



ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT

The Making and Unmaking of a Presidency: Envisioning Empire in British Bencoolen, 1685–1825

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Abstract

The English, and later British, settlement of Bencoolen was first established in 1685 and remained in British hands, barring French wartime occupation, until 1825, when it was handed over to the Dutch in a territorial exchange. Bencoolen was even elevated to the status of a Presidency in the second half of the eighteenth century. Why did the English East India Company and British officials maintain a presence in Bencoolen for so long? This article makes the case that multiple, overlapping visions of commercial and agrarian transformation, including projects focused on pepper and sugar cultivation, sustained British efforts to govern and maintain Bencoolen as part of a larger, trans-oceanic network of territories. Such visions of Bencoolen's economic and imperial potential evolved in sync with equally persistent concerns about Bencoolen's failure to become a thriving settlement. Yet even amid constant anxieties about producing enough pepper, maintaining a sizeable population, and generating sufficient revenue, numerous British imperial agents located in London and Calcutta as well as Sumatra argued over whether the settlement was likely to remain a permanent failure and how the problems that dogged it might be resolved. Thus, even in moments when Bencoolen appeared to be a failed outpost on the periphery of a growing British Empire, its success or lack thereof commanded the attention of British ministers and East India Company servants. In calling for Bencoolen's elevation, subordination, or even abolition as a settlement, Britons contributed to a wide-ranging discussion of what constituted a valuable colony and, indeed, empire.

In the late seventeenth century, amid succession struggles and partisan conflict in Britain, the English East India Company established two new settlements across the Bay of Bengal: Calcutta (now Kolkata) in Bengal and Bencoolen (now Bengkulu) in Sumatra. While these two settlements in the English "East Indies" emerged at roughly the same time, their paths appear to have diverged significantly in both the history and historiography of the British Empire. Calcutta would become a central node in the British Empire from at least the 1770s onward and remained the capital of British India until 1911. Bencoolen, meanwhile, would be handed over to the Dutch in a territorial exchange in 1824, a process completed in 1825, and be largely eliminated from studies of the Company and the makings of the British Empire in modern South and Southeast Asia.¹ Bencoolen's place as a footnote in these histories, however, sits uneasily with its status as a British settlement for almost a

¹ For example, Philip Lawson's overview of the English East India Company alludes to Sumatra occasionally but does not refer to the Company's settlement at Bencoolen. See Philip Lawson, *The East India Company: A History* (London, 1993).

century-and-a-half. Moreover, presumptions of Bencoolen's peripherality do not explain its elevation to the position of a Presidency between 1760 and 1785, a designation it shared with the better studied subcontinental Presidencies of Bengal, Bombay (now Mumbai), and Madras (now Chennai). So why did the East India Company and the British state invest in a settlement and governmental edifice in Bencoolen for about 140 years? If the settlement was indeed largely inconsequential, why was there a persistent effort to retain it, extending even to the establishment of a Presidency for about twenty-five years in the second half of the eighteenth century?

Multiple, overlapping visions of commercial and agrarian transformation, including projects of pepper and sugar cultivation, sustained British efforts to govern Bencoolen as part of a trans-oceanic network of territories. Such visions of Bencoolen's potential evolved in sync with equally persistent concerns about Bencoolen's failure to become a thriving settlement. Yet even amid constant anxieties about producing enough pepper, maintaining a sizeable population, and generating sufficient revenue, numerous British imperial agents located in London and Calcutta as well as Sumatra argued over whether the settlement would remain a permanent failure and how the problems that dogged it might be resolved. Both those who thought that Bencoolen was unlikely to ever succeed on account of intrinsic environmental qualities, as well as those who believed that failure was merely a product of mismanagement, applied themselves to the question of Bencoolen's place within a larger imperial expanse.

Thus, even in moments when Bencoolen appeared to be a failed outpost on the periphery of a growing British Empire, it commanded the attention of British ministers and East India Company servants. Contrary to the historiographical inattention to Bencoolen, eighteenth-century imperial agents regularly discussed Bencoolen's role and future in the British Empire. In doing so, they also participated in a wider ideological contest over the purpose of imperialism. In calling for Bencoolen's elevation, subordination, or even abolition as a settlement, these Britons contributed to a wide-ranging discussion of what constituted a valuable colony and, indeed, empire.² Was value generated purely through trade without expensive investment in controlling land, labor, and agrarian production? Or did the process of securing, peopling, and "planting" a territory produce value? Bencoolen's making and unmaking as a Presidency and British territory were, therefore, marked by continuing discussion of how to render the settlement most useful.

Uncovering persistent contestation over Bencoolen reveals that this seemingly marginal outpost was a vital part of how British governmental agencies, located across the Indian Ocean and in Britain itself, attempted to administer an expanding empire. Governing Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras as well as St Helena in the South Atlantic necessitated engaging with the question of how to administer Bencoolen. Equally, regulating the trade with China and negotiating diplomatic relations with the Dutch frequently brought Bencoolen's political economy to the fore. This article does not attempt to offer a comprehensive account of political economic shifts in Bencoolen. Rather, it highlights how Bencoolen and its economy were envisioned by British imperial actors at several key moments across the settlement's long stint as a British settlement. Consequently, it illumines rival visions of imperialism underpinning Bencoolen's evolving status.

A small but growing body of historical scholarship has examined English and, later, British exploits in Bencoolen. Philip Stern has noted the East India Company's ambitions in Bencoolen as well as the challenges faced by Company officials in Sumatra through the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.³ Indeed, Stern argues that the

² For recent scholarship on political economic debate and imperial expansion, see Carl Wennerlind, *Casualties of Credit: The English Financial Revolution, 1620–1720* (Cambridge, 2011); Abigail Swingen, *Competing Visions of Empire: Labor, Slavery, and the Origins of the British Atlantic Empire* (New Haven, 2015); Jonathan Eacott, *Selling Empire: India in the Making of Britain and America, 1600–1830* (Chapel Hill, 2017).

³ Philip Stern, *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India* (Oxford, 2011).

“Company’s regime was far bolder and assertive in Sumatra than in Mughal India and in some general ways in fact foreshadowed behaviors that would follow from the expansion of Company power in India in later centuries.”⁴ Kathleen Wilson has presented Bencoolen as one among several “frontiers” of the British Empire where colonial practices of family and gender were reformulated.⁵ David Veevers has examined the efforts of Company servants to expand imperial control in Sumatra in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries through diplomacy as well as conflict with local Malay rulers.⁶ Meanwhile, Richard B. Allen has highlighted the history of European practices of slavery in the Indian Ocean world by detailing the deployment of enslaved labor in Bencoolen.⁷ European projects of empire as well as scientific inquiry in Bencoolen and Sumatra also feature in Sujit Sivasundaram’s account of revolutionary changes across the Indian and Pacific Ocean worlds.⁸ In Sivasundaram’s account, spaces such as Bencoolen and the “string of islands spreading between mainland Asia and the Pacific were seen by the British as add-ons to India and essentially maritime spaces.”⁹

Focusing on Bencoolen during a period of territorial expansion in South Asia casts new light on British imperialism between the late seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries. Situating Bencoolen within wider histories of the English East India Company and the British Empire reveals the continuing importance of Southeast Asia in British imperial visions beyond the disastrous Dutch “massacre” of several Englishmen in Amboyna in the Indonesian Archipelago in 1623.¹⁰ Long before Singapore emerged as a major imperial node in the nineteenth century, British ambitions in the region revolved around Bencoolen. Attending to Bencoolen’s history as a British settlement illuminates the mechanics of British trade and governance across the Indian Ocean world. Despite its location on the island of Sumatra, Bencoolen was not an insular space. Rather, the very establishment of the outpost depended on the movement of laborers, provisions, commodities, and officials across multiple territories of the English East India Company. Bencoolen’s place in a network of British ports across the Indian Ocean evolved out of efforts to profit from regional trade circuits as well as concerted attempts to remake the outpost as a site of agricultural productivity and manufacturing. Therefore, British imperial projects in South Asia and China were intimately connected with the making and remaking of Bencoolen as a British colony. The boundaries mandated by area-studies categories of “South Asia” and “Southeast Asia” do not capture how Britons in the eighteenth century conceived of the relationships between Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, and Bencoolen. As the category of the “East Indies” suggests, many Britons imagined these spaces as being profoundly connected with each other.

Importantly, the evolution of a diverse range of commercial and agrarian projects in Bencoolen powerfully illustrates British political and economic thought across its global empire between the late seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries. Not only did British officials and traders in Bencoolen, Madras, and London draw upon an ostensibly Atlantic world model of a plantation economy in their attempts to transform Bencoolen, they also

⁴ Stern, *The Company-State*, 96.

⁵ Kathleen Wilson, “Rethinking the Colonial State: Family, Gender, and Governmentality in Eighteenth Century British Frontiers,” *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 5 (2011): 1294–1322. See also Kathleen Wilson, *Strolling Players of Empire: Theatre and Performance of Power in the British Imperial Provinces, 1656–1833* (Cambridge, 2022).

⁶ David Veevers, “‘The Company as Their Lords and the Deputy as a Great Rajah’: Imperial Expansion and the English East India Company on the West Coast of Sumatra, 1685–1730,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 41, no. 5 (2013): 687–709.

⁷ Richard Allen, “Slave Trading, Abolitionism and ‘New Systems of Slavery’ in the Nineteenth-century Indian Ocean World,” in *Indian Ocean Slavery in the Age of Abolition*, ed. Robert W. Harms, Bernard K. Freamon, and David Blight (New Haven, 2013); Richard Allen, “Slavery in a Remote but Global Place: The British East India Company and Bencoolen, 1685–1825,” *Social and Education History* 7, no. 2 (2018): 151–76.

⁸ Sujit Sivasundaram, *Waves Across the South. A New History of Revolution and Empire* (Chicago, 2020), 249–52.

⁹ Sivasundaram, *Waves Across the South*, 231.

¹⁰ Alison Games, *Inventing the English Massacre: Amboyna in History and Memory* (Oxford, 2020).

sought to recalibrate pre-existing patterns of East India trade through the imposition of a monopoly on Sumatran pepper and increasingly intrusive supervision of pepper cultivation. Further, they deployed models of labor extraction, particularly enslavement and coercion, practiced in the Caribbean and South Asia. In many ways, therefore, Bencoolen was representative of British efforts not only to capture markets but to remake markets through direct interventions in agrarian economies. British attempts to remake Bencoolen into a center of pepper as well as sugar production, therefore, belie historiographical accounts that present European economic activity in the Indian Ocean as being primarily focused on trade and commerce prior to the nineteenth century.¹¹ Such accounts suggest that radical interruptions of pre-existing agrarian practice were only enforced in the nineteenth century, especially with the inauguration of a period of “high imperialism” in the South Asian subcontinent. On the contrary, both trade and the remaking of patterns of agrarian production motivated British officials and traders in Sumatra.

Bencoolen’s Beginnings, 1685–1760

The foundation of an English settlement in Sumatra in 1685 occurred amid the broader remaking of Stuart imperialism.¹² The 1680s witnessed political controversies and crises within Britain as well as multiple English colonies across the globe. In 1684, English officials and civilians abandoned Tangier, its premier colony in the Mediterranean Sea.¹³ While the fall of English Tangier marked the failure of a major “crowd funded experiment,” the coronation of James II in 1685 inaugurated a new phase of imperial transformation. James II espoused a “land-based, zero-sum” conception of political economy that demanded territorial expansion and heightened imperial control.¹⁴ His efforts to expand and better control England’s territorial empire included the establishment of the Dominion of New England, a centralized polity in North America that lasted between 1686 and 1689.¹⁵ James II’s imperial vision did not leave the East Indies untouched. Upon taking the throne in 1685, he supported and facilitated the Tory Josiah Child’s growing control over the English East India Company. In turn, Child and the Company provided James II with substantial support in realizing a shared vision of territorial aggrandizement and aggression toward rivals such as the Dutch.

The establishment of an English presence in Bencoolen, in close proximity to Dutch Batavia, therefore, proceeded from James II’s effort to compete with the Dutch and enlarge England’s empire and its commercial reach. Advocates of the new settlement emphasized its potential role in disrupting Dutch hegemony. The erection of Fort York at Bencoolen, named after James II’s pre-succession ducal title, highlighted the close connection between James II’s foreign policy and the beginnings of an English settlement in Sumatra. Proponents of an English presence in Bencoolen justified the new settlement as an opportunity to outmaneuver the Dutch in the “pepper trade,” which they emphasized “is of so great advantage to this nation.”¹⁶ The pepper trade “had been wholly lost as to England” due to the conquest of

¹¹ C. A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1988); Thomas Metcalfe, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge, 1995); Neeladri Bhattacharya, *The Great Agrarian Conquest: The Colonial Reshaping of a Rural World* (Ranikhet, 2018). The “intrusion of the colonial state into Indian agriculture” and the consequent development of meteorology and economic forecasting are often located in the nineteenth century. See Sunil Amrith, “Risk and the South Asian Monsoon,” *Climatic Change* 151, no. 1 (2018): 17–28.

¹² For a new account of post-Restoration Stuart imperialism, see Gabriel Glickman, *Making the Imperial Nation: Colonization, Politics, and English Identity, 1660–1700* (New Haven, 2023).

¹³ Gabriel Glickman, “Empire, ‘Popery,’ and the Fall of English Tangier, 1662–1684,” *The Journal of Modern History* 87, no. 2 (2015): 247–80.

¹⁴ Steven Pincus, *1688: The First Modern Revolution* (New Haven, 2009), 383.

¹⁵ Owen Stanwood, *The Empire Reformed: English America in the Age of the Glorious Revolution* (Philadelphia, 2011).

¹⁶ *Some equitable considerations, respecting the present controversy between the present East India Company, and the new subscribers or petitioners against them* ([London, 1698?]), 3. For an overview of the trade in pepper and its significance, see Udo Pollmer, “The Spice Trade and its Importance for European Expansion,” *Migration & Diffusion* 1, no. 4 (2000):

Bantam (or Banten) in Java by the Dutch, they argued.¹⁷ By “erecting a settlement on the other side of the island of Sumatra,” however, the English had managed to “regain” access to the trade.¹⁸ Similarly, a travel account published not long after Bencoolen’s establishment noted that it “was the pepper trade that drew our English merchants to settle here.”¹⁹

The English presence in Sumatra featured prominently in stormy debates over the future of the English East India Company in the wake of the Revolution of 1688. Advocates of a single, powerful English East India Company made the case that without “the late enlargements of power to the English Company,” the English would not have secured a foothold in Sumatra and the Dutch would have “made themselves masters of all the pepper.”²⁰ Further, supporters of the Company and its monopoly made the case that the profits generated through the “single commodity of pepper” was “sufficient to maintain fleets, to fight any Royal Navy in India.”²¹ The failure to prevent a Dutch monopoly over pepper would, they warned, culminate in Dutch control over saltpeter and consequently, the means of war. If such an eventuality were to come to pass, they continued, “the *English Empire and Dominion in India* will certainly and quickly be lost.”²² In other words, they argued that Bencoolen and its supply of pepper were not only important in themselves but essential for the preservation of the English Empire in the Indian Ocean. Moreover, they made the case that the East India Company’s monopoly over all English trade with the East Indies was the very mechanism preventing a Dutch monopoly over valuable commodities such as pepper and salt peter.

Meanwhile, critics of the Company’s monopoly and James II’s policies of territorial expansion and militarization presented the English settlement in Bencoolen as wasteful. One such pamphleteer argued that “the space is so very unhealthful, and kills so many of our sea-men,” adding that the profits drawn from selling Bencoolen pepper could not help in maintaining a garrison and fort there.²³ Instead, the pamphleteer suggested it would be more effective and certainly cheaper to procure pepper at unfortified factories in Malabar and North India. The pamphleteer even advised that “in reality Fort St. George [Madras] and Bombay are of little or no use to the Company or trade in India and a great many think they had better quit them” and that the English ought to emulate the Dutch who had exited Policat (Pulicat) on the Coromandel Coast since they did not find “it worth their charge to keep it.”²⁴ Taking aim at the ill-fated military effort launched by the East India Company against the forces of the Mughal Empire in the 1680s, the pamphleteer argued that the Dutch had correctly realized that expensive militarization would ultimately be worthless given the challenges of confronting Mughal armies in the battlefield.²⁵ Therefore, such critics posited the advantages of an open trade carried out by a larger number of merchants than were allowed to participate in the activities of a monopolistic joint stock company as well as a strictly commercial approach without heavy expenditure on building and defending settlements.

In tandem with such debates about the management of trade and diplomacy in the East Indies, the governance of Bencoolen in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was defined by efforts to realize its apparent political and economic promise, and lay to rest complaints about its disadvantages. In line with wider discussions of the importance of the pepper trade, officials posted in Bencoolen committed themselves to the “necessary work”

58–72; Sebastian Prange, “‘Measuring by the Bushel’: Reweighing the Indian Ocean Pepper Trade,” *Historical Research* 84, no. 224 (2011): 212–35; Marjorie Shaffer, *Pepper: A History of the World’s Most Influential Spice* (New York, 2013).

¹⁷ *Some equitable considerations*, 3.

¹⁸ *Some equitable considerations*, 3.

¹⁹ William Dampier, *A new voyage round the world* (London, 1697), 182.

²⁰ *Some considerations offered touching the East-India affairs* ([London, 1698?]).

²¹ *Some considerations offered*.

²² *Some considerations offered*, 3.

²³ *Companies in joynt-stock unnecessary and inconvenient. Free trade to India in a regulated company, the interest of England. / Discours’d in a letter to a friend* ([London], 1691), 3.

²⁴ *Companies in joynt-stock*.

²⁵ For a discussion of the Anglo-Mughal War, see Pincus, 1688, 380–81.

of “promoting the increase of pepper.”²⁶ The Company’s servants at Bencoolen promised their overlords in London “a vast increase” of the “pepper plantations” and “a moral assurance of the West Coast’s becoming a flourishing Settlement.”²⁷ Thus, they claimed they would “prove that we have not only eat the Company’s bread but likewise done them some service for it.”²⁸ As such officials quickly realized, however, the business of cultivating pepper was a slow and labor-intensive process.²⁹ Responding to irate Company managers back in London, a member of the Bencoolen Council noted that “young” pepper trees “are generally three or four years before they produce any quantity which is the reason of our crops at present being so small.”³⁰ Despite such considerations, some commentators made the case that “the pepper here is better than that of Malabar, because the land is more moist.”³¹ The life cycles of pepper trees and environmental conditions notwithstanding, the Company’s pursuit of pepper required not only cultivators but also the enforcement of cultivation.

In order to promote the cultivation of pepper, Company officials in Bencoolen sought to “assemble all the Rajas and great men” of the island and “recommend to them the planting [of] pepper.”³² Diplomatic overtures to local elites, therefore, constituted the basis of a system of pepper cultivation in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Cloaked in the language of incentives, the Company’s system of pepper cultivation, however, fundamentally depended on coercion since it encouraged Sumatran elites to enforce compliance, sometimes through violent means, on a reluctant population. In 1719, this pattern of brutal mistreatment resulted in a major uprising against the Company and three-year long expulsion from the settlement.³³ Moreover, even though the Company partly depended on local rulers and their subjects for planting pepper and thus outsourced the violence of enforcing cultivation, officials also recognized the possibility of playing a more direct role in the manufacture and preparation of pepper for transport and sale overseas. Consequently, they declared the necessity of procuring “slaves to garble pepper,” a process of sifting that was essential for preparing pepper for transportation and eventual sale.³⁴ As per officials in Bencoolen, “Malay coolies” cost “15 [Spanish Dollars] a day” while “slaves will double their work and don’t cost about 14 Dollars a year.”³⁵ The demand for slaves in Bencoolen, specifically a category of slaves referred to as “the Company’s slaves,” emerged as a ploy to create, at least theoretically, a reservoir of disciplined labor. Importantly, officials believed that using slave labor would reduce reliance on recalcitrant locals for all aspects of the pepper manufacturing process.

While Sumatran pepper loomed large in the minds of Company officials, it was not the only commodity to shape discussions of Bencoolen’s future. The establishment of an English presence in Sumatra in the 1680s was accompanied almost immediately by proposals for sugar production and the potential for deploying enslaved African labor to plant sugarcane, a crop cultivated across large swathes of Asia.³⁶ Drawing upon imperial repertoires in

²⁶ Bencoolen Council, Fort York to the Court of Managers, East India Company, _? February 1704/5, IOR/G/35/6, letter 1, British Library (hereafter BL).

²⁷ Bencoolen Council to the Court, 30 June 1705, IOR/G/35/6, letter 5, BL.

²⁸ Bencoolen Council to the Court, 30 June 1705.

²⁹ For a discussion of the dynamics of pepper cultivation in the region, see Barbara Watson Andaya, “Women and Economic Change: The Pepper Trade in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 32, no. 2 (1995): 165–90.

³⁰ Bencoolen Council to the Court, _? February 1704/5, IOR/G/35/6, letter 1, BL.

³¹ Nathaniel Crouch, *The English Acquisitions in Guinea and East India* (London, 1728), 179.

³² Crouch, *The English Acquisitions*.

³³ Alan Harfield, *Bencoolen: A History of the Honourable East India Company’s Garrison on the West Coast of Sumatra (1685–1825)* (Barton-on-Sea, 1995), 77–86.

³⁴ Bencoolen Council to the Court, 12 February 1703/4, IOR/G/35/7, 4, BL.

³⁵ Bencoolen Council to the Court, 12 February 1703/4, 3.

³⁶ Ulbe Bosma, *The World of Sugar. How the Sweet Stuff Transformed Our Politics, Health, and Environment over 2,000 Years* (Cambridge, 2023).

formation across the Atlantic world, the Bencoolen Council began importing African slaves within a few years of the settlement's establishment. In a letter addressed to the Bencoolen administration in 1687, the Company's Court of Directors declared, "until we see Englishmen can live better in your place, we are unwilling to make any considerable enlargement of that Fort, or to send any more soldiers from hence to be deprived of their lives in so short a time, but we have ordered ten of the Company's blacks to be sent you from St. Helena that speak English, and such other persons as are willing to try their fortunes there."³⁷ In 1689, the Madras administration launched an expedition to procure East African slaves or "Coffrees" from Madagascar for the use of the Bencoolen Council.³⁸ African slaves transported from one Company settlement to another were deemed expendable and relatively pliant, an easier source of labor to exploit compared to Sumatra's local population. Moreover, as various seventeenth-century English actors believed, African slaves transported from St Helena had skills that the local population simply did not possess. Not only would such slaves serve as essential laborers in building a new settlement, but they would also help commence sugar-works in Sumatra. With the example of the growing sugar economies of the Atlantic world in mind, the Company dispatched planters as well as slaves "skillful in sugar plantations" from St Helena to Bencoolen.³⁹ Alongside African slaves and enterprising English planters, officials at Bencoolen also tried to attract Chinese settlers to the fledgling settlement through an explicit invitation in 1689.⁴⁰ This project had a long afterlife. Later in the eighteenth century, the Company leased slaves to private sugar planters, including German Protestants and Chinese settlers, in a bid to attract them to Bencoolen.⁴¹

The demand for enslaved labor implicated Bencoolen in a wider network of trade and exchange across British territories in the Indian Ocean. The Bencoolen Council frequently requested greater intra-imperial support for the settlement, especially from the Madras Presidency, which enjoyed supervisory authority over the settlement. The Council repeatedly asked that other British outposts "more largely...supply us" with essentials such as rice.⁴² They complained at length about the refusal of the Madras administration to provide the fledgling settlement with the funds necessary to sustain itself. In the absence of such support, the Council complained to the Company's Directors in London, pointing out that as a result "your affairs may very much suffer in these parts."⁴³ In such an event, they would be "forced," they warned, "to sell pepper" locally rather than at a profit in markets elsewhere.⁴⁴ Beyond the difficulties of procuring enslaved labor through coordination with other settlements, the Bencoolen Council also struggled to prevent the escape of slaves. The Company employed Macassar soldiers from the hinterland to surveil slaves. Yet, as one official complained, "sleepy" and "pilfering" Macassar soldiers were "permitting at several times the Company's slaves to make their escape."⁴⁵

The importation of enslaved Africans as well as the employment of soldiers drawn from the wider archipelagic world of the eastern Indian Ocean accompanied myriad acts of state-making and efforts to transform Bencoolen's economy. The Company minted coins at Fort York.⁴⁶ It also supervised construction in the settlement and the management of difficult environmental conditions. The Bencoolen Council noted that "an engineer is extremely wanted" not only for constructing fortifications and other buildings but also for "securing

³⁷ *Records of Fort St. George. Despatches from England 1686-1692* (Madras, 1929), 71.

³⁸ Elihu Yale and Madras Council to Court of Directors, 21 September 1689-15 October 1689, IOR/E/3/48, fol. 62v, BL.

³⁹ *Records of Fort St. George*, 71.

⁴⁰ William Marsden, *The History of Sumatra* (London, 1783), 370.

⁴¹ Court of Directors, East India Company to the President and Council of Fort Marlborough, Bencoolen, 11 January 1771, IOR G/35/33, fol. 14r, BL.

⁴² Bencoolen Council to the Court, _? February 1704/5, IOR/G/35/6, letter 1, BL.

⁴³ Bencoolen Council to the Court, _? February 1704/5.

⁴⁴ Bencoolen Council to the Court, _? February 1704/5.

⁴⁵ William Griffith, Banjar to Bencoolen Council, 4 August 1705, IOR/G/35/6, letter 3, BL.

⁴⁶ Coins minted at Fort York in 1695. 1870, 0507.13679 and E. 3952, British Museum.

the river from further encroaching on us.”⁴⁷ Enslaved labor played an essential role in such projects. As early as 1704, the “extraordinary” services carried out by slaves on “your Fortifications and Buildings” led officials at Bencoolen to inform authorities in London that “200 more, which if could be procured at Madagascar, would be of very great service.”⁴⁸ Expanding Bencoolen’s built environment not only depended on the importation of enslaved laborers, it also served as a means to attract settlement. As part of this effort, the Bencoolen Council announced in 1704 that it had “given a liberty to all people to trade custom free to encourage their residence at Bencoolen.”⁴⁹ In 1714, the Bencoolen administration launched another major construction project with the relocation of the official British headquarters in the region. Fort Marlborough in Bencoolen supplanted Fort York and emerged as the new center of British governance in the region. A local uprising against the British in 1719, however, led to the destruction of the original Fort Marlborough and the subsequent reconstruction of the fort in 1723, once the British managed to regain a foothold in Sumatra.⁵⁰

Amid frequent warfare in Europe and growing inter-imperial rivalries in the Indian Ocean world, the 1750s marked the beginnings of intensifying surveillance of Bencoolen and renewed debate about reforming the settlement. Frustrated by what they saw as misgovernment in Bencoolen, the Company’s Court of Directors appointed two officials in the Madras government as Supervisors for Bencoolen in 1753. They charged them “with full power and authority to supervise all our servants upon the West Coast” and to “put our affairs upon a good footing.”⁵¹ The Directors identified several problems: the frequent movement of Company servants from one settlement to the next, the appointment of unqualified Residents, the failure to enforce “natives to a strict compliance” with pepper production quotas as well as “not having regular annual surveys,” and trusting “the Bugguese and inferior people” to conduct such tasks instead of the Company’s covenanted servants.⁵² To ameliorate the situation, the Directors called upon the Supervisors to, first and foremost, scrutinize and manage the collection of Sumatra’s most important commodity: pepper. Lamenting “the great decrease of pepper at almost every settlement upon the coast, the Directors ordered that the Supervisors provide their superiors at Fort St George, Madras, with regular reports on the “quantity of pepper you may reasonably expect in the season and at what times it will be ready.”⁵³ Such “application and good management” would, the Directors hoped, “treble the quantity of pepper.”⁵⁴ While pepper clearly dominated the Directors’ concerns, they also called upon the Supervisors to monitor the manufacturers of arrack and sugar in Bencoolen. Expressing their satisfaction with the sugar samples received from Bencoolen, they requested that such projects be further encouraged. Furthermore, the Supervisors were also expected to enforce restrictions on private trade and profiteering at the expense of the Company. The Madras government warned of efforts to defraud the Company by making “exorbitant demands” for “the diet of some Coffrees and prisoners.”⁵⁵ This intervention in 1753 set the stage for sweeping changes by the end of the decade.

The Bencoolen Presidency, 1760–85

The transformation of Bencoolen into a Presidency in 1760 occurred amid the exigencies of the Seven Years’ War and a growing recognition of the need to expand Britain’s

⁴⁷ Bencoolen Council to the Court, _? February 1704/5, IOR/G/35/6, letter 1, BL.

⁴⁸ Sumatra Factory Records, 1704, IOR/G/35/6, letter 1, unfoliated, BL.

⁴⁹ Bencoolen Council to the Court, 12 February 1703/4, IOR/G/35/7, 3, BL.

⁵⁰ Harfield, *Bencoolen*, 77–87.

⁵¹ Court of Directors to the Madras Council, 28 November 1753, IOR/E/4/861, 9, BL.

⁵² Court of Directors to the Madras Council, 28 November 1753, 22–23.

⁵³ Court of Directors to the Madras Council, 28 November 1753, 13.

⁵⁴ Court of Directors to the Madras Council, 28 November 1753, 21.

⁵⁵ Court of Directors to the Madras Council, 28 November 1753, 16.

governmental presence across multiple enclaves. Yet Bencoolen's elevation was not purely the product of inter-imperial rivalries or French aggression. On the contrary, officials in Bencoolen actively demanded the settlement's transformation. In 1756, the new Deputy Governor of Bencoolen Thomas Combes insisted that "he could not serve the Company effectually unless the Settlements upon the West Coast were independent of the Presidency at Fort St. George."⁵⁶ The appointment of Supervisors from the Madras Presidency had clearly stoked intra-imperial rivalries across the two settlements and fears of extra-local intervention. Some of the Company's Directors, however, fiercely disagreed with Combes's proposal for Bencoolen's independence. To diffuse the threat of "disunion," the Court of Directors declined to grant Bencoolen autonomy.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, in recognition of Combes's dissatisfaction, and that of other servants posted in Sumatra, they offered several concessions.

On the same day that the Directors rejected Combes's proposal to make Bencoolen independent, proposals for removing "all restrictions and clogs to the private trade" at the settlement were put forth, as well as a motion to place Bencoolen's servants "upon the same footing as all subordinates are to Madras, Bengal and Bombay."⁵⁸ The Court of Directors sought to respond to the immediate material concerns of the Company's servants in Sumatra while postponing a structural transformation. Company servants serving in and around Fort Marlborough at Bencoolen, however, continued to clamor for a greater commitment of resources for the maintenance of multiple settlements in Sumatra. "It appears to us that our honorable masters seem to entertain a wrong idea of the reasons why the West Coast is not so advantageous as they expect," they argued, claiming that it was not the heavy "charges of the out Residencies" but rather the lack of "investment," particularly at Fort Marlborough itself, that was to blame.⁵⁹ Instead of "withdrawing settlements" in order to pursue pepper production as cheaply as possible, they recommended "having Residents settled along the Coast at the distance of thirty or forty miles from each other" to better supervise pepper cultivation.⁶⁰ The cost of expanding the number of Residents would, they averred, increase pepper production and ultimately reimburse the cost of such intensive management.

Thus, they made the case that it was not the cost of maintaining a British presence in Sumatra that was making pepper cultivation a failed and draining project. Rather, they argued that it was the failure to invest more resources in the maintenance of a robust administrative apparatus that had rendered pepper cultivation difficult and expensive. Such claims as to why more money ought to be devoted to Bencoolen demonstrate that a settlement's failure, or impending failure, was not a matter of consensus. By quarreling over why pepper plantations had not flourished in the region, the Company's Directors as well as servants in Sumatra disagreed about the relationship between governmental investment, agrarian production, and profitability. Even British merchants and inhabitants of Calcutta saw increased commodity production in Bencoolen as a worthy goal. In 1758, several of them wrote to Robert Clive, the Governor of the Bengal Presidency, demanding that "due encouragement be given to manufacture sugar, arrack," and other items at Bencoolen "for that place may soon be brought to rival Batavia and greatly increase trade."⁶¹

Alongside promoting new agrarian schemes, British officials also devoted themselves to the long-standing project of encouraging settlement in Bencoolen. In 1758, the Company's Court of Directors ordered the Bengal Presidency to encourage "a number of industrious

⁵⁶ Memoranda of the East India Company Committee of Correspondence, 18 November 1756, IOR/D/105, unfoliated, BL.

⁵⁷ Memoranda of the East India Company Committee of Correspondence, 18 November 1756.

⁵⁸ Memoranda of the East India Company Committee of Correspondence, 1 December 1756, IOR/D/105, unfoliated, BL.

⁵⁹ Roger Carter, Joseph Gunn, Richard Preston, and Mathew Blaquiére to the Bencoolen Council, 22 February 1759, IOR/G/35/12, fol. 20r, BL.

⁶⁰ Roger Carter, Joseph Gunn, Richard Preston, and Mathew Blaquiére to the Bencoolen Council, 22 February 1759.

⁶¹ Merchants and Inhabitants of Calcutta to Robert Clive, President and Governor, and the Council of Fort William, 28 December 1758, Bengal Proceedings, IOR/P/1/31, fol. 37v, BL.

people with their families” to “settle upon the West Coast of Sumatra under the Company’s protection.”⁶² At the same time, the Directors instructed Company officials posted at Canton to “use their best endeavors to engage as many industrious Chinese families to proceed to Fort Marlborough to fix and settle there as they possibly can by assuring them of our good usage and encouragement.”⁶³ Further, aware of the possibility that such a project might be confronted with opposition from the Chinese and Dutch governments, the Directors called upon them to solicit volunteers surreptitiously. In renewing their efforts to “settle” Bencoolen, the Directors signaled their awareness of the Chinese community in Batavia and the Dutch model of imperial immigration. Equally, the need for labor propelled regular demands for enslaved men, women, and children. In July 1758, the Court of Directors ordered the delivery of 500 slaves to Bencoolen from East Africa.⁶⁴ As Richard B. Allen has shown, such orders did not produce immediate results: in 1758, Bencoolen had a slave population of 458 and a year later the recorded number of enslaved people stood at just 460.⁶⁵ Consequently, calls for further shipments of slaves continued. Even amid the commencement of hostilities, British officials did not see the expansion of Bencoolen purely as an incidental, if convenient, consequence of a fundamentally military strategy. Rather, they also pursued the enlargement and settlement of Bencoolen as a distinct objective even against the backdrop of a multi-front inter-imperial war.

The outbreak of Anglo-French hostilities in Europe and across America, South Asia, and the Indian Ocean world in 1756 nonetheless generated a new set of anxieties about the settlement. Concerns about the “present defenseless condition of the Company’s settlements upon the West Coast of Sumatra and the absolute necessity of putting the military force there upon a respectable footing” culminated in the appointment of a Commandant of the Company’s Forces on the West Coast in 1759.⁶⁶ The breakdown of supply chains between Madras and Bencoolen due to the intensity of hostilities on the Coromandel Coast prompted efforts to further expand Bencoolen’s ties with the Presidencies of Bengal and Bombay.⁶⁷

The urge to secure Bencoolen as a viable possession finally resulted in the Residency’s elevation to the status of a Presidency in 1760. The Directors claimed in their correspondence with the administration of Bencoolen that “this resolution was taken upon a full conviction that it will be the means of rendering our Settlements upon the Island of Sumatra of great advantage and Utility for the Company from henceforward.”⁶⁸ Bencoolen’s transformation into a Presidency or “independent settlement” involved the appointment of a “Governor or President and Council in the same manner and with the like power and authorities as our other Presidencies.”⁶⁹ The Governor or President would also serve as the Commander in Chief or leading military authority in Sumatra. Bencoolen’s newfound independence did not dull continuing calls for close cooperation among the Presidencies. The Directors instructed the Council at Bencoolen “to keep up a regular correspondence with them all” and alluded to their instructions to the Madras administration “to promote to the utmost of their power every measure” necessary for Fort Marlborough to thrive “in this infant state.”⁷⁰

In 1761, the possibility of capturing the French colony of Mauritius gave rise to proposals to redeploy confiscated resources to Bencoolen. The Company’s Secret Committee in London

⁶² Court of Directors to the Bengal Council, 8 March 1758, IOR/L/PS/5/538, unfoliated, BL.

⁶³ Court of Directors to the Bengal Council, 8 March 1758.

⁶⁴ Richard B. Allen, *European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean, 1500–1850* (Athens, 2014), 9.

⁶⁵ Allen, *European Slave Trading*.

⁶⁶ East India Company Committee of Correspondence Report, 22 August 1759, IOR/D/22, fol. 94r, BL.

⁶⁷ Bencoolen Council to the Court of Directors, 10 March 1759, IOR/G/35/12, fol. 41v, BL.

⁶⁸ Court of Directors to the Governor and Council of Fort Marlborough, Bencoolen, 4 February 1761, IOR/G/35/12, fol.173r, BL.

⁶⁹ “Extract of the Company’s General Letter to Fort Marlborough, 4 February 1761,” *Journal of the House of Commons*, 26 May 1772, 848–49.

⁷⁰ Court of Directors to the Governor and Council of Fort Marlborough, Bencoolen, 4 February 1761, fol. 173v.

advised the Madras Council that in the event of a successful siege, they were to gather all “cannon, warlike stores and every slave in particular” from Mauritius and have them “transported to our settlement of Bencoolen.”⁷¹ Such an infusion of weaponry and enslaved laborers would, the Committee calculated, “save us prodigious expense and be of infinite service to that rising colony.”⁷² The contingencies of a sprawling conflict, therefore, provided new opportunities for the expansion of the newly created Bencoolen Presidency. Importantly, the Secret Committee’s description of Bencoolen as a “rising colony” and the emphasis on transporting military equipment as well as slaves illuminates how Company officials envisioned Bencoolen’s future. Bencoolen’s newfound status and associated attempts to shore up the military presence on the island did not, however, stave off a successful French siege and takeover of the settlement. Quite contrary to grand visions of elevating Bencoolen on the back of slave labor extracted from a French colony, Bencoolen found itself occupied by French forces in 1761. Two years later, the Treaty of Paris, concluded in February 1763, authorized the return of Bencoolen as well as “Natal and Tapanouli in the island of Sumatra” to Britain as part of a broader process of territorial exchange and restoration across the East Indies as well as the Caribbean, North America, and Europe.⁷³

Therefore, the work of transforming Bencoolen into a settlement worthy of the status of a Presidency only commenced in earnest in 1763. The destruction of Bencoolen’s infrastructure, notably its fortifications, during the French occupation might have been viewed as an ideal opportunity to abandon a marginal and unproductive experiment. As long as fortifications and other infrastructure stood, abandoning Bencoolen as a British territory could have been seen as a waste of a prior investment. But the wartime destruction of numerous buildings in Bencoolen eliminated concerns about sunk costs and raised the question of whether another relocation might be considered. Soon after Bencoolen’s elevation, Company officials asked themselves if “the same place should be fixed upon for our principle settlement again whereon the remains of Fort Marlborough stands” or “whether it may be more for the interest of the Company to make the Principal Settlement upon any spot near it or even at some other more distant place.”⁷⁴ They suggested “raising the pepper” with greater efficiency and achieving the “extension of commerce” by establishing a British hub in Tapanouli instead.⁷⁵ Yet the risk posed by Dutch pretensions to Tapanouli cemented Bencoolen’s continued place as a British hub in Sumatra. Thus, policymakers in the 1760s recommitted themselves to rebuilding Bencoolen and preserving it as a British territory.

This new era in Bencoolen’s history was characterized by a continuing and accelerating demand for slave labor. Shortly after the conclusion of the Seven Years War in 1763, the effort to reverse the impact of the French occupation in Bencoolen drove a renewed demand for slaves for the sake of “public works, and other labors of their settlement,” which “could not be carried on without a large supply of slaves.”⁷⁶ Equally, given the central role played by slaves in manufacturing sugar and important byproducts such as arrack, British officials in Sumatra even referred to spaces of sugar production as branches of a “slave factory for the making of arrack and sugar.”⁷⁷ As lists of enslaved persons prepared by Company officials show, enslaved persons served as “sawyers,” “artificers,” “tindals,” even “doctors.”⁷⁸

⁷¹ Secret Committee, Court of Directors to the Madras Council, 6 January 1761, IOR/L/PS/5/538, unpaginated, BL.

⁷² Secret Committee, Court of Directors to the Madras Council, 6 January 1761.

⁷³ *The Definitive Treaty of Peace and Friendship between His Britannick Majesty, the Most Christian King, and the King of Spain* (London, 1763), 5–6.

⁷⁴ Extract from the Hon’ble Company’s Letter, 4 June 1762, Melville Papers, East Indian Islands, Ms 1968, fol. 1., National Library of Scotland (hereafter NLS).

⁷⁵ Extract from the Hon’ble Company’s Letter, 4 June 1762.

⁷⁶ *Abridgment of the minutes of the evidence, taken before a committee of the whole House, to whom it was referred to consider of the slave trade, 1791* ([London, 1791]), 137.

⁷⁷ Stokeham Donstan, Letter from Fort Marlborough, Bencoolen, 10 January 1770, DDN 223c/ 32, Nottinghamshire Archives.

⁷⁸ Sumatra Factory Records, 1786–1787, IOR/G/35/156, fols. 584v–585v, BL.

The female slaves named in such lists were identified by their marital status, a not insignificant fact since officials often demanded that female slaves be provided for the sake of enlarging the slave population through reproduction, even though many enslaved women performed many of the same tasks as enslaved men. The labor performed by enslaved persons was, therefore, essential for rebuilding Bencoolen's economy and for infrastructural development more generally. The maintenance of this laboring population was itself facilitated by infrastructural innovations. In 1759, concerns about ill-health among African slaves in Sumatra led to the construction of a hospital, as the Bencoolen Council put it, "for the reception of your slaves."⁷⁹ The Council noted that in the absence of such a medical institution "your slaves" had "suffered greatly for the want of such a convenience." Though the Bencoolen Council deployed the language of "convenience," the establishment of this new institution, which entailed efforts to construct "a brick building" at "as small an expense as possible," was motivated by the desire to conserve the enslaved local population as well as avoid any loss on the initial investment that the purchase of the slaves involved.

Anxieties about the health of slaves particularly arose from concerns over the "climate of Bencoolen" and its effect on different groups. As one commentator argued, the climate of Bencoolen "has proved the most sickly" of the four Presidencies.⁸⁰ To bolster his claim, he noted that it was not the English alone who had fallen prey to Bencoolen's climate. Rather, when "many Chinese merchants, with their families quitted Manilla in order to settle under the English government at Bencoolen" in 1763, "the air of this country proved so fatal, that most of those Chinese and their families died soon after their arrival."⁸¹ Increasingly, however, African slaves were believed to show remarkable tolerance for the local conditions. Against proposals for abolishing slavery in Sumatra in the 1780s, a number of advocates stridently made the case for its preservation. Henry Botham, a former West India planter and sugar planter in Bencoolen, emphasized the fact that Bencoolen's slaves had "begun to increase."⁸² The very enterprise of ensuring that Bencoolen's enslaved population would become self-perpetuating and self-sustaining illustrates British efforts to engineer and remake the territory. The abolitionist William Wilberforce himself cited Botham's evidence, claiming that "in Bencoolen, which has been accounted one of the most unhealthy climates on earth, the negro slaves had increased."⁸³ William Marsden, in his detailed history of Sumatra, similarly noted the "extraordinary fact, that if there is one class of people eminently happy above all others upon earth, it is the body of *Caffres*, or negro slaves belonging to the India Company at Bencoolen."⁸⁴

The management of enslaved populations was matched by the effort to expand Bencoolen's population of settlers. Throughout the 1760s and 1770s, officials in London sought "to engage some more German Protestants who are acquainted with the sugar manufactory and husbandry" for the sake of "rendering our West Coast settlement of as great utility to the Company and to individuals as possible."⁸⁵ In subsequent correspondence, the Directors congratulated the Bencoolen administration for their "humane and prudent" conduct toward "those settlers."⁸⁶ By inviting such settlement, the Bencoolen Council hoped to substantially increase the settlement's agricultural output. The effort to increase agricultural production in Bencoolen proceeded in sync with the concurrent project of expanding British trade with China. The Company's Directors instructed the Bencoolen Presidency to "consign to our Supracargoes in China as much pepper as can be

⁷⁹ Bencoolen Council to the Court of Directors, 10 March 1759, IOR/G/35/12, fol. 50v, BL.

⁸⁰ James Lind, *An essay on diseases incidental to Europeans in hot climates* (London, 1777), 87.

⁸¹ Lind, *An essay on diseases*.

⁸² *Abridgment of the minutes of the evidence*, 137–38.

⁸³ William Wilberforce, *A letter on the abolition of the slave trade; addressed to the freeholders and inhabitants of Yorkshire* (London, 1807), 106.

⁸⁴ Marsden, *The History of Sumatra*, 215.

⁸⁵ Court of Directors to the Bencoolen Council, 11 January 1771, IOR G/35/33, fols. 14r–v, BL.

⁸⁶ Court of Directors to the Bencoolen Council, 25 March 1772, L IOR G/35/33, fol. 88r, BL.

collected.”⁸⁷ The sale of pepper was meant to finance the purchase of prized Chinese commodities such as tea and porcelain. In 1773, Bencoolen produced slightly less than 1,300 tons of pepper for export to both the Chinese and British markets.⁸⁸ The production of 1,300 tons was no mean feat and marked a high point in the Bencoolen Presidency’s ability to produce pepper in the second half of the eighteenth century. Yet it fell considerably short of the 4,000 tons that Fort Marlborough’s administration had promised their superiors in London.⁸⁹ In light of such disappointments, Company officials also hoped that Bencoolen would emerge as a market for the sale of opium cultivated in British territories such as Bengal.

Concurrently, through the 1770s, the question of naval expansion in the Indian Ocean invited discussions of Fort Marlborough’s utility in relation to other ports. Tapanouli once again featured prominently in these discussions. George Burghall, the Chief Engineer at Bencoolen, argued vociferously against the “partisans for Marlborough” to insist upon Tapanouli’s preferability as a port and commercial center.⁹⁰ Burghall claimed that Britain’s interest in the pepper trade would be advantaged by shifting operations to a more centrally located port on Sumatra’s western shore such as Tapanouli. Moreover, Burghall even went so far as to avow that “Tapanouli will or might surpass Bombay altogether and become the greatest seaport and emporium of India.”⁹¹ Thus, Burghall sought not only to decenter Bencoolen but also Bombay. To make his case, Burghall contended that the “navy in India” would find a “harbor secured against all the winds that can blow” in Tapanouli, and thus “protect the trade and peace of Bengal and the Coast of Coromandel.”⁹²

Richard Barwell of the Bengal Government, meanwhile, took a mixed view of Bencoolen’s utility as a British territory, noting both its failings and potential. In a letter to the Prime Minister, Lord North in 1775, Barwell argued that “the Presidency of Bencoolen is neither nearly nor remotely concerned in any political interests of the continent.”⁹³ The continent Barwell referenced was the South Asian subcontinent. Interrupting a lengthy meditation on the complex political maneuvers underway in South Asia, Barwell insisted that the Bencoolen Presidency was “weak and incapable of extending its influence over the island of Sumatra by military power.”⁹⁴ Quite unlike the Bengal Presidency that Barwell served, Bencoolen had, he despaired, remained merely a commercial settlement. Yet for all of Bencoolen’s apparent unimportance, Barwell also considered the possibility of a different future. He argued that if the island as a whole were conquered, “the acquisitions would be more to the interest of Great Britain than all its other possessions,” especially since “opening the ports on the eastern side of the island and by supplying the valuable article of tin for which there is an unremitting demand by the Chinese” would “greatly facilitate the English commerce to China.”⁹⁵ Barwell even went on to compare Sumatra with the Dutch colony of Ceylon, arguing that his proposals would allow it to compete with one of the Dutch Empire’s major spice producers.

In 1779, John Crisp, an official stationed at Fort Marlborough, put together a substantial plan for the settlement’s reform. While he personally recommended abandoning the settlement due to the expense of maintaining it, he nevertheless offered a scheme to improve its fortunes. Attributing “the delusive hopes” for Bencoolen to the act of “converting the establishment from a subordination to Madras into an independent Presidency,” Crisp

⁸⁷ Court of Directors to the Bencoolen Council, 16 December 1772, IOR G/35/33, fol. 104., BL.

⁸⁸ John Bastin, ed., *The British in West Sumatra, 1685–1825* (Kuala Lumpur, 1965), xxvi.

⁸⁹ Bastin, ed., *The British in West Sumatra*.

⁹⁰ George Burghall to Wheler, Chairman of the East India Company, 4 December 1773, Ms 1068, fol. 8., NLS.

⁹¹ George Burghall to Wheler, Chairman of the East India Company, 4 December 1773, fol. 9.,

⁹² George Burghall to Wheler, Chairman of the East India Company, 4 December 1773, fol. 9.,

⁹³ The National Archives (TNA): T 49/16/8, Richard Barwell to Lord North, 25 March 1775.

⁹⁴ Richard Barwell to Lord North, 25 March 1775.

⁹⁵ Richard Barwell to Lord North, 25 March 1775.

emphatically recommended the settlement's transformation through the expansion of arrack and sugar production.⁹⁶ Such concerns about Bencoolen's unfulfilled promise should not, however, be read in isolation. Similar anxieties about economic value and potential were frequently aired about territories that historians have typically presumed to have been indispensable. Indeed, Bombay was often described as a "loosing settlement."⁹⁷ A correspondent of Robert Clive's, for instance, argued that Bombay cost too much money to maintain and that only the port's docks had ever "been of any material service to the Company."⁹⁸ Similarly, Charles Cornwallis, who took charge as the Governor General of British territories in the East Indies in 1786, compared Bombay and Bencoolen. In response to such criticisms, advocates of Bencoolen argued that "the Island (Sumatra) was capable of being made a most valuable pepper garden, and, in a few years hence, must be in a condition of not only supplying itself, but all the other settlements in India, with arrack and sugar, but for the want of a person competent to manage such an undertaking."⁹⁹ Bencoolen, advocates argued, was simply in need of competent management.

Subordination, 1785–99

Anxieties about Bencoolen's unfulfilled potential after almost two-and-a-half decades as a Presidency came to a head in 1784 due to seismic shifts in British imperial policy. As the records maintained at Bencoolen itself indicate, "soon after the establishment of the Board of Commissioners for the Affairs of India, the Government of Fort Marlbro' at Bencoolen was reduced to a Residency and made subordinate to the Supreme Government of Bengal" as "part of the system of retrenchment and economy."¹⁰⁰ In 1784, a new ministry led by William Pitt the Younger rose to power in Britain. Soon after taking charge, Pitt and his close associate Henry Dundas shepherded a new piece of East India legislation through Parliament. The East India Act of 1784 provided for the formation of a new ministerial institution called the Board of Control for India Affairs. The Board of Control, constituted of a number of ministers, including the Prime Minister himself, would take direct charge of all political and military matters in the East Indies and supervise the operations of the East India Company. While the legislation did not abolish the Company and theoretically provided it with autonomy in matters of commerce, as many critics of the Act pointed out, control over political affairs inevitably involved the Board in questions of commerce. While much of the existing historiography has presented the formation of a Board of Control for India Affairs as part of a slow and gradual process of increasing metropolitan surveillance of the East India Company's conduct in South Asia, the Board played a far more decisive role in shaping the governance of British territories in the Indian Ocean world.¹⁰¹ Indeed, the downgrading of Bencoolen to a Residency attests to the interventionist role of the Board of Control, especially Henry Dundas, the so called "India Minister."¹⁰² Much like all major orders dispatched to the East Indies by the Company's Court of Directors from 1784 onwards, the order to transform Bencoolen's position was examined, edited, and approved by the Board.

⁹⁶ Memorial of John Crisp, Fort Marlborough to the Court of Directors, 10 June 1779, Eur Mss G37/68/4, BL.

⁹⁷ Unsigned letter to Robert Clive, 17 June 1774, Eur Mss G37/68/1, fol. 21r, BL.

⁹⁸ Unsigned letter to Robert Clive, 17 June 1774.

⁹⁹ *Report on Records of India Office by Registrar and Superintendent of Records*, vol. I (London, 1888), 77.

¹⁰⁰ "For Mr Anstruther's Advice and opinion concerning the Criminal Judicial Authority of the Members & Council at Fort Marlbro in the Island of Sumatra," 30 June 1795, IOR/G/35/12, fol. 190r, BL.

¹⁰¹ Holden Furber presents the formation of the Board of Control in terms of Henry Dundas's control over patronage politics. Holden Furber, *Henry Dundas, First Viscount Melville, 1742–1811. Political Manager of Scotland, Statesman, Administrator of India* (London, 1931), 31. See also Robert Travers, *Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India: The British in Bengal* (Cambridge, 2007), 212.

¹⁰² Henry Dundas, "On the Conduct of the Bill," Melville Papers, GD/51/3/11–13, fol. 13r, National Archives of Scotland.

On 13 December 1784, the members of the Board of Control for India Affairs approved a decision to “immediately” consider the “affairs of your Presidency and adopt some regulations which we hope will relieve us from the very heavy burden which the settlement of Fort Marlborough in its present state is upon us.”¹⁰³ On 4 March 1785, the Board of Control approved Bencoolen’s “reduction” to a Residency and its subordination “under the Supreme Government of Fort William” in the Bengal Presidency.¹⁰⁴ The order explained the decision to strip Bencoolen of the status of a Presidency by pointing to heavy financial losses, specifically a “net loss of £37,589 annually” compared to an annual “profit of £1774” between May 1754 and April 1759 while it was still a Residency.¹⁰⁵ Bencoolen’s annual production of roughly 437 tons of pepper simply did not, the Court of Directors argued, constitute a sufficient “advantage” that might justify the “enormous expense” of maintaining it as a Presidency.¹⁰⁶ In fact, the 437 tons marked a considerable decline from the roughly 1,300 tons the settlement had produced a decade earlier in 1773.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, the order indicated precisely what Bencoolen’s downgraded status meant: they would no longer receive funds directly from London. The Bencoolen Council would have to request all funds for administration as well as agrarian and commercial investment from the Supreme Presidency of Bengal. All too optimistically, the Court of Directors and, by extension, the Board of Control expressed the hope that on account of such cost-cutting, “the settlement will yield us a profit of about £34,000 annually.”¹⁰⁸

Bencoolen’s unmaking as a Presidency in 1785 gave rise to new proposals for reconfiguring the British presence in Sumatra. In 1785, George Smith wrote to Henry Dundas, the de facto head of the Board of Control for India Affairs, from Calcutta to make the case that Bencoolen and its subordinate settlements in Sumatra were “proving losing” and were “not beneficial settlements to the Company.”¹⁰⁹ Smith recommended handing over Bencoolen to the Dutch, whom he believed had long desired the settlement on account of its proximity to Batavia and Dutch Java. Instead, Smith recommended moving the establishment of Bencoolen to “Acheen” (now Aceh) on the north-west coast of Sumatra, which possessed the advantage of proximity not only to Bengal, Golconda, Coromandel, and other South Asian ports but also to the Malay, Cambodian and Chinese “continents.”¹¹⁰ According to Smith, the excellence of Acheen’s harbor and location would expand the British capacity to access all manner of commodities, from peppers and betelnut to gold dust and sulfur. He also envisioned the possibility of transforming Acheen into a producer of coffee, indigo, and even, “with care,” spices such as cinnamon, cassia, and nutmeg.¹¹¹ While George Smith settled on Acheen as a potential successor to Bencoolen, a British expedition led by Captain Light in 1786 established a fledgling new settlement on the island of Pulo Peenang (now Penang). Advocates of a settlement at Pulo Peenang, or Prince of Wales Island, celebrated its harbor and noted that it could serve as a better conduit to the region’s trade networks.¹¹²

¹⁰³ Draft Paragraphs of a letter proposed by the Court of Directors of the East India Company to be sent to the President and Council of Fort Marlborough, 13 December 1784, IOR/G/35/43A, 1, BL.

¹⁰⁴ Draft Paragraphs proposed by the Court of Directors to be sent to the President and Council of Fort Marlborough, 4 March 1785, IOR/G/35/43A, 3, BL.

¹⁰⁵ Draft Paragraphs proposed by the Court of Directors to be sent to the President and Council of Fort Marlborough, 4 March 1785.

¹⁰⁶ “Court to Fort Marlborough, 7 March 1785,” in Bastin, ed., *The British in West Sumatra*, 84.

¹⁰⁷ Bastin, ed., *The British in West Sumatra*, xxvi.

¹⁰⁸ Draft Paragraphs proposed by the Court of Directors to be sent to the President and Council of Fort Marlborough, 4 March 1785, 6.

¹⁰⁹ George Smith to Henry Dundas, 27 January 1785, IOR/H/434, 49, BL.

¹¹⁰ George Smith to Henry Dundas, 27 January 1785, 52.

¹¹¹ George Smith to Henry Dundas, 27 January 1785.

¹¹² Elisha Trapaud and Francis Light, *A Short Account of the Prince of Wales’s Island or Pulo Peenang in the East Indies* (London, 1785).

Governor General Charles Cornwallis himself wondered about Bencoolen's future in regular exchanges with Henry Dundas. Soon after the establishment of a presence in Penang, he asked Dundas to "talk over with your friends in Leadenhall Street the real ability of Bencoolen" and consider "whether it is wise to keep both that settlement and Penang."¹¹³ Revealing his dim view of the Bencoolen Council, Cornwallis noted that he knew "nothing of Bencoolen but that they mortgaged the cargo of pepper which they sent to China and that they draw on us without mercy."¹¹⁴ Bencoolen's financial mismanagement and inexhaustible demand for funds from Bengal was, however, hardly exceptional. Indeed, Cornwallis compared the shortcomings of the Bencoolen administration to the Presidency of Bombay's "contempt" for its unpaid military bills.¹¹⁵ Not long after, Cornwallis posed a fundamental question to Henry Dundas: were either Bombay or Bencoolen "of substantial use to the Company"?¹¹⁶ "We know at present they are very expensive," Cornwallis averred, while also declaring his preference for finding "good and secure harbors for ships of war" elsewhere.¹¹⁷ Cornwallis's frequent reports of "things going on very ill" at Bencoolen would only have exacerbated Henry Dundas's skepticism about the settlement.¹¹⁸

Dundas had increasingly begun to see Bencoolen and the pepper trade as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the Dutch. Convinced that a British alliance with the Dutch was the most "preferable to any other country" as the Dutch could "promote the sale of our products and manufacturers in a superior degree and at the same time contribute very important political assistance," Dundas reflected on the possibility of giving up British interests in and around Sumatra.¹¹⁹ Calculating that the foremost concern of the Dutch was "to secure to herself the monopoly of the Spice Islands," Dundas noted that giving up the trade centered around Bencoolen would in no way obstruct Britain's primary ambition "to maintain and preserve the Empire which she has acquired." When compared with imperial preservation, Dundas claimed that "even trade is a subordinate or collateral consideration." By allying with the Dutch, Britain could preclude the possibility of a French-Dutch alliance and thus protect "our Empire in India." Meanwhile, Dundas did not consider giving up the British interest in the pepper trade too great a price to pay for such an alliance. Pepper, after all, Dundas argued could not be "monopolized" and indeed grew "over many parts of India." Further, leaving the pepper trade of the "Spice Islands" to the Dutch would not imperil Britain's broader commercial interests. "It is impossible the Dutch can extend their trade in India, between India and China, or between India and Europe," Dundas averred, without a significant presence in Bengal or the Coromandel Coast. Therefore, Dundas concluded: "by guaranteeing the Spice Islands, we abandon what is scarcely worth pursuing." Though Dundas conceded that such a shift would likely impact the export of opium from Bengal to Sumatra, Java, and China, he noted that ultimately the Dutch would be willing to forge a trade agreement permitting the export of not only opium but other manufactures from Bengal in Dutch territories. Such a trade agreement would, Dundas highlighted, allow the British all the advantages of an "establishment" in the region but "without being burdened with the expense."¹²⁰

Dundas's willingness to part with Bencoolen did not so much betray a disinterest in territorialized governance as reveal his priorities for committing resources. By privileging "India," and thus South Asia, as the center of Britain's Empire, Dundas signaled a new commitment to centralized imperial governance in the subcontinent. Dundas's emphasis on

¹¹³ Charles Cornwallis to Henry Dundas, 30 November 1786, Ms 3385, 13, NLS.

¹¹⁴ Charles Cornwallis to Henry Dundas, 30 November 1786, 13–14.

¹¹⁵ Charles Cornwallis to Henry Dundas, 30 November 1786.

¹¹⁶ Charles Cornwallis to Henry Dundas, 5 March 1787, Ms 3385, 49, NLS.

¹¹⁷ Charles Cornwallis to Henry Dundas, 5 March 1787.

¹¹⁸ Charles Cornwallis to Henry Dundas, 14 August 1787, Ms 3385, 70, NLS.

¹¹⁹ "Considerations on the Subject of a Treaty between Great Britain, and Holland, relative to their Interests in India, as drawn up by Mr. Dundas in 1787," MS 1068, fol. 20_r, NLS.

¹²⁰ "Considerations on the Subject of a Treaty," fols. 20_v–25_r.

curtailing expenditure by giving up Bencoolen entirely also echoed the Board of Control's decision to undo its status as a Presidency in 1785. Nevertheless, Dundas's growing skepticism and Bencoolen's unmaking as a Presidency did not diminish the settlement's place in wider intra-imperial networks. Crises in the South Asian mainland often necessitated a swift response from the subordinated Bencoolen Council. In 1787, the Court of Directors informed the Bencoolen administration that the "the embargo laid by Tipu Sultan" had greatly obstructed the Company's access to the pepper of the Malabar coast.¹²¹ In response to this exigency, the Directors demanded that "no endeavors in your parts will be wanting to induce to planters to proceed in extending the [pepper] cultivation to the utmost, as it is essential to our interest to procure as largely as possible of this article to make up for the small quantities, received of late from the Malabar Coast." Conflict with Tipu Sultan's Mysore and shortfalls in the pepper trade in South India renewed hopes that the Company could rely upon supplies of Sumatran pepper. Despite disappointment about overall production levels, Bencoolen did export a significant amount of pepper through the 1790s. Between 1794–99, Bencoolen exported, on average, 652 tons annually to Great Britain and 300 tons annually to China.¹²² The settlement's utility in the context of wider global conflicts meant that Bencoolen's final unmaking as a British territory unfolded circuitously over the course of several more decades.

Dutch Bencoolen?, 1799–1825

Tipu Sultan's death and defeat at the battle of Seringapatam in 1799 relieved the stress on British access to the pepper of the Malabar coast. Speaking in Parliament in 1802, William Dundas, Henry Dundas's nephew and a member of the Board of Control for India Affairs, suggested as much. "The great advantage formerly arising from the Settlement of Bencoolen was the cultivation of pepper; but in consequence of our altered situation on the western side [of] the peninsula of India, we had very great facilities of procuring pepper, and consequently the Settlement of Bencoolen was no longer so beneficial," William Dundas argued.¹²³ Yet the elimination of the threat posed by Tipu Sultan did not diminish ongoing concerns about Anglo-French hostilities in Europe and beyond. Thus, William Dundas insisted that "although Bencoolen had ceased to be of much importance, yet it would not be prudent altogether to abandon it, because then it might be taken possession of by any other Power."¹²⁴

The Napoleonic Wars, which were also fought fiercely across the Indian Ocean and culminated in the British occupations of Mauritius as well as Dutch Java, therefore dramatically altered British geopolitical and economic calculations over Bencoolen. Even with the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, Bencoolen was not immediately handed over to the Dutch as Dundas had suggested in the 1780s. Unlike Charles Cornwallis and Henry Dundas, Stamford Raffles saw vast untapped potential in Bencoolen and Sumatra. Raffles's tenure as Lieutenant Governor of Bencoolen in 1818 began with a tour of Sumatra in a bid to highlight the interior's economic vitality.¹²⁵ "It is the governor's opinion," a newspaper reported, "that, with a little encouragement, far greater resources are to be found in Sumatra than the British have derived from Java; but much remains to be done." Raffles and his administration at Fort Marlborough argued that, despite being "one of the first establishments formed by the Company," Bencoolen had "partaken less than any other of the benefits and prosperity resulting from the enlightened principles of their Indian administration."¹²⁶ In essence, Raffles argued that Bencoolen had never received the necessary

¹²¹ Court of Directors, London to Fort Marlborough Council, Bencoolen, 28 December 1787, IOR/G/35/43, 129, BL.

¹²² Bastin, ed., *The British in West Sumatra*, xxvii.

¹²³ House of Commons Debates, 19 February 1802, Parliamentary Register, vol. 17, 47.

¹²⁴ House of Commons Debates, 19 February 1802.

¹²⁵ "Miscellany from the Liverpool Advertiser of January 18: The Island of Sumatra," *The Philadelphia Register and National Recorder*, 27 March 1819, 211.

¹²⁶ "Fort Marlborough to Court, 15 October 1821," in Bastin, ed., *The British in West Sumatra*, 185.

investment of capital and labor. Accordingly, he criticized the decision to place Sumatra under the supervision of the Bengal Presidency in 1785. “The fact is, the country has gone rapidly to ruin ever since it has been under the Bengal Government, and that from the most obvious causes of misgovernment and neglect,” he argued.¹²⁷ Given Raffles’s sense that it would be unlikely for the East India Company “to devote much capital to the cultivation of the soil” on account of its past economic losses in the region, he insisted upon the necessity of attracting the “capital and industry of European individuals.”¹²⁸ Unlike his predecessors in the mid-eighteenth century who had looked to enslaved African labor and relied on coerced pepper cultivation by locals, Raffles criticized forced labor and saw European settlers as a solution to the problem of a “country deficient in population.”¹²⁹

Raffles drew upon persistent anxieties about the necessity of importing staple foodstuffs into Bencoolen from other British territories by launching a program of grain production, with the ultimate aim of turning the settlement into an “exporting rather than an importing country.”¹³⁰ In addition to emphasizing grain, Raffles’s plans echoed the visions of several generations of British administrators in Sumatra before him. Not only did Raffles insist on extending “coffee, pepper, and other plantations” on the island, he also revived past proposals for transforming Sumatra into a major sugar producer.¹³¹ “I find that a sugar-work may be established here at less than one-sixth of the expense which much be incurred at Jamaica; that our soil is superior, our climate better, and, as we are neither troubled with hurricanes nor yellow fever, that our advantages are almost beyond comparison greater,” Raffles wrote in 1820. The contrast Raffles sought to draw between Jamaica and Sumatra was one derived from personal experience as he was born in Port Morant in Jamaica in 1781. He argued in favor of Bencoolen’s significance not only in terms of the cost of labor and environmental factors but also with an eye to markets. “Our advantages over the West Indies are not only in soil, climate, and labour, but also in constant markets,” Raffles stated, alluding to the access Sumatra enjoyed to “the India and China markets, besides an extensive local demand” while “the West Indies always look to the European market, and that alone.”¹³²

Furthermore, Raffles made the case for treating Sumatra altogether differently from the South Asian subcontinent, noting that “the Eastern Islands are so differently circumstanced to the continent of India, that the principles which is considered to apply against colonization in the latter, does not hold good in the former.” When Raffles wrote of “colonization” in Sumatra what he had in mind was a collaboration between British capitalist-settlers as well as Chinese laborer-settlers. “It is here by colonization, by European talents and Chinese labour alone, that the resources of the country can be brought forward,” Raffles noted. South Asia, he argued, was “for the most part cultivated to the highest pitch and occupied by an industrious race of inhabitants” and not in need of the kind of colonization he proposed for Sumatra.¹³³ Raffles even drew a comparison between the Cape Colony and Sumatra with the intention of demonstrating that the latter would be an ideal candidate for European settlement and colonization.

¹²⁷ Stamford Raffles to Mr. Murdoch, 22 July 1820, in *Memoir of the life and public services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles...particularly in the government of Java, 1811–1816, and of Bencoolen and its dependencies, 1817–1824: with details of the commerce and resources of the Eastern archipelago and selections from his correspondence*, vol. 2 (London, 1835), 139.

¹²⁸ “Fort Marlborough to Court, 15 October 1821,” in Bastin, ed., *The British in West Sumatra*, 186.

¹²⁹ “Fort Marlborough to Court, 15 October 1821,” 185.

¹³⁰ Stamford Raffles to Mr. Murdoch, 22 July 1820, in *Memoir of the life and public services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles*, vol. 2, 139.

¹³¹ Stamford Raffles to the Duke of Somerset, 20 August 1820, in *Memoir of the life and public services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles*, vol. 2, 147.

¹³² Stamford Raffles to the Duke of Somerset, 20 August 1820, in *Memoir of the life and public services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles*, vol. 2, 148.

¹³³ Stamford Raffles to the Duke of Somerset, 20 August 1820, in *Memoir of the life and public services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles*, vol. 2, 149.

John Crawford, another Company servant, similarly argued that European colonization and “the silent and unrestrained effects of the capital and enterprise of the European nations” were the best means of establishing a successful settlement.¹³⁴ According to Crawford, “the wretched establishment at Bencoolen” had been founded on “monopoly principles.”¹³⁵ In the absence of “principles of true wisdom and liberality,” Bencoolen had, Crawford lamented, become a place where “they were yearly sinking large sums of money, and which they threatened over and over again to abandon.”¹³⁶ While Raffles suggested that Sumatra as a whole would be a valuable settler colony, Crawford argued that the blame for Bencoolen’s “wretched” state lay in the monopolistic restrictions placed on a trade, settlement, and investment. Thus, both Raffles and Crawford recognized the shortcomings of Bencoolen as a British settlement while also proposing plans for its rejuvenation.

Back in Britain, the question of relinquishing Bencoolen to the Dutch was not a matter of consensus, meriting little discussion in Parliament.¹³⁷ In introducing the East India Possessions Bill in 1824, George Canning, the Foreign Secretary and a former President of the Board of Control for India Affairs, presented the handover as a straightforward choice growing out of territorial disputes left over from the conclusion of war in 1815. Echoing William Dundas, he argued that Bencoolen had only remained a British settlement “because it was not known into what hands it might fall” and that the “barren settlement” was “actually maintained at an annual charge of 85,000 l [pounds].”¹³⁸ Meanwhile, Canning emphasized the significance of the newly established British outpost at Singapore, describing it as “the unum necessarium for making the British Empire in India complete.” Contrary to Canning’s hope that his parliamentary colleagues would raise no objections, however, Alexander Robertson argued that “by giving up Bencoolen we should greatly injure our China trade, which at present produced a revenue of three millions annually.”¹³⁹ Another parliamentary colleague, Charles Forbes, shared his fears that an ongoing Dutch expedition to Borneo indicated the dangers of making any concessions to a rival imperial power. Even as Britain prepared to hand over Bencoolen to the Dutch, dissenting voices articulated the importance of maintaining multiple British settlements in the region rather than relying entirely on Singapore.

Conclusion

In stark contrast with its peripherality in much of the historiography, Bencoolen is ubiquitous in the records of the English East India Company as well as in the documents generated by the Board of Control for India Affairs after its formation in 1784. British officials in Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay regularly alluded to developments afoot in Bencoolen as they managed trade, military operations, and everyday administration. Bencoolen’s linkages with major Indian Ocean ports, British territories in the Atlantic world, and the imperial capital of London reveal the truly global dimensions of British imperialism. Slave labor from Madagascar as well as from West Africa via St Helena was mobilized in pursuit of sugar as well as pepper production. Soldiers and laborers from South Asia and Sumatra’s immediate hinterland were deployed alongside such enslaved laborers. In addition, “settlers” drawn from the German-speaking lands as well as from the Chinese diaspora across the

¹³⁴ John Crawford, *History of the Indian Archipelago*, vol. III (Cambridge, 2014), 263. For more on Crawford’s views on settlement in the Indian Ocean World, see Onur Ulas Ince, “Deprovincializing Racial Capitalism: John Crawford and Settler Colonialism in India,” *American Political Science Review* 116, no. 1 (2022): 144–60.

¹³⁵ Crawford, *History of the Indian Archipelago*, 242.

¹³⁶ Crawford, *History of the Indian Archipelago*, 241.

¹³⁷ For an account of Anglo-Dutch negotiations over Singapore, see Peter Borschberg, “Dutch Objections to British Singapore, 1819–1824: Laws, Politics, Commerce and a Diplomatic Misstep,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 50, no. 4 (2020): 540–61.

¹³⁸ House of Commons Papers, 17 June 1824, Hansard Sessional Papers, Second Series, vol. 11, col. 1433.

¹³⁹ House of Commons Papers, 17 June 1824.

Indian Ocean were sought to advance the project of remaking the outpost's fortunes. Thus, Bencoolen connected British administrative and commercial networks in the Bay of Bengal with trading diasporas in the South China Sea. It served as an essential staging post for trade between Calcutta and Canton. During the Seven Years War, Bencoolen emerged as a battleground and space of occupation. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Bencoolen increasingly featured as a bargaining chip amid British and Dutch negotiations over territorial realignments in the region.

Even though it is clear that Bencoolen never produced as much pepper as advocates hoped nor became an indispensable commercial hub, the possibilities of agrarian and economic transformation nevertheless made Bencoolen a subject of constant interest. Bencoolen stood at the confluence of several economic visions and models of imperial governance. Over the course of more than a century, the exigencies of daily governance in Bencoolen brought to the fore fraught debates about intra-imperial relations, the value of a plantation economy, administrative independence, and the politics of labor management. Paying attention to Bencoolen's evolving position in the British Indian Ocean reveals shifting imperial ambitions in Sumatra. Advocates of a British presence in Bencoolen envisioned the settlement both as a commercial conduit and center of agrarian production. The decision to elevate the settlement to the position of a Presidency in 1760 grew out of the hope that autonomous governance in combination with heightened investment would render the settlement far more profitable than it had ever been. Bencoolen's unmaking as a Presidency in 1785, meanwhile, reflected the ideological realignments underway in Britain with the rise of a ministry controlled by William Pitt the Younger and Henry Dundas.

The effort to transform Sumatra into a productive constituent of a larger imperial nexus depended on many of the same processes that were to shape modern capitalism. Not only did British officials in Bencoolen deploy coerced and enslaved labor, they did so with the intent of wresting control of the production, consumption, and circulation of valuable commodities such as pepper and sugar. Practices of slavery, transplantation, and agrarian change typically associated with British colonies in the Atlantic world fundamentally shaped Bencoolen. Consequently, the distinctions conventionally drawn between British imperialism in the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean worlds, or the "First British Empire" and the "Second British Empire," cannot explain Bencoolen's evolution. Contrary to the belief that the informal commercial imperialism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was followed by formal and interventionist imperial governance in Asia from the late eighteenth century onwards, Bencoolen's example highlights instead a long history of transformative experimentation since the outpost's establishment in the late seventeenth century.

No less importantly, Bencoolen's history sheds light on the workings of British imperium elsewhere. The pursuit of empire in Bencoolen was, after all, profoundly imbricated with British imperial projects across South Asia. The growing centrality of South Asia, and more specifically Calcutta and the Bengal Presidency, in British administrative and commercial structures by the close of the eighteenth century has produced a historiographical overemphasis on British imperialism within the subcontinent. The focus on the territorialization of the British presence in South Asia through acts of military conquest has sidelined the maritime connections that sustained British imperialism within South Asia.¹⁴⁰ Yet, as this article shows, pepper cultivation as well as experiments with sugar cultivation in Bencoolen were designed to fulfil pan-imperial objectives. Such projects grew out of regular communication and exchange between Bengal and Bencoolen as well as other subcontinental hubs. Officials in Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras regularly relied upon the Bencoolen administration to compensate for shortfalls in the commodities required for the China

¹⁴⁰ Numerous scholars have described British imperial expansion in eighteenth-century South Asia as a process of territorialization. See P. J. Marshall, *Bengal: The British Bridgehead: Eastern India 1740-1828* (Cambridge, 1987); James Vaughn, *The Politics of Empire at the Accession of George III: The East India Company and the Crisis and Transformation of Britain's Imperial State* (New Haven, 2019).

trade. In turn, officials at Bencoolen called upon their colleagues across South Asia for the provision of not only ready money but also dietary staples and laborers, especially African slaves. The makings of a British Empire in the Indian Ocean proceeded from routine, if contested, interdependence among multiple constituent settlements.

Bencoolen, therefore, was not a minor outpost of empire destined to fail. It was deeply implicated in the emergence of an administrative state operating across vast distances. Equally, it was central to ideological and practical debates about what constituted the very foundations of British imperial and economic hegemony.

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