable and an essential component of lasting improvement in the subcontinent. However, he did not foresee Britain's eventual withdrawal as a sign of failure; rather, it would herald Britain's finest hour in India. The following passage nicely encapsulates his thinking and that of certain members of his generation.

> Neither, if fate otherwise decree, and if by spontaneous movement, originating in an impulse communicated by England herself, the most lustrous of oriental jewels be severed from the British crown, will this be any detraction from—nay, rather will it be a brilliant addition to, our country's glory. As to every individual, so to every nation, its appointed task in life; its own proper share in the great work of promoting God's kingdom on earth; and to none has been vouchsafed so grand a share as to ourselves. (277)

What is striking about this passage is that, having spent much of his professional career immersed in the cause of empire, Thornton advocated home rule in India far in advance of British imperial policies. Indeed,

"no economist of standing had urged the political separation of India from Britain" (Ambirajan 1978, 58). Thornton, in contrast, came to realize that for Britain to hold its Indian subjects to a different political standard from that enjoyed by British subjects at home was an untenable position because it undermined Britain's own moral claim to be ruling India for its own benefit—a view that was exceptional at the time (see Ambirajan 1978, 48–58, for further discussion of this point).

4. Concluding Remarks

Thornton joined the East India Company during its heyday and progressed steadily through the imperial ranks due in large measure to the patronage of his close friend, John Stuart Mill. After the administrative responsibilities of the East India Company were passed to the India Office and Thornton became secretary of its Department of Public Works in 1858, he came to realize that public works could play a crucial role in revitalizing Indian society, acting as a stabilizing and civilizing force. At the same time, he saw the potential value of gradually building upon what was best in India's traditional practices and institutions, rather than a wholesale eclipse of the indigenous system by political institutions based on European models. It was these beliefs and this idealism that no doubt attracted Mill to him in the first place.

Although Thornton was in many respects a conventional civil servant, his economic and philosophical beliefs placed him among the vanguard of reformers in the India Office, even if he was not in a position to do much to implement any reforms.[42] His writings make it clear that he rejected the assumption that the British Raj was rescuing India from the economic ravages of despotic rulers and backward social and political practices and institutions. At the same time, Britain, thought Thornton (1875, 219), had a moral obligation to "watch, protect, and foster the interests of the peasantry, as being at once the most numerous and most defenceless portion of the rural population." Failure to honor this

42. Even in the case of the Godaveri navigation scheme, Thornton, who had come to take a very pessimistic view of the project by the mid-1860s because it was proving a financial drain on the government, was unable to dissuade Sir Charles Wood, the secretary of state for India, from abandoning the undertaking, which one historian has described as "a wild scheme from the beginning" (Harnetty 1965, 729). Thornton's role in this extraordinary example of British folly is reviewed in Peter Harnetty's article (1965, 720–21 n. 63, 723 n. 70) and in Williams's book (1983, 431–42).

commitment rendered dubious Britain's moral claim to rule in India. The sympathy he displayed, moreover, toward developing an understanding of Indian culture, coupled with his ideas on home rule and land tenure reform, seems to be in advance of his contemporaries at the India Office.

On the morning of 17 June 1880, Thornton finally succumbed to a debilitating illness. At the time, he still held the position of secretary of the Department of Public Works in the India Office, but there is no record of his having prepared, read, or edited draft dispatches in the last months of his life.

The *Times* obituary notice registered the nation's depth of gratitude in the following way:

> In [William Thornton], the India Office and the country at large lose a tried and valuable public servant.

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