



*Banished Potentates:  
Dethroning and exiling  
indigenous monarchs under  
British and French colonial rule*

**Robert Aldrich**

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**Review by: Cathleen Sarti**



*Banished Potentates: Dethroning and exiling indigenous monarchs under British and French colonial rule.* By Robert Aldrich. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018. ISBN 978-0-7190-9973-1. x + 328 pp. £79.

**R**obert Aldrich, Professor of European History at the University of Sydney, discusses in his most recent book the depositions and exile of hereditary, indigenous rulers by colonial powers, in particular by the British and the French. The timeframe of this study covers 140 years (1815-1955) of intense colonialism in Asia and Africa. Aldrich succeeds in combining current post-colonial research with recent discussions in the field of royal studies, and contributes to our understanding of modern monarchies from several perspectives: imperial, colonial monarchies (as deponents) as well as global, indigenous monarchies (the deposed). All of that is situated in a time of growing importance of nationalist movements, which also included debates on republican ideas and anti-monarchical sentiments.

The study is based on several case studies exploring why and how colonial powers deposed indigenous rulers, and what happened afterwards with the deposed monarchs in exile. One of the first deposed rulers in the nineteenth century was “the last king in Ceylon,” Sri Vikrama Rajasinha, who was sent to Madras in India just shortly after Napoleon was sent to his last exile in St Helena. Aldrich’s short comparison at the beginning of his book situates this study firmly in research on European history, and brings to the forefront how European powers in the nineteenth century acted as colonial powers, intermeddling in foreign affairs in Europe, but also globally. One aspect of Aldrich’s research is to question how this was legitimised, seeing that interference in domestic politics was hitherto frowned upon. Furthermore, colonial powers were (except for the French in some time periods) monarchical realms themselves.

The balancing act of colonial powers to realise their interests, and at the same time to not openly question and hurt the political idea of royalty and divine right of monarchy, can especially be seen in the British depositions. The colonial interest included getting rid of a monarchy that was often an institution around which several indigenous resistance groups could gather. A preferred solution to colonial conquests was a so-called protectorate in which the colonial powers granted “protection” in exchange for land, resources, and upholding of political order by the indigenous ruler. If native monarchs, however, were not as docile as wished—for example, if the colonial interest in conquests encountered resistance from established structures and divinely legitimated monarchy—conflict ensued and the need for the above-mentioned balancing act rose. Several times over the nineteenth and twentieth century,

this balancing act was resolved by military force, deposing the monarch and sending him or her into exile, and ruling directly over the realm. While sending a royal ruler into exile was still accepted practice in the minds of the colonial powers, executing a member of the global royalty was a step too far (12).

Aldrich builds his argument on several depositions of native monarchs in Asia and Africa by the British and French colonial powers. Though it remains somewhat unclear how the case studies were chosen, Aldrich manages to build a conclusive model of depositions by colonial powers. He brings to mind the diverse problems crystallized in such events. This includes discussing native monarchies as incentives for independence and nationalist movements, as well as the representation of native realms and rulers as “primitive” or “despotic,” or the arbitrariness of the decisions when to depose and exile, including keeping them as state-prisoners and providing for them, their (extended) families, and courtiers. Furthermore, Aldrich analyses actors, their interests and actions from the British East India Company to the monarchy, especially Queen Victoria, or the French government, and the native political elites, royal families (sometimes rivals), and monarchs. In much of the book, this reads more as a history of the colonial powers and their treatment of Asian and African realms than as an analysis of the domestic structures that are inevitably also part of every deposition—in particular the opposition of political elites against the ruler. Additionally, the approach of the book to mostly synthesize existing research (together with relying on printed sources like travel diaries and reports from officials) also adds in some cases to the lack of detail on the side of the banished potentates and their realms. This leads to some cases where it is hard to follow the details and the events unfolding. The relationship between the British and the raja of Coorg, Chikka Virarajendra, is described as friendly in the 1790s, as soured in connection with a rival conflict (no date given), and leading to Virarajendra’s deposition in 1834 (78). The roughly forty-year gap remains unexplained, and leaves the reader wondering about the events in the meantime.

Aldrich changes his way of writing about depositions throughout the chapters, which allows him to combine more detailed analysis in some cases, such as on the last king in Ceylon in chapter two, with a more general approach, such as the deposed and exiled rulers from the Indian sub-continent in chapter three. Both chapters focus also on the British as colonial power. Chapter four covers French colonialism in Vietnam, while chapter five offers the comparison of British and French approaches in Africa. Finally, the book ends with two chapters on French colonialism, again a detailed analysis of one case study, the queen of Madagascar, including a gender approach to

queens in late nineteenth century in chapter six, and a more general view on the region of North Africa in chapter seven.

Some criticism has to be made concerning the features of the book that might not have been the author's responsibility. First, a map of the discussed realms and places of exile would have been helpful. Although the map on the cover of the book is very beautiful, it cannot be used to trace any of the routes into exile, or even to identify small realms like Coorg on it. Second, chapter endnotes are a hassle to work with: footnotes on the same page can as easily be ignored by a more general audience, and are much appreciated by researchers wanting to know exactly where a particular piece of information came from. And third, the bibliography does not separate between primary sources and secondary literature. On the positive side, the index is very helpful and includes not only persons and places, but also the different topics discussed throughout the book.

It is always a pleasure to write a review on a book that is so easily readable and really adds to one's own knowledge in a significant manner. Robert Aldrich's book manages this, despite some minor criticism from my side that speaks mostly about my wish to know even more about these cases. The book is particularly inspiring—from the perspective of a pre-modern royal studies scholar—in that it takes the institution of monarchy with all its ceremonies, backgrounds, political-religious ideas, and contexts seriously, even in a time of (supposedly) anti-monarchical nationalism, colonialism, and modernity. This study shows once again how influential monarchical ideas and conventions remained after the French Revolution.

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