## **Conclusion**

'tis not what I desire but what you and they can procure for me ...'1

Sir Robert Cowan, MP, Portugal Merchant, free trader, East India Company servant and eventual Governor of Bombay, left historians a vast legacy in his correspondence, which includes business and private letters, accounts, bills of lading, as well as collections of letters and accounts of other East India Company servants. In volume, it is enormous, as many of the batches of Inward and Outward letters contain hundreds of items, and other batches include accounts, ships' records, journals, diaries and cashbooks. The survival of such a record of early eighteenth century business transactions is remarkable in its own right. While Cowan's papers have been extensively used by some historians to illustrate the East India Company's economic relations with the Indian merchant traders or to analyse the internal politics of the period, the documents have not been used to explore and interpret the interconnectedness of the Directors and Servants of the Company, and other merchants, bankers, and Members of Parliament.<sup>2</sup> This thesis has investigated Cowan's position and standing in the Company, his relationship and dealings with various Directors, and his peers and subordinates. These men were all inextricably linked through the bestowal of patronage and through a trail of kinship ties.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Cowan to Henry Cairnes, 20 December 1725, PRONI RCP D654/B1/1C.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> I.B. Watson, Foundation for Empire: English Private Trade in India-1760, Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd., New Delhi, 1980; A. Das Gupta, 'The Merchants of Surat, c.1700-1750', in Elites in South Asia, eds E. Leach, & S.N. Mukherjee, Cambridge University Press, London, 1970; A. Das Gupta, Indian Merchants and the Decline of Surat c.1700-1750, Franz Steiner Verlag, Wiesbaden, 1979; et al.

While patronage in the East India Company has been the subject of important scholarly work in the past, little emphasis has been placed on the way that it affected the men who were its recipients, and those who granted such aid in the early eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> The aim of this thesis has been to shed light on those men and the network they created through various forms of kinship as well as through reciprocal, horizontal, and vertical patronage, all of which are clearly represented in Robert Cowan's papers. His correspondence beautifully illustrates the role played by patronage over a period of a decade and a half, and the way it formed not only the activities of a joint stock company, like the English East India Company, but also the affairs of private business ventures. These interconnections between Cowan, his peers, patrons and clients reveals an entangled web of commercial, familial and political linkages that spanned the world, and formed the basis for Britain's later transformation from a 'sub-imperial' country to a full-fledged imperial power.

Prosopography has been described as allowing the combination of political history with 'hidden' social history, thereby providing a more complete view of society. This is the link that Cowan's correspondence provides. Further evidence is provided in Cowan's papers because they also cover the activities of other Company servants, as it is a record of both Inward and Outward mail. Additional material is provided by other collections, including those of John Scattergood, Sir Mathew Decker and Joseph Collett. The documentation of Cowan's career, and those of others who

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> See J.M. Bourne, Patronage and Society in Nineteenth-Century England, Edward Arnold, London, 1986; Das Gupta, *ibid.*, Watson, *ibid.* 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> K. F. Werner, 'L'apport de la prosopographie à l'histoire sociale des elites', ed K.S.B. Keats-Rohan, *Family Trees and the Roots of Politics*, Boydell, Woodbridge, 1997, pp. 1-21, quoted at <a href="https://www.linacre.ox.ac.uk/prosopo.html">www.linacre.ox.ac.uk/prosopo.html</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> OIOC, MSS EUR C 387/1 – 4, Papers of John Scattergood, Madras Merchant 1698-1723; J. Collett, The Private Letter Book - Sometime Governor of Fort St George, Madras, ed. H.H. Dodwell, Longmans, Green & Co., London, 1933.

served at the same time, allows for a prosopographical investigation into the networks that early eighteenth century East India Company servants, and their patrons, relied upon.

These collections of documents show that the networks of patrons and their clients were well established in the East India Company by the second decade of the eighteenth century. The major significance for the clients of this complex arrangement was that it provided the support and resources for those men who had aspirations, and the desire to advance in the Company's service, but who did not always come from an establishment background, or who lacked the credentials to accomplish such a goal. Thus the networks and patronage from various levels allowed outsiders to overcome financial and social hurdles. The classic example of such a beneficiary is Robert Cowan. He was a Dissenter, of Irish/Scot descent, and, moreover, he had suffered mixed fortunes in his previous career in Portugal. With East India Company Directorate sponsorship he journeyed to India, and began his career as a free trader. He swiftly transferred into the Company's service as a result of his efforts as an intermediary with the Portuguese, and he then obtained a Governorship in Mocha, Yemen. From that Factory, thanks to the influence and aid of his many patrons, he moved back to Bombay, and eventually gained that Presidency. Most dismissals from the East India Company Service were for failure to promote the Company's business in a proper manner, although several men, like Thomas Waters, were later reinstated. Sometimes the charges brought against them were due to personal animosity between servants, and resulted in counter-allegations being raised. Cowan was also dismissed from the Service, but returned to England to clear his name, and he was rewarded for his services by a knighthood, and a seat in Parliament.<sup>6</sup>

The importance of this thesis is that Robert Cowan is a case study of what was a generalised system by the second decade of the eighteenth century. He is a vital link between the upper sections of society and the men and women of the lower ranks. At the same time, Cowan was different from many others of that period, but only because he availed himself of a far larger network of patrons and clients than did most other East India Company servants. He was driven by his desire to make his fortune, but he never lost sight of the Company's interests either. They were inextricably linked because he knew that without his position in the Service he could not expect to make more than what he termed a competency.

The prevailing view of the gift of patronage is that, in general, it was bestowed from 'above', as it was in traditional political and clerical appointments. Cowan's correspondence, with corroborative evidence from other primary sources, shows that it was also practised 'below' within the English East India Company, but obviously on a less grand scale. It also occurred at peer level in a horizontal form, for example from Governor Hinde to Governors Macrae and Cowan, and vice versa. In this form each Governor dispensed patronage to those men he chose to support. Another form, reciprocal patronage, was practised by Cowan, for example, to those Company servants recommended by men to whom he was obligated. In return, Cowan also requested

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> R. Sedgwick, *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1715-1754*, Vol.I, H.M.S.O., London, 1970, p.589. Cowan was knighted on 31 January 1736. and gained his seat of Tregony, at the instigation of Robert Walpole, on 9 February 1737, but died twelve days later.

support for his own clients from both his colleagues in the East India Company service, and from his influential patrons in England.

Cowan's patrons were divided into two distinct groups. The 'major' patrons were those in the upper echelons of society, business and politics and these, of course, were most valuable in order to safeguard his position, and for advancement of office. In the East India Company context, patronage was not usually a one-off, isolated action, and the services of a member, or members, of the East India Company Directorate, known colloquially as the 'Head Clubb' was highly valued. These patrons were vital to the needs of an aspiring Company servant. They were often doubly valuable because many were associated, at varying times, with other important entities like the Bank of England, and frequently they were politicians, bankers or successful merchants as well.

Cowan's energetic campaign to attract sponsors from the beginning of his sojourn in India indicates that he was well aware of openings through such contacts. His papers record his solicitations for favours, listing those with whom he was successful as well as those who remained deaf to his pleas for aid. There were others that he did not even approach for help, some of whom were equally as powerful as his major sponsors, and this selectivity adds interest to his eventual choices. He was also cognisant of the need to have protection in England against attacks from any disgruntled returning Company servants, and, as demonstrated by later events, he was wise to ensure that he retained maximum support from his patrons.

Traditional patronage was the first type to be invoked by Cowan, and other potential Company servants. Without the goodwill and aid of at least one East India

Company Director after 1714, it was impossible to gain admittance to the Service or even to travel to India as a free Merchant. A.K. Ghosal states that this prerogative of the Directors was something that they zealously guarded over the following years, and that by so doing, they retained an almost monopolistic control of employment.<sup>7</sup> This is corroborated by evidence in Cowan's letters of the degrees of interconnectedness between the Directorate and their clients in the Service. Cowan availed himself of the help of the Gould merchant family to begin his career in the East, and he rapidly gathered a large coterie of patrons from the East India Company Directorate. Cowan also gained several lesser patrons, like Arthur Stert, most of whom were known to him from his merchant days in Portugal. While they did not wield as much authority as those in the major patron category, they were useful in different ways. For example, some of them were in contact with other influential men in England, to whom Cowan might, at some stage, require an introduction. As most of them were merchants, they were also in a position to handle some of his private trade shipments through Portugal, thus avoiding possible difficulties and recriminations from the East India Company...

The upper echelons of the network included men who were Directors of the East India Company, the Bank of England, and the South Sea Company, some were Members of Parliament, and nearly all were successful merchants or bankers. What benefits were there for these men, like John Drummond, Edward Harrison and Sir Nathanial Gould, in sponsoring Robert Cowan? They certainly did not expect to recoup all the patronage debts owing to them through political support by their clients, as the majority were employed in lowly positions in the East India Company, and

<sup>7</sup> A. K. Ghoshal, Civil Service in India under the East India Company: A Study in Administrative Development, University of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1944, p.22.

were not expected to become high flyers. The high attrition rate in the East meant that only a small minority returned to England, and only the few who returned with fortunes, or who managed a judicious marriage into money, would have been in a position to wield political clout. Through his patrons' efforts, Cowan was able to achieve the Governorship of Bombay, and his elevation to this position allowed him to increase his own trading interests in what the East India Company termed country trade.

Country trade was an area in which the Company had declined to be involved, mainly because of the difficulties involved in maintaining a diverse and complex business from a great distance. Instead they allowed the Company servants to pursue their private ventures in this area, and this was also to be a means to supplement their minimal wages paid by the East India Company. The Company did, however, restrict and control the amount and type of items that their employees were entitled to carry to England as private trade, and even the allowable goods were subject to taxes and duties. The Directorate also endeavoured to maintain control over who was granted permission to travel to India, in order to stop unsanctioned men from joining the Service once they had arrived in the East. The Servants' dealings in country trade were not subject to close Company scrutiny, simply because it was too difficult to monitor, and this left the Governors of the three Presidencies in India virtually in control of this trade. It allowed them to bestow patronage to their clients by giving permission for them to mount private trading ventures of their own, or to include them in their dealings.

It is difficult to believe that the Directors who sponsored men such as Cowan were not involved in the trading ventures of their clients. From the mid seventeenth century the East India Company Directors were banned from participating in private trade deals to England.<sup>8</sup> The results obtained by Company servants like Elihu Yale and Thomas Pitt, must have made them well aware of the opportunities offered by shrewd investments in country trade. For example, the provision of patronage to William Phipps and Robert Cowan placed the two men under immense obligation to their sponsors. As a means of repayment, the Directors, and other major patrons, could become involved in joint country trade dealings at their clients' invitation. The efforts of Pitt, Yale, Cowan and Phipps alone show that there were vast amounts of money to be made when the trade was handled properly. However, Cowan's correspondence shows that it was essential for the Company servants to continue to promote the Company's trade as the same time, because their private success was dependent on them retaining their position within the Company's service. If the clients were to enrich themselves and their patrons they were all reliant in keeping their official positions. Without good results for the Company, which would have brought loss of employment, or, at a higher level, loss of Directorships, the whole network would have crumbled. Cowan was a past master at striking a good balance between advancing his own dealings, and ensuring the Company's interests were promoted successfully. Without his high position in the Company, he would have been denied many opportunities to enter into country trade ventures with his peers in India and the Persian Gulf. The necessity to adequately serve two masters at once caused much of the friction between various Company servants, which resulted in so many of them being dismissed for irregularities against the Company. Cowan's efforts

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Watson, *ibid.*, pp.71-72.

seemed to reward everyone, and his adroit handling of a dual role explains why he achieved so much against all odds. He was in the East for about fifteen years and retired with a fortune believed to be at least £100,000, and possibly as much as £150,000, whereas many of his contemporaries died, like Samuel Johnson, almost penniless. Cowan stated that Johnson had left a legacy of £100 for his father.<sup>9</sup>

Cowan's correspondence shows that especially in his years as Governor of Bombay, he was also in a position to exert his own form of beneficence. He was able to provide a similar service not only to other men of comparable rank in the Service but also to those at a more junior level who were often recommended to him by his powerful friends in England. In the same way, he wherever possible extended his protection to those recommended to him by other East India Company servants, especially the Governors of the other Factories. Verifying evidence of the extent of this patronage as well as the kinship networks is readily available amongst other papers, including those belonging to Joseph Collett, Governor Fort St. George 1717-1720; John Scattergood, Madras Merchant; Robert Adams, Chief of Tellicherry; Thomas 'Diamond' Pitt, Governor Fort St. George 1697-1709, Major John Roach, Fourth in Council at Madras, and Commandant of the Fort St. George Garrison, and Sir Mathew Decker, in the early part of the eighteenth century, although it is on a lesser scale than that seen in Cowan's papers.<sup>10</sup> The sheer volume of Cowan's papers may well account for this difference.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Cowan to Charles Savage, 20 January 1731, PRONI RCP D/654/B1/2B.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Collett, *ibid.*, OIOC, MSS EUR C387/1-4, *Papers of John Scattergood, Madras Merchant 1698-1723;* BL, H/MISC/37, *Letter Books of Robert and Mrs. Adams*; OIOC, ADD MS 22842-56, *Letter Books and Invoices of Thomas Pitt, Governor of Fort St. George 1699-1709*; TNA, C108/94-96, *Chancery: Master Farrer's Exhibits Accounts and Correspondence:* Major John Roach, Fort St. George, 1727-1738; H.D. Love, *Vestiges of Old Madras, 1640-1800*, Vol. II, John Murray, London, 1913, p.232.

Horizontal patronage was a method whereby Cowan could utilise his peers in India to share and diversify their trade throughout the subcontinent. Included in this group were some men who had accepted Cowan as their client, including Governors Charles Boone and William Phipps. Both of these men aided Cowan's rise in the Company's service, because of their ability to recommend candidates for appointments. They were to be of further use to Cowan and his network at the end of their terms as Governors of Bombay because they both returned to England to hold positions on the East India Company Directorate. The Bombay Governors' trading arrangements sometimes included members of the other factories on the East Coast of India. There was distinct rivalry between the two sides of the country with regard to the Company's trading matters, and this competitive atmosphere tended to overflow into the country trade arena, often restricting possible lucrative ventures. James Macrae, at Madras, was the exception to this rule because of his early affiliation with Cowan. From the beginning Cowan indicated his ambition to work with Macrae upon the latter receiving his governorship. He said that he hoped they might 'Cultivate a Correspondence to mutual advantage.' Another part of horizontal patronage was to assist their peers' protégés whenever a suitable opportunity arose. For example, Cowan would endeavour to provide aid by utilising visiting captains and supercargoes, who were favoured by other Presidents, on supplementary journeys from his port.

Reciprocal patronage was a third means of repayment for the huge debt that Cowan, and others in a similar position, owed to their patrons. It involved Cowan accepting as his own clients, those men who were recommended to him by his

<sup>11</sup> Cowan to James Macrae, 20 October 1723, PRONI RCP D/654/B1/1B.

influential patrons. It involved giving newcomers to India a helping hand, either by providing an opportunity to work in his own private trade, or by promoting their interests in the Company's employ. In this way Cowan, and others in a similar situation, were able to repay some of their debts. Furthermore, as each new, albeit insignificant, member was added to the network, there was always the chance that they might bring a more valuable connection with them. Cowan managed, almost immediately upon his arrival in India, to add considerably to the influential network pool, both from above and below.

The provision of aid to those of lesser rank usually consisted of putting trading possibilities their way, but sometimes, if it was warranted, it led to direct employment with the Company, or even in the patron's own private trade matters. Much depended on the amount of obligation under which the person considered himself to be, as well as the prevailing circumstances, such as the state of trade, and the number of staff vacancies. These were further influenced by seasonality, and the availability of ships and goods. To reduce the risk of offending a patron if prevailing local conditions proved inadequate, it was not uncommon to ask peers at other factories to proffer assistance to the client.

Kinship also played a role in the compiling of a personal network in the East India Company in the early eighteenth century. Cowan's direct kinship connection was that of his brother, William. William obtained initial employment in the Company's service using the formal patronage system, but returned to England, allegedly suffering from the climate's deleterious affect on his health. His subsequent attempts to gain another posting failed despite Robert possessing so many powerful

friends. William eventually took the risky option of returning without the Company's sanction. He was sponsored by his brother, and Robert designed for him to work on his own ships on voyages to China. In this arena they were highly successful, with William remaining in the East after Robert returned to England. Robert Cowan also intended to further cement the ties from his patronage network by marriage to Betty, daughter of John Gould, Snr. Theirs was a long standing arrangement dating from the time when Cowan was in Portugal, but Robert's tenure in the East proved to be of too long a duration for the marriage to take place. Betty finally married East India Company Director, merchant, and MP, Albert Nesbitt. If Cowan had returned to claim his bride it would have united him with six of his most powerful and wealthy patrons.<sup>12</sup>

Cowan was repeatedly asked to provide help for members of various patrons' families, and these clients achieved a mixed bag of results. Some worked assiduously, like John Hinde, who was a cousin of the Gould family, and gained promotion in the Company's service. Others showed disruptive behaviour, and disgraced not only themselves, but also their family members in England. One such instance was that of Thomas Thorowgood, who took to the bottle, and only his death released John Gould, Jr. from any further embarrassment. At the time of his uncle's death, Gould was both a Director of the East India Company, and an MP. The vast majority of the men who arrived in India were never able to make the most of any introductions they

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> The six were: John Gould, Snr., Sir Nathanial Gould, John Gould, Jr., Nathanial Gould, Sir Alexander Cairnes, and Henry Cairnes.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Cowan to John Hinde, 2 August 1728, PRONI RCP D/654/B1/1C. Cowan referred to 'your Cuz<sup>n</sup> Jack Gould'; Cowan to John Gould, 15 April 1723, PRONI RCP D/654/B1/1A; Cowan to John Hinde, 18 July 1724,& Cowan to Mrs Cairnes, 12 January 1727, PRONI RCP D/654/B1/1C. Hinde began as a supercargo, became a factor in Bengal, and was according to Cowan 'universally beloved'

carried with them, simply because of the very high mortality rate amongst Company servants in the eighteenth century.

There were various forms of kinship other than traditional blood relationships. Ties also occurred through religion, and Cowan's shared non-conformist beliefs gained him the benefit of patronage from six members of the Gould and Cairnes' families, as well as Hugh Henry. These men were prominent members of the cloth merchants and private banking communities. Some were also Members of Parliament, and on the executive of the Bank of England or of the East India Company. There were also ties through the merchant community of England, Ireland and Portugal. Cowan had been an established merchant in Lisbon for many years, and despite his business failure, he was fortunate to retain the goodwill of not only these men, but also the friendship and aid of several of the remaining Lisbon based English merchants. Separately, these kinship groups were not of great significance, but when they were added to the elite group of patrons that Cowan attracted during his stay in India and the Persian Gulf, they comprised a very impressive group. When their influence was extended by Cowan's effective use of the patronage and kinship networks he had assembled, their strength became immense.

In return for their on-going support of entrepreneurs like Robert Cowan, the patrons prospered from the private trade practised by Company servants. The more money a protégé made, the more benefits were likely to be reaped by the patrons. The flair shown by Cowan in his early days in the East explains the willingness of so many men to add their names to his ever-growing list of patrons. Through the efforts and entrepreneurial skills of Cowan, who was merely representative of his type, they

grew wealthy, established dynasties, and generally helped create the solid economic background required to exploit to the full the benefits brought by the technological changes of the Industrial Revolution. The establishment of one such dynasty occurred because of Robert Cowan's legacy. <sup>14</sup> These fortuitous circumstances allowed England to capture a massive twenty-seven per cent of world trade by the end of the eighteenth century. <sup>15</sup> Without this early foundation, England's advantage later in the century would not have been so great, and the money thus accumulated was used to finance Britain's imperial expansion. The wealth generated by the East India Company itself meant opportunities arose to utilise the power thus created, and those in positions of authority were able to turn it to political advantage.

Cowan's personal letters and papers put the focus on the individual and his position within the system, rather than on the Company itself. The collection also offers a wide perspective because it includes letters from other Company employees, thereby providing corroborative evidence of the breadth of the network. Cowan was born into a world that accepted patronage in all forms and it was not restricted to the upper classes. Cowan certainly knew the rules applicable to the system and he played them to the best of his ability. His case was typical as the networking organization was available to, and utilised by, all those who possessed the drive and ambition to gain advantageous positions in the Company's service. Without support, an individual could not hope to survive the cutthroat world of Company politics. A successful servant needed to exert effort for and on behalf of the Company, and to become involved in the intricate patronage and kinship network. Without the cooperation of powerful friends at both at home and abroad, the chances of career enhancement or the opportunities to make a

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> See below p.377.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> The New Cambridge Modern History, 1793-1830, Vol. IX, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1975, p.45.

fortune were virtually non-existent. Cowan's vast correspondence and his prodigious ability to manipulate the network to the very best advantage makes him a vital prosopographical link between the wealthy and powerful men in the East India Company Directorate, the Bank of England, the merchant and banking communities, and Parliamentarians.

The majority of the men featured in the collection of letters did not think of themselves, or their dealings, as being of any particular importance to other than those involved in their kin groups, employment, patronage or trade dealings. In 1726 Robert Cowan described himself thus: 'I was born under a three penny plannet never to be worth a groat, but I have got philosoph enough to rest contented'. 16 This disparaging reference to his financial status was written at about the time he had invested a thousand pounds in just one trading venture.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, as Cowan did not live for very long after his return from India, he was unable to fully enjoy his fortune, knighthood and seat in Parliament. The attainment of his 'competency' did allow his sister, Mary, and her husband Alexander Stewart, to convert that money into real estate – something that Cowan had very much desired. In so doing, they and his fortune formed what became the Londonderry dynasty. Their son was the 1st Marquess of Londonderry, and his son became Viscount Castlereagh. 18 Cowan's experiences showed how support could be used to encourage lesser men to achieve advantage for themselves. His correspondence illustrates in remarkable detail that being part of a kinship network, and in a position to receive and bestow patronage was not only critical to the operation of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Cowan to Captain Thomas Bronsdon, 2 June 1726, PRONI RCP D/654/B1/1C.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Cowan to Captain Westerbane, 6 September 1726, *ibid*. Cowan wrote: I advanced you my ready Money for what was sold & some that were not sold & I am now on that score actualy a thousand pounds out of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> H.M. Hyde, The Londonderrys: A Family Portrait, Hamish Hamilton Ltd., London, 1979, pp.1-2,6,8-11.

the East India Company in the early eighteenth century, but was also an integral aspect of the political economy of an imperialising Britain.

## Robert Cowan's Patronage Network

