

***Alexander's Expedition: Genre and Conquest in Thomas Beddoes's Revolutionary Epic***

**Michael Bradshaw**

Thomas Beddoes is known for his career as a celebrated medic and chemist, and radical educationalist, epitomised by works such as *Hygëia* (1806), his employment and mentoring of Humphry Davy, and the foundation of the Pneumatic Institution, frequented by Coleridge and Southey. This article proposes a re-evaluation of Beddoes' achievement in poetry, a field in which he has often been eclipsed by other scientist-writers, including his own son Thomas Lovell Beddoes, and, more recently, his protégé Davy as well. Interpretation of how the scientific, political, and literary aspects of Dr Beddoes' career were connected has been affected by political and personal interests; a significant historical factor was the contested role of John Edmonds Stock, the official biographer engaged by the Beddoes family. Coleridge wrote: "I feel permitted to avow the pain, yea the sense of shame with which I contemplate Dr Stock as a performer. I could not help assenting to Southey's remark, that the proper vignette for the work would be a funeral lamp besides an urn and Dr Stock in the act of placing an extinguisher on it."<sup>1</sup> In fact the allegedly dull Stock may have been chosen for partisan reasons, as Neil Vickers has explained. Stock had been implicated in an armed plot to kidnap the Lord Chief Justice of Scotland, after which the ringleader Robert Watt was executed in 1794; Stock fled to America, where he took a degree in Philadelphia, returning to England during the Peace of Amiens (1802) and receiving a pardon. It is likely that Stock was entrusted to write an authorised life by Beddoes' widow Anna Maria specifically because he would be likely to cleanse the life of political radicalism and concentrate on the science; this seems to have contributed to the relative neglect also of Beddoes's literary contribution to British Romanticism, notwithstanding his

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<sup>1</sup> *Coleridge Letters* III, 171.

connectedness to radical networks in Bristol, and the frequent affectionate tributes from Coleridge and others.<sup>2</sup> Beddoes' father-in-law Richard Lovell Edgeworth described him thus:

a little fat Democrat of considerable abilities, of great name in the Scientific world as a naturalist and Chemist – good-humour'd good natured – a man of honor and Virtue, enthusiastic & sanguine .... His manners are not polite – but he is sincere & candid ... if he will put off his political projects till he has accomplish'd his medical establishment he will succeed and make a fortune – But if he bloweth the trumpet of Sedition the Aristocracy will rather go to hell with Satan than with any democratic Devil'.<sup>3</sup>

In this article I will attempt to re-open a discussion about how Beddoes "bloweth the trumpet of sedition" through the media of poetic genre and textual form. Beddoes' impact on Romantic-era thought extended far beyond his research on chemistry, and the medicinal properties of "factitious airs." His neglected attempt at epic poetry, it will be seen, brings literary confidence and learning to the articulation of radical political sentiments.

Beddoes published his miniature epic poem *Alexander's Expedition down the Hydaspes and the Indus to the Indian Ocean* in 1792, six years before the opening of the Pneumatic Institution in Bristol, and during the period of intensive fund-raising which made this scientific and medical enterprise possible. Beddoes's more recent biographer Dorothy Stansfield explains how the publication of the poem emerged from a liberal intellectual network in the English Midlands. Although the book was advertised as being sold by J. Murray, "this was simply a 'blind:'"<sup>4</sup> the

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<sup>2</sup> See Vickers 37-8.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *Poetry Realized* 11.

<sup>4</sup> Stansfield 65.

volume had been prepared by a J. Edmunds of Shropshire with typeset, woodcut illustrations, and printing all done locally, and paid for by William Reynolds. In 1819, William Anstice, Reynolds's executor, donated a copy of the book to William Parr, deeming him a suitable recipient because of his extensive library, his Lunar Society connections, and his involvement with Whig politics (65). The covering letter that accompanied this gift provides an anecdote about the apparently experimental nature of Beddoes's composition:

[*Alexander's Expedition*] owes its origin to a conversation which took place at the table of the late Mr Wm. Reynolds [...] in which some men of taste and genius contended that the poetic effusions of Erasmus Darwin were inimitable. Dr Beddoes maintained a contrary opinion, and to try the point produced a short time afterwards the manuscript of the present piece as from his friend Darwin, and sent to him for his inspection prior to publication. The advocates for Darwin's style were deceived, and the Doctor triumphed. Reynolds had it printed at his own expense, but for obvious reasons it was not published... (65-6)<sup>5</sup>

Stansfield argues that the "obvious reasons" for preferring a private printing to open publication included not only Beddoes' defensiveness about the poem's aesthetic merit and the potential to cause embarrassment to Darwin, but also the overtness of the poem's political allegory and anxieties about hostile reception (66). Beyond the anecdote of rivalry and imitation, Darwin's poetry provided Beddoes with a formal model rich in possibilities. *The Loves of the Plants*, part II

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<sup>5</sup> A full discussion of the affinities and misattributions between Beddoes's and Darwin's "natural" styles can be found in Michelle Faubert, "Erasmus Darwin, Thomas Beddoes, and 'The Golden Age' of the 1790s", *European Romantic Review*, 22. (2011), 453-76.

of *The Botanic Garden*, had been published in 1791. Its organic theme and mission to foster sympathy with the world of plants is expressed in a versatile relationship between poetic text and discursive prose notes: the reader's aesthetic and emotional attention is engaged in the poetic encounters with specific plants and their life cycles, while the prose notes feed the reader's appetite for further scientific understanding and Linnaean classification. The oscillation of attention between these two modes of writing is adapted to a historical theme in *Alexander's Expedition*, in which Beddoes' prose essays both amplify and digress from the heroic narrative; the two modes complement each other, and yet are in mutual tension. Beddoes had another possible model in a poem entitled *The Devoted Legions* (1776) by Thomas Day, also a Lunar Society member. Day's poem uses a classical tale of the Roman tyrant Crassus as the vehicle for his protest against the war to retain British colonies in North America. *Alexander's Expedition* is the product of wide reading in ancient history, on Indian religion and culture, and on the fundamental affinities between the nations and races of humanity; it also shows a strategic use of lightly distancing allegory to explore modern geopolitics from a partisan perspective. It is thus highly unlikely that the poem was thrown together spontaneously to win a bet in clubbable rivalry. And yet Anstice's anecdote aptly catches an experimental quality in Beddoes' poem, and even a certain ephemerality, its rapid response to a specific historical moment, for which its author gathers together material from diverse sources in order to make a relevant statement.

*Alexander's Expedition* is a significant intervention in the cultural politics of its time, in which the central theme of colonial conquest is explored through the loose control of a digressive narrative in generally well-maintained heroic couplets, together with extensive scholarly apparatus. Trevor Levere cites the reaction to *Alexander's Expedition* – “a printed but unpublished epic poem denouncing British imperial ambitions in India” – among the reasons for Beddoes' relocation from Oxford to Bristol, along with his faltering academic reputation and dwindling number of students, largely due to widespread hostility to his openly pro-revolutionary

politics.<sup>6</sup> Mary Fairclough interprets the poem as a manifestation of Beddoes' belief in the imagination as a faculty which not only facilitates teaching and learning, but can directly effect change in the related realms of science and politics, extending beyond the traditionally aesthetic definition of the "Romantic imagination:" "Beddoes's visionary speculations and generically indeterminate work are not [...] symptoms of dilettantism but rather key elements of the epistemological and political agenda that informs that work."<sup>7</sup> Roy Porter also situates the poem as part of Beddoes' all-embracing political vision: "In some ways, [Beddoes'] literary and practical writings were a sidestep, a digression from politics. Yet Beddoes was never an emollient man, and even these became vehicles for the political rage now seething in his breast. *Alexander's Expedition* was an expression of vehement denunciation of imperialism and militarism."<sup>8</sup> The present discussion builds upon these insights, while exploring further the generic intelligence of *Alexander's Expedition*. I aim to demonstrate how an active stance on the politics of the epic genre enables Beddoes to amplify his simple opposition to conquest and colonialism.

*Alexander's Expedition* is Beddoes's key poetic statement on the sublime historical moment of the 1790s; eclectic in its use of sources and shrewd in its deployment of genre, the poem lacks neither complexity nor subtlety. In terms of form and genre, it offers a connection between Darwin's philosophical poetry and Southey's heroic poetry, beginning with *Joan of Arc* (1796) and his first orientalist epic *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801). Southey described Beddoes as "a hypercritic of the Darwin school, who writes bad verses himself, & of course criticises all others severely,"

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<sup>6</sup> *Poetry Realized* 10-1.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Fairclough, "Dr Thomas Beddoes and the Politics of the Imagination", *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 37 (2014), 79-96 (87).

<sup>8</sup> *Doctor of Society* 15.

indicating his awareness of the poetic dialogue between Beddoes and Darwin, and suggesting that he may have drawn influence from it in developing his own early epic visions.<sup>9</sup>

In its use of oriental theme and ancient setting, Beddoes' experimental poem also finds an apt comparison in Walter Savage Landor's *Gebir* (1798). Like *Alexander's Expedition*, *Gebir* is a tale of heroic but compromised conquest in an oriental setting, narrated in a self-declared heroic style. And like Beddoes, Landor uses a tale of colonial adventuring and conquest as the vehicle for a radical protest against oppressive government. But whereas Landor's polemical epyllion centres on tragic characterisation and a tragic action, Beddoes' narrative point of view regards the titular protagonist from a distance: Alexander is the occasion for the plot and its digressions, but always a rhetorical idea, never really emerging as a psychological character. This is how Beddoes introduces his reader to Alexander:

Now the new Lord of Persia's wide domain  
 Down fierce Hydaspes seeks the Indian Main;  
 High on the leading prow the Conqueror stands,  
 Eyes purer skies, and marks diverging strands.  
 A thousand sails attendant catch the wind,  
 And yet a thousand press the wave behind;  
 Two Veteran hosts, outstretched on either hand,  
 Wide wave their wings and sweep the trembling land.  
 The serried Phalanx Terror stalks beside,  
 And shakes o'er blazing helms his crested pride;  
 While Victory, still companion of his way,  
 Sounds her loud trump and flaunts her banners gay. (1-12)<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Letter to Charles Watkin Williams Wynn, 26 January 1797. *CLRS* 195.

The passage illustrates the characteristically panoramic style of the poem, in which Alexander surveys a sweeping landscape populated by massed forces ready for battle. Beddoes' poem is motivated by the idea and spectacle of great historical events, including military victory and conquest, and yet uses these scenes as the occasion for a moral and political commentary which is anti-colonialist; this structural irony operates throughout the text from these opening lines onwards, which invite the reader to admire and feel exhilarated by a spectacle of violence that she will also find repellent. Beddoes' use of form and genre is at the heart of this irony.

Appearing early in the revolutionary decade, and relatively early in what we think of as the Romantic period, *Alexander's Expedition* stands in specific relation to the established debates about the Romantic epic. Michael O'Neill writes: "A major ingredient in the new generic recipes produced by Romantic poets, epic is understood by Romantic practitioners and theorists to be a genre marked by its width, inclusiveness, openness – and also by its virtual unattainability in its purest form."<sup>11</sup> The apparent aversion from or suspicion of the epic as an intimidating or even impossible genre is illustrated by Coleridge's tongue-in-cheek verdict in this often-quoted letter:

I should not think of devoting less than 20 years to an Epic Poem, Ten to collect materials and warm my mind with universal science. I would be a tolerable mathematician. I would thoroughly know Mechanics, Hydrostatics, Optics, and Astronomy, Botany, Metallurgy, Fossilism, Chemistry, Geology, Anatomy, Medicine – then the *mind of man* – then *minds of men* – in all Travels,

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Beddoes, *Alexander's Expedition down the Hydaspes & the Indus to the Indian Ocean* (London: J. Murray, 1792).

<sup>11</sup> Michael O'Neill, "Romantic re-appropriations of the epic", in *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic*, ed. by Catherine Bates (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 193-210 (193).

Voyages and Histories. So I would spend ten years – the next five to the composition of the poem – and the five last to the correction of it. So I would write haply not unhearing of that divine and [nightly]-whispering Voice, which speaks to mighty minds of predestinated Garlands, starry and unwithering.

(*Coleridge Letters* I, 320)

Coleridge's musing on epic ambition in this letter acknowledges the importance of capaciousness and scale to the genre, while also hinting broadly at its self-seriousness and its potential for disintegration and self-defeat. The capacious tends towards the digressive, and the heroic mode usually carries traces of the mock-heroic. Modern scholarship on the early Romantic epic also testifies to its divided quality, its propensity to undermine its own practices and serve as a vehicle for other discourses. M.H. Abrams gives this definition of the aspirations of epic genre in the age of the French Revolution: "a dark past, a violent present, and an immediately impending future which will justify the history of suffering man by its culmination in an absolute good."<sup>12</sup> It is the work of the epic to provide a vision that will redeem historical suffering and prophesy its alleviation. Contrastingly, Stuart Curran argues that a conscious undermining of Virgilian heroic style was part of the early Romantic continuation of Milton's internalisation of epic, observing "a clear pattern of epic subversion" in poetry of the 1790s.<sup>13</sup> A key point of reference for the writers

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<sup>12</sup> *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971), 332.

<sup>13</sup> Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 169. "If we place *Joan of Arc*, *Gebir*, and *Alfred* in the context of the various derivatives of *Paradise Regained* in the 1790s and the two epic defences of a revolution that was, in the popular memory, bloodless, there emerges a clear pattern of epic subversion, fostered alike by critical public events and Milton's two attempts to find a subject 'Above Heroic'" (169).



of this time was William Hayley's *Essay on Epic Poetry* (1782); Hayley promoted the genre's liberation from neoclassical rules and constraints, which he associated with France, but maintained a strong national mission for the genre:

[...] Poesy's sublime, neglected field  
 May still new laurels to Ambition yield;  
 Her Epic trumpet, in a modern hand,  
 Still make the spirit glow, the heart expand.  
 Be such our doctrine! our enlivening aim  
 The Muse's honour, and our Country's fame! (I, 43-8)<sup>14</sup>

Hayley's argument reverts to the theme of nationality throughout, here chiding his country in the final epistle, and exhorting English poets to write the epics that their national heroes deserve:

In every realm where'er th' Heroic Muse  
 Has deign'd her glowing spirit to infuse,  
 Her tuneful Sons with civic splendour blaze,  
 The honour'd Heralds of their country's praise,  
 Save in our land, the nation of the earth  
 Ordain'd to give the brightest Heroes birth!—  
 By some strange fate, which rul'd each Poet's tongue,  
 Her dearest Worthies yet remain unsung. (V, 281-8)

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<sup>14</sup> William Hayley, *An Essay on Epic Poetry; in Five Epistles to the Revd Mr Mason, with Notes* (London: J. Dodsley, 1782).

This emphasis on banal nationalism in the pursuit of a genre which should reach for the sublime prompted Southey to ask sceptically whether an epic poem was required to be “national,” and even to refer to “the degraded title of Epic” in his Preface to *Madoc* (1805).<sup>15</sup> O’Neill observes of Southey’s early attempts at epic genre, “this heroic endeavour often takes the form of wishing to rid the world of evil and is fundamentally Utopian” (199).<sup>16</sup> But can such an unstable genre be trusted to fulfil this mission?

When Beddoes published his epic poem in 1792, the genre was resurgent, but also characterised by contradictions – intimidating or perhaps impossible, located somewhere between the utopian and the nationalistic, and given to the generation of miscellaneous digressions which undermined its claim to narrative strength and unity.<sup>17</sup> Disingenuously casting himself as a novice writer, Beddoes exploits some of these internal tensions in the genre to stage a debate about conquest and national power, and to investigate forms of resistance to tyranny. A

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<sup>15</sup> “The manner of the poem, in both its parts, will be found historically true. It assumes not the degraded title of Epic; and the question, therefore, is not whether the story is formed upon the rules of Aristotle, but whether it be adapted to the purposes of poetry.” Robert Southey, *Madoc* vol. II of *Robert Southey: Poetical Works 1793-1810*, gen. ed. Lynda Pratt, 5 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004), 6.

<sup>16</sup> Southey showed his familiarity with *Alexander’s Expedition* by including excerpts from Beddoes’s poem in *The Annual Anthology* (1799): Stansfield 66, 136.

<sup>17</sup> For discussion of Francis Jeffrey’s attack on Southey’s miscellaneous, fragmented method of composing epics, and Thomas Love Peacock’s similar scathing view of incoherence in modern poetry, see Dahlia Porter, “Formal Relocations: the Method of Southey’s *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801)”, *European Romantic Review*, 20 (2009), 671-9.

general perception that the epic genre was changing, unstable, and open to question, while retaining its traditional high status, gave Beddoes the space in which to conduct this experiment.

In attempting a heroic poem of his own, Beddoes reflected both the perceived nationalism of the genre, and the distaste later expressed by Southey for this “degradation.” He also engaged with eighteenth-century debates about the genre’s tendency to generate digression and excrescence, which impeded a unified narrative. In the Argument to *Alexander’s Expedition*, Beddoes alludes pointedly to a suspicion of the genre for being complicit with oppression, for a kind of tyranny of aesthetic taste – a similar argument in fact to the one William Hazlitt would later level at Shakespeare in general, and especially plays such as *Coriolanus*, in which the power of magnificent poetry leads the reader or audience astray into a veneration of tyrants and a contempt for the people.<sup>18</sup> Beddoes writes of the “Pernicious effect of martial poetry on the imagination of men in ancient and in the middle ages, [the] prostitution of poetry to flatter despots” (viii). Comments like these in the apparatus to the volume act as a deliberate counterweight to the conventional heroism of style and sentiment in the main verse narrative, which remains apparently polite, lofty, and conservative. Beddoes engages his reader in a nuanced conversation midway between the verse narrative and the prose essays, with the greater meaning of the text emerging from the tension between its various elements, a method influenced by and adapted from Erasmus Darwin.

Introducing his poem, Beddoes expresses his surprise at having become a poet and remarks that completing the poem has more than doubled his total poetic output (iv). The disclaimer may be disingenuous, since the poem shows a confident and opinionated handling of genre, including lengthy digressions on the nature and purpose of epic, not only in the footnotes but also in the verse text itself. *Alexander’s Expedition* is formally complex. The volume opens

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. “The language of poetry naturally falls in with the language of power” (“*Coriolanus*”): William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespear’s Plays* (1817) (London: Dent, 1906), 53.

with an Advertisement, followed by an Argument; the poem itself is supplemented by lengthy footnotes, some of which greatly outweigh the main text and reduce the page to as few as two lines of verse; finally, the volume includes a series of six digressive scholarly essays on Indian history and culture, as follows:

- I. (1) Observations on the Hindoo austerities and on ceremonious devotion; (2) On the indolence of the Asian character
- II. Observations on the manufactures of the Hindoos
- III. Conjectures on explosive compositions
- IV. Antiquity of the Hindoos
- V. On the complexion of the natives of hot countries, and the varieties of the human race
- VI. On the possessions of the British in Hindostan (49-90)

Beddoes' choice of subject matter likewise responds to complexity and ambiguity; the significance attributed to Alexander was open to debate. Beddoes chooses to represent Alexander as a foreign invader who forbears to oppress or enslave those he conquers – a hard-to-imagine combination of colonist and reformer. The ambiguity of Alexander had some currency among English radicals of the 1790s. William Godwin makes several allusions to the historical and mythic power of Alexander in his fiction. In *St Leon* (1799), the central character Reginald compares his friendship with the African character Hector: “My reliance on him was not less than that which Alexander the Great yielded to Philip the physician: I knew his rectitude, his simplicity, his fidelity, and the singleness of his heart; and I could not harbour the shadow of a doubt respecting him.”<sup>19</sup> Hector is Reginald's companion in exile, and eventually dies a heroic

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<sup>19</sup> William Godwin, *St Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century* (1799; London: Colburn and Bentley, 1831), 270.

and self-sacrificing death. In this instance, Godwin cites Alexander as an index of masculine virtue, and does not associate him with conquest as such; the reference is also appropriate to a novel which deconstructs at length the concept of “immortal” fame and glory in relation to a literally immortal life. There is a longer discussion of the meaning of Alexander in *Caleb Williams* (1793). Near the start of the second volume, Caleb’s suspicion of Falkland is building and gradually becoming a burden to him; he is drawn into a testy argument with his master on the nature of Alexander – specifically, his right to be called “the Great.” Caleb and Falkland dispute the implied morality of Alexander, with Caleb protesting that his alleged “greatness” was at root a lust for glory, only sated by a huge cost in human lives:

“Ah, sir! it is a fine thing for us to sit here and compose his panegyric. But shall I forget what a vast expense was bestowed in erecting the monument of his fame? Was not he the common disturber of mankind? Did not he over-run nations that would never have heard of him but for his devastations? How many hundred thousands of lives did he sacrifice in his career? What must I think of his cruelties; a whole tribe massacred for a crime committed by their ancestors one hundred and fifty years before. Fifty thousand sold into slavery; two thousand crucified for their gallant defence of their country? Man is surely a strange sort of creature, who never praises any one more heartily than him who has spread destruction and ruin over the face of nations!”<sup>20</sup>

Reacting to Caleb’s scathing critique, Falkland’s angry defence of Alexander’s reputation at first scorns Caleb’s youthful inability to judge, re-asserting fame as its own *a priori* justification, before making increasingly tenuous claims for Alexander as a promoter of civilised values and the life of

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<sup>20</sup> William Godwin, *Things as They Are; or, Caleb Williams* (London: B. Crosby, 1794), II, 15-6.

the mind. As Falkland's claims become less and less plausible, it becomes clear that he has a personal stake in the argument and is displacing onto Alexander a sentimental defence of his own crimes and a refusal to be held accountable:

“You must learn more clemency—Alexander, I say, does not deserve this rigour. Do you remember his tears, his remorse, his determined abstinence from food, which he could scarcely be persuaded to relinquish? Did not that prove acute feeling and a rooted principle of equality?—Well, well, Alexander was a true and judicious lover of mankind, and his real merits have been little comprehended.”

(20)

Beddoes shares with Godwin this ambivalence regarding his protagonist. Alexander appeals to the idealist and reformer as an example of austerity and fortitude, a demonstration that a righteous individual can effect change in the world through the power of will. But Alexander simultaneously embodies colonial supremacy, the systematic use of military force, and an addiction to self-justifying violence – all ideas which are repugnant to the liberal mind. The contradictions within his ancient theme allowed Beddoes to challenge modern British colonialism in India, while also interrogating his own position and literary method.

The ancient historical event on which Thomas Beddoes based his poem was the military campaign of Alexander in the Punjab. In 326 BCE, Alexander of Macedonia fought and defeated King Porus of Paurava at the devastatingly costly Battle of the Hydaspes. Alexander's victory, although celebrated for its audacious strategy, owed much to technical resources, organisation, and discipline. The battle led to the annexation of the Punjab region into the Grecian empire, and, in the longer term, the opening up of political and cultural exchange between the Greek world and all of India. Alexander's victory over the Pauravans took place in 326, only about

three years before his death in the year 323 at the age of 33. The battle was Alexander's last major victory, followed by a retreat due to disease and over-extended supply lines: the river Indus therefore marked the outermost border of the Macedonian empire. Beddoes had chosen as his heroic theme not only a conqueror as scourge or climacteric to oppressive regimes, but also a military colonist approaching the symbolic limit of his achievement, and soon to be undone by common human mortality.

The modern historical events which Beddoes considers through his poem include the British treaty with the Nizam-ul-Mulk of Hyderabad and the third Anglo-Mysore War (1790-92) between Mysore and the East India Company. More generally, these years saw a gradual deepening of British colonial power in the Indian sub-continent.<sup>21</sup> The trial in the House of Lords of the former Governor, Warren Hastings, on charges of corruption continued throughout the writing and printing of *Alexander*; Hastings was eventually acquitted in 1799. The East India Company's charter would be renewed for another twenty years by an act of parliament in 1793. British interest in India was in transition from the militarised commercial administration of the Company towards fully-fledged imperial rule; around 1789, for example, the British army began to deploy Indian soldiers on foreign campaigns. Tipu Sultan had achieved military victories over the British in the previous decade, becoming ruler of Mysore in 1782; the British had made peace with Tipu in 1784. He was finally overcome in 1799. The Muslim stronghold of Mysore constituted the main threat at this time to the process of British expansion. Tipu Sultan was keenly aware of the strategic value of courting Britain's enemies in Europe, and had become an ally of the French. Tipu not only posed the main obstacle to the consolidation of British power in India, but also symbolised the international Jacobin enemy.

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<sup>21</sup> See: Lawrence James, *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India* (London: Little, Brown, 1997, 2003), 63-78; and John F. Riddick, *The History of British India: A Chronology* (London and Westport CT: Praeger, 2006).

Lawrence James discusses Tipu's overt courting of allies in France, and the anxiety this caused among the British:

Tipu went to considerable lengths to cultivate the revolutionary regime in Paris and its offshoot in the Indian Ocean: he wore a cap of liberty when he met French representatives, called himself "Citizen Tipu" and expressed sympathy for the ideals of Robespierre. Elsewhere in India, French mercenary officers elected their generals, hoisted tricolours and voiced what the Marquess Wellesley called "the most virulent and notorious principles of Jacobinism". One alarmist intelligence report claimed that Hyderabad's French officers were planning a revolution, which would overthrow the nizam and establish the Rights of Man in southern India.<sup>22</sup>

Beddoes shows his knowledge of these recent events in the east, and also how they were moralised with cant and "spin" at home, in the conclusion to a digressive footnote about two thirds of the way through his poem:

We have heard loud exclamations against Tippoo Sultan. And assuredly Humanity must shudder at some of his actions. But how few have been the despots to whom this reflection will not apply, and if a wise and just tribunal were to decide between the Mysorean Tyrant and the person who has

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<sup>22</sup> James, *Raj*, 68.



declaimed most vehemently against him, which would be condemned as the most atrocious enemy of his species? (36-7)<sup>23</sup>

This awareness of reactionary and imperialist attitude is absorbed into the poem and co-exists with the anti-colonialist polemic, so that Beddoes' reader has a double perspective on the putative hero. Beddoes gives Alexander a number of long perorations, invoking divinity, praising Greek culture, and paying tribute to the beauty and fertility of India. When Alexander has praised the fields and rivers, the seasons and harvests, and all the flora and fauna, and generally idealised his new territory, he even pays tribute to the antiquity of Indian culture, which has created "Primæval Piles, that rose in massive pride, / Ere Western Art her first, faint efforts tried!" (159-60). For a moment he seems to express humility before a more ancient civilisation, before the conqueror's vanity and instinct for personal fame reasserts itself:

Ye Brachman old, whom purer æras bore,  
 Ere Western Science lisped her infant lore!  
 How will your wonders flush the Athenian Sage?

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<sup>23</sup> The "person" who vilifies Tipu as a tyrant may be possibly be Pitt, but other possible candidates include William Cornwallis, the governor general and commander of British forces in the Third Mysore War, or Henry Dundas of the East India Company. Cf. "The figure of Tipu was employed by Pitt's government to justify support for the embattled reputation of the East India Company as it fought against the supposedly tyrannical character of the Sultan." Michael Soracoe, "Tyrant! Tipu Sultan and the Reconceptation of British Imperial Identity, 1780-1800" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland, 2013), 215; "By playing up the cruelty and violence of Tipu's character, Cornwallis was able to justify a series of very harsh peace terms, as necessary to reign in the 'tyrant' that threatened all of southern India" (40).

How ray with glory my historic page?" (161-4)

There are a number of allusions to Alexander's liberal nature – "Large was thy thought, and liberal was thy soul" (231) – and passages which justify his invasion as a liberation from the yoke of petty local tyrants:

As to their dark pavilions, terror-chaced,  
 Grim tyrants of the forest, growling, haste;  
 In swift succession as before his eyes  
 A new Creation's crowded wonders rise—  
 —And now, his nodding prows triumphant dance  
 O'er swelling waves, on Indus' broad expanse; (97-102)

The Macedonian conquest is here associated with scale, illumination, and modernity; the "crowded wonders" of a new world; the sight of Alexander's galleys, serene and dominant, as they navigate the great river, is another favourite image. The vanquished in this passage are contrastingly furtive, small-minded bullies hiding in the forest gloom, who scuttle into hiding without waiting to be defeated in open battle.

Alexander arrives in India as the scourge of these local tyrants, but is himself deeply compromised by an ideology which equates progress with conquest. The poem moves on to an intimation of Alexander's death and what that might mean for his dominions:

Mourn, India, mourn—the womb of future Time  
 Teems with the fruit of each portentous crime.  
 The Crescent onward leads consuming hosts,

And Carnage dogs the Cross along thy coasts (275-8)

As the narrative voice steps out of the ancient historical plot to sound a baleful prophecy of modern atrocity for India, both Islam and Christianity are indicted as bringers of destruction. A lengthy footnote taking up most of the adjacent page explains the historical fallout from Alexander's death: without his charismatic leadership, the Macedonians are compared to a swarm of rats that devour everything in sight until they are forced to consume each other (31). Beddoes' explanatory footnote is bluntly didactic, shedding both the lofty style and the moral equivocation of the verse narrative:

The face of the known world was covered with confusion. The republics preserved only a vain appearance of liberty, which left the inconveniences without the advantages of that form of government. Turbulence took the place of strength, factions multiplied, and became irreconcilable. But the whole contention was for the choice of tyrants. (31)

Beddoes' epic therefore proposes a pessimistic cyclical view of history, in which conquest follows conquest, petty tyrant is driven out by colonial overlord, and future epochs have little comfort to offer except further waves of conquest. The concept of an apocalyptic end to historical suffering in an uprising of the people is left largely implicit beneath the poem's elevated heroic style.

The epic subject matter of the western penetration of the Indian sub-continent and subjugation of local rulers, therefore, is a problem for Beddoes to explore in his poem, not simply an outrage to be lambasted: colonial conquest is a fact of history (if not a necessary fact of life), and, problematic as it may be, long-term benefits may arise from injustice and atrocity. The

narrative surveys a range of local despots to whom Alexander's triumphal expedition brings truth and climacteric; their cruelties are about to be erased and forgotten, but at what cost? In his digressive and fragmentary text, Beddoes exploits the tensions within the epic genre to present to his readers a range of viable counter-arguments with which to oppose the encroaching tyranny of British commercial imperialism – including not only moral indignation, but also enlightened (economic) self-interest, and a belief in sustainability and equilibrium. The prose polemic of the essay “on the possessions of the British in Hindostan” is dogmatically anti-imperial and anti-conquest. But the poem is expansive and dialogic, and tolerant of alternatives: don't put your faith in violent insurrection as a solution to violent oppression, it seems to say, but be aware of the historical cycles of conquest, and aspire to a state of equilibrium. Through a tense dialogue between the heroic verse narrative and the discursive historical and political footnotes that mediate it, Beddoes presents to his reader an epic poem that indicts the epic genre, a masquerade of exotic conquest that conceals a Jacobin message.

In the concluding section of essays, for which the whole volume may well have been regarded as an opportunistic vehicle, Beddoes certainly offers some bracing polemic. The earlier essays on the ancient culture of India, its technologies, and ethnicity, accumulate to establish a generalised moral consensus that India has its own unique identity, which no foreign nation has the right to invade, appropriate, or exploit. The final essay builds on this generality, and drives home a series of protests against the rapacious British foreign policy in the sub-continent. As well as deploying impassioned rhetoric, Beddoes uses a degree of pragmatism, making arguments about economy, wealth, and taxation: “For perpetual war must increase our taxes perpetually— Since the English have gained any considerable footing in India, there has been no secure or permanent peace” (83). Again in pragmatic mode, he argues that the historical decline of former European superpowers is often associated with the over-extension of foreign colonies:

Possibly [...] Fortune will serve us as she has served all the commercial Conquerors, our predecessors. And with Portugal, Spain and Holland, we may exhibit another melancholy example of that imbecility, to which distant possessions and distant wars must inevitably reduce every state. Possibly in that forlorn condition, some future maritime power may conspire with some future military Despot, to dragoon us into proper submission to our superiors. (84)

The tone is harsh and sarcastic. Beddoes implies that this decline, and even military subjugation, would be no more than the British deserve. The essay builds in invective, moving on to more directly moral arguments based on an assumption of common human nature and human rights – a discovery that, he feels, may come as a shock to some of his compatriots:

Of the famines that so frequently sweep thousands and tens of thousands from the face of India, I shall only say, that if not occasioned, it should seem they must be commonly aggravated by the European Strangers, since they will consume much, and produce nothing. (86-7)

A people under a foreign commercial tyranny, can least of all people attain an erect and independent mind, that base of all excellence. It is no more possible for them to advance in science or in virtue, than for the brutes who draw our ploughs and carts, to become rational. Some individuals will indeed be less severely flogged and more plentifully fed than others. And in this will consist the whole difference. It is strange, but it is true, that men are but just beginning to feel that the natives of other countries and climates are human beings. (88)

In the argument of this essay in particular, Beddoes seems to express his own moral and political views and to do so in his own voice. But there is also an awareness that this style may only ever reach a readership of already-converted fellow reformers; his essay will either draw approval from the like-minded or hostile rejection from confirmed opponents. For this reason, the textual complexity of *Alexander*, and its admixture of different styles and values, is integral to his political purpose. While the main verse narrative appears to offer conventional elevated epic poetry, strongly attracted to heroism and conquest, and the prose essays confront the reader with an impassioned anti-colonial polemic, the apparently digressive footnotes serve an important function in mediating between these contrary positions and eliciting a more active response from a non-aligned reader. These mediating footnotes are an adaptation of the model Beddoes found in Darwin, and engage explicitly with ethical questions of poetic style, thus connecting the generic experiment, the ancient historical theme, and the modern politics that constitute the whole text of *Alexander's Expedition*. One of the most effective footnotes interrogates the problem of epic tradition, leading the reader through a connection between literary genre and political justice. These are the lines of verse which trigger the footnote:

O Thou! whose magic tones of bursting song  
 Rude Nature hush'd, and charmed the savage throng—  
 —But ah! the Warrior raised thy youthful flame,  
 For him thy hand unbarred the gates of Fame:  
 Each softening Art and gentler Virtue pined;  
 Vain were their charms; nor moved the martial mind. (325-30)

And this is the beginning of the note:

The spirit of ancient poetry must undoubtedly have contributed to the moral sentiments of mankind, by establishing a false standard of excellence. The fascinating power of the Iliad, we are told, induced Alexander to regard Achilles as a model, and the choice could not but debase his own superior character. (38 n.)

Beddoes develops a witty self-reflexive point which absorbs the heroic figure of Alexander himself into its argument about epic genre: having been raised on a diet of warlike Homer, Alexander has been ill served by his education and misled into venerating Achilles, the supreme warrior. In imagining that this has degraded his naturally “superior character,” Beddoes implies that Alexander is as much a victim of the bad faith of epic poetry as its perpetrator. A later note takes the further step of equating the veneration of power in epic poetry with allied forms of egotism and passion: “It would well become poetry, philosophy, and all the powers propitious to mankind, to correct the prevailing ideas respecting the powerful. We may be sure that the world will ever continue to be, as it has been heretofore, wasted by the unbridled passions of its rulers, till they are judged according to the plain rules and feelings of morality” (40-1 n.). The magnificence of epic poetry is part of a greater continuum in culture and history – the tendency to worship strength and so to judge the powerful by different rules. The same attraction to power that is expressed in epic poetry lies at the heart of social injustice and colonial exploitation alike; and the remedy will be a little humility, applying to the great and powerful the standards of the common morality observed by the people.

As Matthew Leporati observes, “[Southey’s] earlier epics had engaged with the ‘anti-epic’ tradition, using the genre to subvert the militaristic, imperial themes with which it is often

associated.”<sup>24</sup> Like Southey, Beddoes shows an ambivalent attitude towards epic in his poem – ambivalent towards both the national myth-making function of the genre, and more generally to the declamatory heroic style, even as he deploys it with competence. The major theme of *Alexander’s Expedition* – conquest – is also a matter of ambivalence for Beddoes, and not something that he dismisses out of hand as an unequivocal evil. On the question of conquest, there is also a latent analogy between Beddoes’s political ideas and his developing scientific theories; he later wrote of Davy’s experiments with nitrous oxide:

Man may, some time, come to rule over the causes of pain and pleasure, with a dominion as absolute as that which at present he exercises over domestic animals and the other instruments of his convenience.<sup>25</sup>

Beddoes is seen, therefore, to mobilise a similar language of conquest and dominion in relation to three different discursive fields – medicine and medical reform, masculine and heroic style in poetry, and the actual military exploits of a historical conqueror such as Alexander. In each field, the theme of conquest is qualified and tempered by an equally significant emphasis on balance and tolerance. Beddoes may have celebrated the potential eradication of disease or the defeat of infection through pneumatic medicine; but to the extent that he had also been a supporter of Brunonian medicine, he believed in health and cure through peaceful equilibrium, the achievement of a healthy balance between “sthenic” and “asthenic” states of over- and under-stimulation.<sup>26</sup> Beddoes was sufficiently committed to the Brunonian system to complete a full

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<sup>24</sup> Matthew Leporati, “‘Authority from Heaven’: Robert Southey’s *Madoc* and Epic Christian Imperialism”, *European Romantic Review*, 25, 2 (2014), 161-80 (162).

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Ruston 167.

<sup>26</sup> Stansfield 25 ff.



English translation of John Brown's *The Elements of Medicine* (originally written in Latin), which he published in 1795; Brown had died in 1788. Beddoes was thus working on Brown's text and Brown's theories around the time when he also composed *Alexander*. It is significant that the qualities Beddoes tends to praise in Brown and the "Brunonian system" primarily concern practice and practical benefit, rather than brilliant theories and paradigms. In this he remains consistent with the general emphasis of the *Elements*, in which Brown uses the language of balance and harmony in preference to a more punitive medical discourse, in which disease or infection is conquered or destroyed.<sup>27</sup>

In *Alexander's Expedition*, Beddoes tempers his use of a heroic style with lengthy statements devoted to discrediting it on moral grounds. And in relation to political and historical conquest, Beddoes uses his essays on Indian culture explicitly to undermine the sublime spectacle of Alexander's victory. It is a strategy devised to backfire on any reader too hasty to draw approving comparison with British colonial wealth and glory, and one which will welcome not only the committed radical but also non-aligned readers who are willing to find dialogue and ambivalence in the theme. This complex political statement emerges from Beddoes' astute handling of the epic genre, exploiting its instability and embracing its digressive energies. *Alexander's Expedition* is a meaningful part of the interrogation and evolution of epic genre in the 1790s, transmitting the influence of Darwin and laying ground for the subsequent more ambitious experiments of Southey: it still has much to say about the nature and possibility of resistance.

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<sup>27</sup> For example, in this extract from Beddoes's summary of the Brunonian method: "Brown, avoiding all useless disquisition concerning the cause of *vitality*, confines himself to the phænomena, which this great moving principle in nature may be observed to produce." "Of the Brunonian Doctrine", in *The Elements of Medicine; or, a Translation of the Elementa Medicinæ Brunonis*, trans. by Thomas Beddoes, 2 vols (London: J. Johnson, 1795), I, xciii.

