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The Big Loaf and the First Opium War: Free Trade and Domestic Politics in the British Empire, 1813-1846

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Short Title: The Big Loaf and the First Opium War

Abstract: This paper argues that the Free Trade lobby's attempts to make its primary concern into a lunch pail issue for the masses played a crucial role in providing the political cover for military adventures despite the pacifist inclinations of the leadership of the Anti-Corn-Law-League. This casts new light on the decision to use force against the Qing Empire during what would come to be the First Opium War.

Keywords: Corn Laws, anti-Corn Law, Free Trade Whigs, working class, Britain, Qing-British relations, First Opium War, East India Company, trade

The Anti-Corn-Law League (ACLL), formed in 1839, and its forerunners in Britain's free trade movement during the first half of the nineteenth century cast unfettered commerce in religious, visionary terms. Using tactics partly pioneered by the Manchester merchant association, including the mass production of pamphlets aimed at an indifferent working audience, petition drives, and the creation of subscription-based societies, the ACLL and its ideological allies made free trade issues a prominent point of debate in British politics. Their efforts served to create a voting bloc in a newly reformed Parliament to turn their ideas into

policy, the culmination of their efforts being the abolition of British agricultural protections, the Corn Laws, in 1846. Though they failed to create direct alliances with movements of the early British working class, those aligned with the free trade lobby nevertheless declared themselves the Parliamentary champions of Britain's working poor. This shift toward liberal policies expressed itself in the votes of new converts, particularly Free Trade Whigs. Free Trade, though advanced as a pacifist cause by its single-issue supporters, became in the British parliament part of the justification for the protection of British traders in Parliamentary debates regarding the use of force in cases of merchants abroad who had encountered difficulties with the governments in their areas of operation. Those, such as Thomas Babington Macaulay, who believed British subjects should be inviolate to non-British justice systems anywhere in the world, had found a cause in Free Trade to legitimize the activities of British traders, even when they operated against the trade restrictions of foreign powers. Therefore, the free-trade lobby made the political success of the interventionist policies that have come to be known as "gunboat diplomacy" more likely. This mechanism provided the votes to support the Viscount Palmerston's decision to send forces to "humble" the Qing Empire during the First Opium War. Not only had Free Trade made this alignment of interests possible, but it had been an earlier success of the movement, the abolition of the East India Company's monopoly on trade with China, that had undermined the foundation of Qing-British relations and created the "need" to use force in the first place. The Free Trade movement, by undermining the only power that had effectively regulated British trade with the Qing Empire, had first created its own diplomatic problem and then justified the military force sent to resolve it.

Though the abolition of the Corn Laws marked the ultimate victory of the Free Trade lobby, it is natural that it is after the adoption of liberal, interventionist foreign policy: other

countries' protectionist systems had no members of parliament defending their interests. In this way, Britain's own domestic protectionist interests would be among be the last to be defeated. The First Opium War, then, needs to be contextualized within the widespread reform movement shaking the foundations of the British political and social order at the time. There was a common cause of Free Trade interest behind the motivations that led to the adoption of Catholic reform in 1829, the Government of India Act 1833, the Poor Law Amendment of 1834, the abolition of slavery within the Empire in 1838, the Opium War of 1839-42, the establishment of the Anti-Corn Law League in 1839, and those laws' eventual repeal in 1846, all of which were happening at the time that the radical suffragist movements for the People's Charter were gaining strength. This period, if understood as a time when the interests of Britain's traders and merchants won over the interests of its landowners and beneficiaries of royal privilege, was one in which institutions targeted for their corruption and connections to the old system would suffer and new systems (such as unfettered access to Chinese ports for private traders) that enjoyed greater ideological support were put into place regardless of the consequences.

The first major political success of Free Trade, close on the heels of the 1832 electoral reform, was the abolition of the East India Company's monopolies thirteen years before the movement's final victory over the Corn Laws. Successful signature drives by manufacturing concerns, particularly the Manchester association of merchants, deluged Parliament with wave after wave of petitions, one bearing over 60,000 names in 1833. Though the Board of Directors of the East India Company still represented a powerful interest, already two members of the Board were selected by Parliament as a hedge against peculation-via-bailout and famine-inducing malfeasance. Further, a chartered monopoly that needed regular rescues from the public purse stood as a stark example of an "Old Corruption" decried by William Cobbett and hated by

supporters of free commerce. The voices that had previously been ignored by bought Members from pocket boroughs found ready ears in those whose seats were gained with the aid of younger, manufacturing money. Turfed out or racing to find new allies were defenders of the East India company's privileges, ending the East India charter for the China trade.

The volume of the Free Trade lobby in a Parliament suffused with new blood meant that East India Company's monopoly was an easy offering to sacrifice, as it was by a wide division in 1833. As Macaulay said, "No Minister, Whig or Tory, could have been found to propose a renewal of the monopoly."[1] The Secretary to the Board of Directors, Peter Auber, hastily compiled texts outlining the Company's painfully gained local knowledge via a series of connected memoranda, attempting to defend the many-decade successes of the East India Company which he believed were being forgotten. According to Auber, it was critical to remember the

> perils, difficulties, and cost which have attended the origin, progress, and establishment of the East India Company's trade with China. It was their care and influence that fostered the benefit and security of the tea trade. …It was likewise their care and influence that enabled the Company's agents to temporize, without sacrifice of character, to extend a protecting influence over the company trade, and to present, when necessary, a counterpoise to the combinations of the Hong merchants.[2]

Auber presented an East India Company monopoly that played a far different role than that envisioned by the Free Traders and sought to argue against them. He certainly was aware who had been responsible for the end of the company's trading rights:

> In contemplating the future, it is impossible not to be struck most forcibly at the entire change about to take place, in the total abandonment of the system under which our intercourse with China has been so successfully carried on. …The progress of the principles of free trade, sound in themselves if met by a

[1] Macaulay, Thomas Babington, "Government of India", in *The Miscellaneous Writings and Speeches of Lord Macaulay, Vol. 4 (of 4)*, http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/2170

[2] Auber, Peter *China: An Outline of its Government, Laws, and Policy, and of the British and Foreign Embassies To, and Intercourse With, That Empire*

> reciprocity on the part of other countries, had indeed gradually prepared the way for the abolition of the Company's exclusive privileges.

Auber would be proven correct about consequences for Anglo-Sino relations: there would be war in less than a decade. Between the abolition of the East India Company's monopoly and the appointment of Commissioner Lin Zexu in 1838, the volume of opium exported to the Qing Empire by private shipping concerns multiplied tenfold. The opium trade under the East India Company's direction had balanced the trade between Britain and China, but now led to an exponentially accelerating flow of silver, not to the British public purse, but into the private fortunes of the opium traders, a legacy that leaves, for example, Jardine, Matheson, & Co. as a member of the Fortune Global 500, at 266 in 2013.[3] The Company's mission in the Qing Empire had been to create profits for its shareholders and, it seems, to ensure "intercourse with China" continued "to be successfully carried on." Indeed, Auber's presentation of the recent dealings of the East India Company (EIC) shows several incidents in which the local Select Committee on-site in Guangzhou had withdrawn its members to Macao or otherwise interrupted the opium trade in times of political difficulty in order to allow tensions to subside. Though the system involved smuggling, it was one that worked, that is, at least, it had kept trade open for ninety years.

Auber's treatise, pulled together from his company documents, shows that the East India Company's supercargoes had managed to wring considerable concessions from their counterparts, in both the Guangzhou local government and among the Chinese chartered merchants, the Cohong. Crucially, they had become exempt from having to give a declaration that their ships had no opium on board,[4] which simplified smuggling operations, since EIC ships could stop at Guangzhou with opium on board and claim their cargo was for another destination.

[3] *Fortune Global 500*, http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/global500/?iid=G500_lp_header
[4] Auber, 124.

This claim of a different port of call was technically true, since the plan was usually to meet up with a Chinese smuggler a few miles up the coast or to be offloaded at night on nearby Whampoa Island.

Auber also illustrated a number of specific incidents, in addition to adjusting policy, that East India Company representatives managed to successfully defuse. An example representative of the quieting effect of their influence occurred in 1741, when Commodore (later Admiral of the Fleet) George Anson arrived aboard HMS *Centurion* and threatened to force the waterway and land his ship in Canton. This was against Qing policy, which prohibited foreign warships from navigating her inland waterways. The supercargoes convinced Anson not to demand an audience with the viceroy, as Auber styled the Qing provincial governor, and instead plied the British officer with free supplies and repairs for his ship, and averted what would have become a sticky situation for British trade should Anson have fired upon the Qing patrol vessels. Not satisfied with having just caused one headache for the China traders, Anson returned weeks later with a Spanish ship laden with valuables captured in tow. The supercargoes managed to convince the Qing magistrate not to levy the usual duty on the value of the prize cargo, as it was destined to be sailed back to British territory.[5]

In this and other crises, often caused by the "most turbulent and disorderly" conduct of British sailors while in port, the supercargoes were granted greater and greater power over British ships sailing under the permission of the East India Company.[6] The supercargoes were expected to smooth over all relations without any ideological handicaps, which proved to be a very different situation from the escalation of tensions that surrounded the private free traders and their commitment to their "rights" after 1834. With the abolition of the East India

[5] Auber, 166.
[6] Auber, 191.

Company's monopoly and its ability to regulate these interactions, the replacement Superintendents of Trade, put in place to take a similar role, enjoyed much less power over the free-traders than the EIC supercargoes had, as evidenced by Captain Elliot's resort to guaranteeing the value of opium that Lin Zexu would destroy in 1839.[7] Further, according to Auber, the successes of British arms in India and a growing awareness of Britain's imperial power on the part of the Chinese authorities contributed to these difficulties in the first place. "The feelings of distrust and apprehension manifested towards British subjects was, in some degree, traced to the impression occasioned by the extensions of our arms and possessions in India."[8]

The semipublic, professionalized nature of East India Company traders and ship supercargoes allowed for these diplomatic externalities to be properly accounted for. The explosion in private trade following the end of the Company's privilege, however, proved too much for the Qing Empire to tolerate – whether morally or fiscally, depending on whether Qing assertions of moral objection or British suspicions about balance-of-payments were the motivation for the appointment of a special commissioner with extensive powers to combat the opium trade.

While this was happening, East India Company's operations in India, its mismanagement of the government of Bengal, the Clive and Hastings trials of the 1770s, and the Government of India Act 1783 had damaged the East India Company's public reputation. Further, Free Trade ideas were spreading throughout Britain. The potion of Free Trade was also hawked to the Chartists as a lifeline to poor workers experiencing vast disruption in their lives and a back door

[7] Peter Ward Fay, *The Opium War*, (Charlotte, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 151.
[8] Auber, 192.

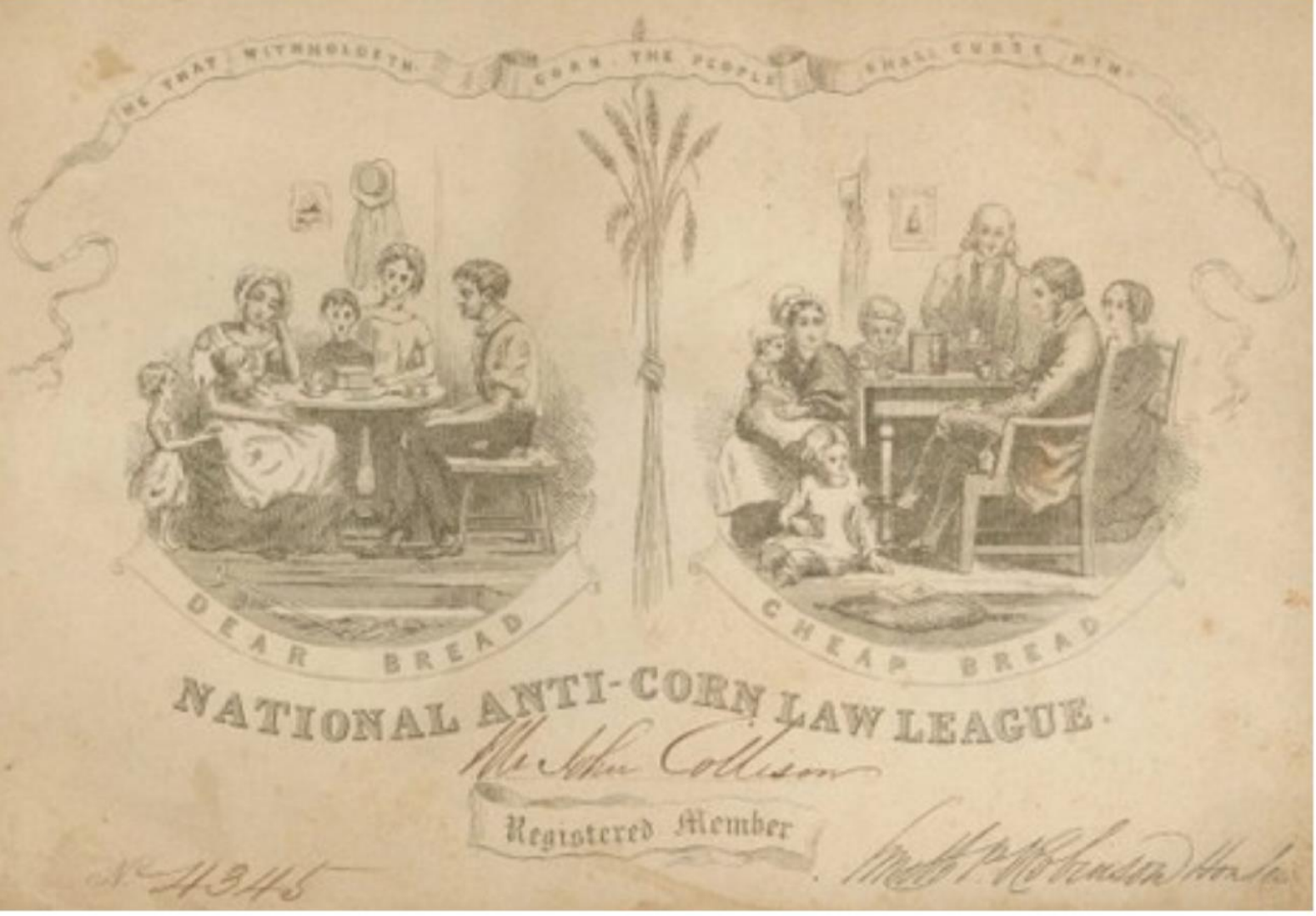
for disenfranchised people to enter civil society.[9] Beyond limited taxation, Free Trade was seen also as the route to which an individual could freely enjoy the fruits of his or her labor, leading to a fundamental path to self-improvement, not just a bigger loaf. In the absence of an alternative economic ideology after the abandonment of mercantilism and with an electorate unwilling to stomach an overtly wealth-snatching empire, the theories of Smith and Ricardo and their popularization by the free trade lobby about the salutary effects of free trade and comparative advantage provided a comforting moral justification for attacks on monopoly aristocracies both at home and abroad. This was the basic appeal to poorer Britons, whose weight of signatures[10] allowed Corn Law repeal petitions in Parliament to outweigh the entire British electorate.

The advocates of free trade had done significant heavy political lifting in their attempt to appeal to members of the Chartist movement. William Cobbett's writings included a denunciation of the Corn Laws as one of the "Old Corruptions,"[11] one of the many tools that the landed rich used to impoverish the poor. General Sir Charles Napier, in charge of British forces in the north during Chartist riots, remarked that the "corn law question would ere long form a rallying point" for otherwise politically diverse groups by 1841. While it was never able to form political alliance with the leadership of the Chartist movement, the mobilization of working people at the time of the height of the League's interest allowed the free trade lobby to *claim* aggressively the mantle of poor advocacy in Parliament. The pervasiveness of the League's efforts in convincing people that the Corn Laws were the source of hunger led to the mention of the corn tax not once, but twice, in the charter's original petition to Parliament in 1838: "We are bowed down under a load of taxes; which, notwithstanding, fall greatly short of the wants of our

[9] Frank Trentman, *Free Trade Nation,* 12.
[10] With coercion - employers could demand signatures to a petition from their workers via threat of blacklist.
[11] Paul Pickering and Alex Tyrrell, Alex, *The People's Bread: A History of the Anti-Corn Law League.* (Trowbridge, Wiltshire: The Cromwell Press, 2001), 129.

rulers; our traders are trembling on the verge of bankruptcy; our workmen are starving,"[12] and, "We tell your Honourable House that the capital of the master must no longer be deprived of its due reward; that the laws which make food dear, and those which, by making money scarce, make labour cheap, must be abolished."[13]

[12] Place MSS., 27,820, f. 374, June 1838, in *British Working Class Movements: Select Documents 1789-1875*.
[13] Ibid.



WORKING MEN!

You Pay a Tax of Tenpence

Upon every Stone of Flour you and your wives and little ones consume.

If there was not the Infamous CORN LAW you and your Families might buy THREE LOAVES for the same money that you now pay for Two.

Upon every Shilling you spend for Bread, Meat, Bacon, Eggs, Vegetables, &c., you pay 4d. Tax for Monopoly.

DOWN, DOWN

WITH THE

Infamous Bread Tax!

The success of the League's advertising campaign can be seen in the effects on its capacity to sustain enormous petition drives, as was the strategy of the free trade reformers, which wrung signatures from the ink of the workers on a scale unseen by earlier political movements: individual city petitions could easily number well above ten thousands. Given the prevalence of anti-protectionist sympathies among the reformers in the League and the frequency in which anti-Corn-Law sermons were preached by interested, often nonconformist ministers, the enrollment of signatures may just as well be a matter of course or rote as a matter of actual success. However, the League's gluts of poor-feeding advertisements combined with the scale of its petitioning to Parliament meant that it successfully converted its interest in Parliamentary discourse to shape the debate about the Corn Laws to one in which Parliamentary defenders of the policy were forced into a rhetorically difficult position of claiming (as even Malthus agreed, to the chagrin of Leaguers) that the Corn Laws aided the poor in the long run by preventing interruptions due to political factors.

Though protectionism through several means was still very much alive and well in the British Empire,[14] the banner of Free Trade could bring respectability to foreign military adventures, while monopoly was something increasingly seen as pernicious, foreign, and unpleasant. A foreign government, according to the liberal interventionists, that blocked rightful Free Trade became not just a society exercising its own sovereignty, but, implicitly, was attempting unjustly to juice the fruits of British labor. In essence, the regulations imposed by the Qing Empire on trade stole from British laborers and enslaved their own populations. For an empire whose traders increasingly were seeing themselves as the main force of morality, the

[14] Chang, Ha-Joon, *Kicking Away the Ladder: Development Strategy in Historical Perspective*, (Anthem, 2002), 17.

balancing effect of abutted, chartered monopolies had served a necessary purpose. It would stave off conflict no longer.

The resulting debates in Parliament in support of the Opium War in 1840 and over whether to ban opium trade immediately after the war in 1843 were, essentially, as much a part of the Free Trade debate as the concurrent debates over repeal of the Corn Laws.

Sir George Staunton, veteran of two failed diplomatic missions to China, first as page to Macartney in 1793 and then as translator to Amherst in 1816, speaking in favor of the guarantees and British involvement in the conflict as a means to reintroduce trade, explained the risk to the Empire itself of a weak stance regarding China while also shying away from a necessarily strong stance would bring a collapse and open a vacuum for less scrupulous European rivals:

> Let the House recollect that our empire in the East was founded on the force of opinion; and if we submitted to the degrading insults of China,—the time would not be far distant when our political ascendancy in India would be at an end. The course which he hoped and believed her Majesty's Government were about to pursue was to make rational proposals to China—such proposals as the Chinese would accept without any improper submission. But, considering the character of that people, such proposals, to be successful, must be accompanied by a competent force.[15]

Diplomacy, then, was to be "accompanied by a competent force" of warships. Imperial honor, free trade, and the threat of violence are here clearly interdependent in Staunton's call for a firm stand. Just seven years from the abolition of the Company monopoly in the China trade, sentiment in favor of free trade had clearly evolved: what had been a debate about how England would manage its own affairs, ten years later was a cause to go to war. China's commitment to block righteous Free Trade was cast by Sir James Hogg as "jealousy."

> It was clearly shown that the Chinese jealousy excluded strangers from the interior, that they admitted no diplomatic relations with foreign states, that they admitted no resident political public officer, that foreign ships were admitted into no ports but Canton, that at Canton foreigners were admitted not to trade with

[15] Hansard, HC Deb 7 April 1840.

> merchants generally, but only with a select few, constituting a monopoly called the Hong, and that the Chinese required strangers, when communicating with them, to adopt the form of a petition or humble request.[16]

To Hogg, it was deeply inappropriate to require British traders to make "petitions" or "humble requests" to such "jealous" officials. It is a clear evil, Hogg protested, for a foreign country to restrict trade according to its own guidelines.

Sir John Hobhouse followed suit, bluntly absolving his countrymen of any responsibility for enforcing or creating any laws limiting British attempts to smuggle opium from India to China, instead casting such an idea as ludicrous:

> What more could be said? Were they to punish those persons for smuggling in a foreign country? It would be the first time that such a power was claimed by any country. Ought we to punish those who attempted smuggling into France or Spain? It would be quite as monstrous to punish those who smuggled into China. Certainly there was no instance in legislation of one country making a law with respect to the fiscal government of another. This was the whole gist of the case. He begged leave to ask the House if they meant to say that a law should be made rendering it penal for a subject of England to try to smuggle opium, or anything else, into any part of the empire of China. That was what they were called on to do—to make a law in aid of the fiscal regulations of the empire of China.

In Hobhouse's extraterritorialist view, Qing officials were not justified in enforcing their laws on British subjects, but also it would be ridiculous for the British government to lift a finger to aid in enforcement of Qing law. Opium was the article that Free Trade had determined that the Chinese people wanted, and the interference of jealous officials was not only mystifying, it was backward and frustrating. Moreover, Hobhouse as free-trader assumed that the interest of the Qing government must be focused on fiscal matters, revealing the moral exhortations of Lin Zexu against the drug as a mere fig leaf to once again reverse the balance of trade.

Further, according to once and future Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel the British had a responsibility to their subject peoples in India to allow them the fruits of Free Trade. It was of no

[16] Ibid.

consequence that Company rule enforced quotas on the production of opium, which they would then sell to the private opium traders. A ban on opium or an attempt to limit its production in India would be unfair to the Indian subjects and would violate British principles of Free Trade!

> Opium was an article of agricultural produce. He [I] considered it very questionable whether the House had a right to limit its growth, in order to introduce into China with much greater advantage the produce of British manufactures.[17]

Peel here illustrates the depth of his commitment to this ideal of Free Trade, to the extent that British industrial products should not be given a leg up over Indian opium in the search of the China market. This ignores of course, the fact that British manufactures had been of very limited popularity in the stead of opium. Later, Peel would sacrifice his own political career to bring an end to the Corn Laws.

Essentially bringing the 1840 debate to a close, before the vote, Palmerston underscored how critical it was to the health of the Empire that British traders be allowed to operate as they wish without Chinese official interference.

> It was impossible, it was indeed preposterous to suppose, that if the same indignities which had been heaped upon British subjects in China, from the time of Lord Napier's expedition down to the present period, were to be persevered in, unresisted and unredressed, it would be impossible to suppose that, under such circumstances, any British merchant could, with any regard to his safety or his self-respect, continue his commercial operations in these parts.[18]

In this speech, it is not even a possibility worth considering that the British subjects *not* "continue their commercial operations in these parts," or even come to the same arrangement of interruptions in trade that the East India Company had staged. The free-traders won their case. A slim majority recognized that the friction between Qing law and the drug traders had heated to an explosion point, resulting in the need to use military force to continue those trading operations.

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[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.

The division in the House to go to full scale war in defense of the opium traders was carried by nine votes over misgivings that Palmerston and the Government had essentially created the situation by being unclear about how Elliott should behave in the face of Chinese resistance as well as the moral protests of a vocal minority. Though many had claimed in their speeches that they were uncomfortable with the reasons behind the trade dispute, the fact of the trade dispute itself was seen by the majority as a sufficient *causus belli*.

The Treaty of Nanjing opened up Chinese ports to British trade, provided an indemnity, part of which indeed compensated Jardine and his colleagues for their lost opium, ceded Hong Kong to the British government, and restored trade to China. Though it brought to a political end what quickly became known as the Opium War, the treaty made no mention of legalizing the trade, and opium prohibition continued. However, following the treaty, a debate on whether to end *now* the trade in opium brought up the same issues, as Bingham Baring revealed.

> It was true, that our imports from China were purchased with opium instead of manufactures, but how was that opium purchased. The noble Lord would find, that our exports to India had increased with the exportation of opium from India. But even if this were not so, what right should we have to drive the Hindoo from competing with us in fair commercial rivalry in the ports of China; and in how far would it be consistent with the honour and duties of a Christian kingdom, to put down this competition, this fair and equal competition of trade by the exertion of our supremacy over a subject race.[19]

Not only did Baring show that it was at least a myth that a commitment to free trade for subject peoples did exist, Baring also revealed the extent to which Free Trade economic philosophy had entered Parliamentary language. Indian subjects of the Empire are considered in "fair commercial rivalry," despite having their lives readjusted to Company plantations and the demands of the cash-crop opium market. Baring also suggests an implicit Christianity of economic liberty and Free Trade, even if the result is less beneficial to the British Empire.

[19] HC Deb 4 April 1843.

Sir George Staunton, in the same debate, revealed how the morality of the particular article of trade is not at issue: the trade itself carries the morality. Instead of banning opium trade, Staunton's speech was part of what eventually convinced the government to disburse compensation for lost opium *and* repayment to British traders for Cohong debt.

> However pernicious and impolitic the traffic in opium may be, and whatever opinion this House may pronounce to-night against its further continuance, we ought to recollect that these persons engaged in this traffic under the full sanction, and indeed encouragement, both of the Indian and the home Government; that they were deprived of their property by an act of violent and unjustifiable outrage on the part of the Chinese authorities; and that they received, at the same time, from her Majesty's Superintendent of Trade, on behalf of the Government, a distinct and specific pledge of reimbursement. I think, therefore, whatever may be the fate of the present motion, these individuals are clearly entitled to full, fair, and entire indemnification for their losses.[20]

To the British government and participants in the opium trade, then, the Opium War genuinely was a war for freedom, but a particular type. A freedom that was considered to be a vast public good in Britain, the freedom to trade safely and without government interference, became a freedom that the British Empire would escort to foreign shores for the benefits of Britons and "their" subjects. The fusion of inviolability abroad with free trade led to a period in which the expansion of the empire was conducted informally, through the diplomatic apparatus, and the era of gunboat diplomacy began.

By raising the profile of liberal ideas on the national stage via their attempts to form a connection to poor people and bombardment of Parliament with petitions, the Free Trade movement culminating in the Anti-Corn-Law League made the Opium War coalition possible, a political victory for the values of opportunity. Though the League as a whole was ardently pacifist, as Auber wrote in his melancholy introduction, "we may trace the most important results, both as regards to nations and individuals, to causes which at the moment were little

[20] Ibid.

contemplated by their authors."[21] Members of the Free Trade movement had set the stage for the Opium War itself by dismantling the existing arrangements that had previously allowed for eighty years of compromise and instilled in the speech of the political coalition that would handle the effects of private trade a discourse around the principles of freedom and the transformational power of the market that justified the use of force against foreign governments that were unhappy with the activities of British traders. By 1839, there was indeed a "mutual incomprehension that pushed both sides towards war,"[22] but that was because the system of comprehension that had worked for well over a century had been unilaterally abandoned by the British. Ideological Free Trade, in conclusion, made it possible to dismiss the moral arguments of the Qing Empire and claim a greater moral footing for interventionism.

[21] Auber, 4

[22] Lovell, Julia. 2011. *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams, and the Making of China.* London, UK: Picador

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