It is a little known fact that during the reign of Queen Victoria, the British capitalist state was the largest drug pusher the world has ever seen. The smuggling of opium into China was by the 1830s a source of huge profits, played a crucial role in the financing of British rule in India and was the underpinning of British trade throughout the East. This is one of those little historical details that are often overlooked in the history books where the opium trade is either played down or ignored altogether. Most recently Professor Denis Judd's Empire, a 500page history of British Imperialism has no discussion of either the trade or the wars it occasioned, while the prestigious Cambridge Illustrated History of the British Empire has a couple of brief inadequate and uninformative paragraphs, a mere passing mention. The opium trade deserves more attention. It was, in the words of John K Fairbanks, "the most long-continued and systematic international crime of modern times."2

The production of opium in India first came under British control in the course of the eighteenth century. In the 1760s, some one thousand chests of opium (each weighing 140 lbs) were smuggled into China and this figure gradually increased to 4 thousand chests in 1800. By the 1820s the traffic in opium began to increase dramatically with over 12 thousand chests being smuggled into China in 1824, rising to 19 thousand in 1830, 30 thousand in 1835 and to 40 thousand chests (2,500 tons of opium) in 1838.3 The British energetically encouraged poppy growing, on occasion coercing Indian peasant farmers into going over the crop. By the end of the 1830s the opium trade was already, and was to remain, "the world's most valuable single commodity trade of the nineteenth century."4

The Opium Capitalists

The opium trade was clearly not a small-scale affair carried out by small-time crooks and gangsters. Instead, it was a massive international commerce carried out by major British trading companies under the armed protection of the British state. According to Sir William Jardine of Jardine Matheson, the opium trade was "the safest and most gentlemanlike speculation I am aware of." In a good year profits could be as high as $1,000 a chest!6 His wealth was sufficient to buy him a seat in the House of Commons in the early 1840s and to get him the ear of the government.

Jardine Matheson was the most successful of the opium smuggling companies, and is still a major financial and trading company today. Jardine's partner in the enterprise, James Matheson, best shows the use to which the profits from drug pushing could be put. In the 1840s he too became an MP, sitting in the Commons for twenty-five years. He went on to become a governor of the Bank of England, chairman of the great P and O shipping line, and the second largest landowner in Britain. He bought the Isle of Lewis in
Scotland and spent over 500,000 building himself a castle there!

The import of opium into China was, of course, illegal, but the British companies engaged in the trade systematically corrupted or intimidated the Chinese authorities so that it continued with little interruption. Depot ships were anchored off the coast, selling the drug to Chinese smugglers who carried it ashore for distribution. By the 1830s, the scale of the problem forced the Chinese government to respond: the country was being drained of silver to pay for the opium, its administration was being corrupted by foreigners and the extent of addiction (estimates of the number of addicts go as high as 12 million) was seen as a threat to both state and society. In March 1839, the Emperor sent a special Commissioner, Lin Tse-Hsu to Canton to stamp out the trade once and for all.

Lin confined the British merchants in Canton to the European Factories, holding them hostage until the opium held offshore was surrendered. After six weeks, the Superintendent of Trade, Captain Charles Elliot, capitulated and ordered the surrender of 10,000 chests which the Chinese destroyed. This precipitated the First Opium War.

The First Opium War

Once they had been expelled from Canton, the British established themselves on the island of Hong Kong, which they were determined to hold in the face of Chinese hostility. Meanwhile, the British government responded to Chinese actions by demanding compensation for the confiscated opium, the opening of more Chinese ports to trade, the permanent cession of Hong Kong, the legalization of the opium trade, and that China pay the full cost of the British war effort to enforce these demands. A powerful expeditionary force was despatched to bring the Chinese to their senses, first blockading the coast and then proceeding up the Yangtze river to Nanjing. The British had an overwhelming technological superiority that turned every battle into a one-sided massacre. As one British officer observed: "The poor Chinese" had two choices, either they "must submit to be poisoned, or must be massacred by the thousands, for supporting their own laws in their own land.

The British capture of the port of Tin-hai in early October 1841 provides a useful example of the character of the war. The port was bombarded by the Wellesley (74 guns), the Conway and the Alligator (28 guns each), the Cruiser and the Algerine (18 guns each) and another dozen smaller vessels each carrying ten guns. In nine minutes, they fired fifteen broadsides into the effectively defenseless town before landing troops to storm the ruins. According to one British participant "the crashing of timber, falling houses and groans of men resounded from the shore" and when the smoke cleared "a mass of ruins presented itself to the eye." When the troops landed all they found was "a deserted beach, a few dead bodies, bows and arrows, broken spears and guns...."\^8

The shelling of the town continued as the British troops moved in to rape and pillage. According to the India Gazette "A more complete pillage could not be conceived ... the plunder only ceased when there was nothing to take or destroy."\^9 It was during this war that the Hindi word "lut" entered the English language as the word "loot." The taking of Tin-hai cost the British three men while the number of Chinese killed was over 2,000. Close behind the warships came the opium ships.

Were the British aware of the consequences of the trade they were intent on imposing on China? Lord Jocelyn, the military secretary to the expeditionary force, in his account of the war, described visiting an opium den in Singapore while en route to China:

One of the objects, at this place that I had the curiosity to visit, was the opium-smoker in his heaven; and certainly it is a most fearful sight.... On a beginner, one or two pipes will have an effect, but an old stager will continue smoking for hours ... A few days of this fearful luxury, when taken to excess, will give a pallid and haggard look to the face; and a few months, or even weeks, will change the strong and healthy man into little better than an idiot skeleton. The pain they suffer when deprived of the drug, after long habit, no language can explain ... The last scene in this tragic play is generally a room in the rear of the
building, a species of dead-house, where lie stretched those who have passed into the state of bliss the
opium-smoker madly seeks-an emblem of the long sleep to which he is blindly hurrying.

There can be no doubt of Lord Jocelyn's awareness of the realities of the opium trade, but later in his book
he goes on to argue that "however hateful it may appear" the trade is nevertheless "a source of great benefit
to the Indian government, returning I have heard, a revenue of upwards of two millions and a half yearly."1
Put bluntly there was just too much money involved.

At home, the war was strongly opposed in the Chartist press with the Northern Star newspaper condemning
this "opium war. "II In the House of Commons, the Tory Opposition put down a motion of censure on the
Whig government's conduct. Among those condemning British policy was William Gladstone, whose sister,
Helen, was an opium addict. Justice, he declared, was with the Chinese, and "whilst they, the Pagans, and
semi-civilised barbarians, have it, we, the enlightened and civilised Christians, are pursuing objects at
variance with both justice and religion." In reply, the Secretary of State for War, Thomas Babington
Macauley, proceeded to wrap himself in the Union Jack and appealed to the lowest kind of patriotism. He
reminded MPs that the opium traders "belonged to a country unaccustomed to defeat, to submission, or to
shame," that they had flying over them a "victorious flag" and urged "that this most rightful quarrel may be
prosecuted to a triumphal close."13 Macauley's shabby prostitution of his oratorical talents to the cause of
massacre and drug pushing carried the day and the government won the vote by 271 to 262.

When the Whig government finally fell in June, 1841, and the Opposition led by Sir Robert Peel took
office, they, in the best traditions of British politics, continued to carry out the very same policy that they
had earlier condemned. The war continued until the Chinese were forced to accept British terms, conceding
everything except the legalization of opium. Public opinion in Britain prevented the pressing of this
demand, but it was made clear to the Chinese government that the British would not tolerate any further
interference with the trade. The most important gain for the British was the cession of Hong Kong.

The "Arrow" Incident

Relations between Britain and China remained strained. The British wanted the whole country opened up
so that China could be incorporated into their "informal Empire," brought under indirect British rule like
South America, rather than direct rule like India. The Chinese government was expected to govern the
country in the interests of the British and their refusal to do this was bound to provoke renewed war.

The occasion for the outbreak of the Second Opium War was the so-called "Arrow incident" of October
1856. The Chinese authorities arrested a suspected pirate ship, the Arrow, that was registered in Hong
Kong. The colony's governor, Sir John Bowring, condemned this as an insult to the British flag, demanded
the release of the crew and an apology. The Chinese released the crew, but refused to apologize whereupon
Bowring, in a find display of "gunboat diplomacy," ordered the navy to bombard Canton, one of the largest
cities in the world. The fact that the Arrow's Hong Kong registration had lapsed at the time of seizure was
kept quiet.

Bowring, it is worth noting, was not a diehard reactionary, but one of the leading liberal intellectuals of the
day with a European reputation. He was Jeremy Bentham's literary executor, a founder of the Peace
Society, a devout Christian (he wrote the hymn "In The Cross of Christ I Glory") and a staunch supporter
of free trade. On one celebrated occasion, he managed to combine his religious and economic beliefs with
the pronouncement that 'Jesus Christ is Free Trade and Free Trade is Jesus Christ." On a more mundane
level, he had been employed by Jardine Matheson in the 1840s and, at the time of the Arrow incident, his
son was a director of the company. There can be no doubt as to where his loyalties lay. The actions of this
upstanding Christian liberal intellectual precipitated the Second (1856-58) and Third Opium Wars (1860)
that were to cost the lives of thousands of Chinese men and women.

Palmerston's government in London was actually advised by the Attorney General that Bowring's conduct
was illegal according to international law, but nevertheless unanimously decided to back him. They were

http://www.historystudycenter.com/search/printItemById.do?UseMap...m&format=FT&collectionsTag=&itemId=13087&PQID=17337802&resource=
defeated in the Commons on the issue (once again Gladstone spoke condemning the war) and Palmerston responded by calling a general election. He fought a fiercely jingoistic campaign that swept him triumphantly back to power with a majority.

The British were joined by the French in the waging of the Second Opium War. Once again the conflict was little more than a succession of technological massacres accompanied by rape and pillage. The allied forces captured Canton at the end of 1857, but determined to settle with the Chinese government once and for all, Lord Elgin, the British envoy, decided to advance up the Peiho river towards Beijing itself. In May 1858 the Taku forts guarding the mouth of the river were taken and the allied expedition advanced as far as Tientsin where the Chinese capitulated. The Treaty of Tientsin effectively incorporated China into Britain's informal Empire and once the British had withdrawn the Chinese tried to renege on its terms. This provoked the Third Opium War with the British once again taking the Taku forts, but this time proceeding upriver to the military occupation of Beijing in October 1860. Chinese humiliation was complete.

As a reprisal for Chinese mistreatment of prisoners, Elgin ordered the destruction of the Emperor's Summer Palace. Captain (later General) Charles Gordon described how the troops went out to destroy the residence and "after pillaging it burned the whole place, destroying in a vandal manner most valuable property.... Everybody was wild for plunder." Another officer, Lieutenant Colonel Garnet Wolseley wrote that both officers and men "seem to have been seized with a temporary insanity; in body and soul they were absorbed in one pursuit, which was plunder, plunder. The British were particularly annoyed as the French had got the best of the loot!

The occupation of Beijing compelled the Chinese government to implement the Treaty of Tientsin and to accept its place in the British world order. At last opium was legalized. Although Elgin's official instructions had not mentioned the trade, he had received private instructions to secure legalization. He personally found the whole business repugnant, but there was too much profit at stake for any display of squeamishness.

By the 1860s the British were exporting 60,000 chests of opium to China annually, rising to 100,000 chests (over 6,000 tons of opium) annually in the 1880s. After this the trade began to decline in the face of competition from Chinese-produced opium. Nevertheless it still remained an immensely profitable business for the rest of the century and beyond. The British opium trade with China only finally came to an end in 1917. As for Britain's pre-eminent position in China, this began to come under pressure from rival Imperialist powers before the end of the century and from Chinese revolutionary nationalism in the early decades of the twentieth century but was only finally eclipsed in the 1930s. What remained, up until 1997, was possession of Hong Kong, the last of the spoils of the Opium Wars.

[Footnote]
NOTES

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