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EDWARD OWEN TEGGIN

# The Presbyterian International and the Case of Robert Cowan

A Study in Robust Action, c. 1710–34

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**Keywords** Ethnic Networks; Intra-Asian Trade; Presbyterian International; Robert Cowan; Robust Action

**Abstract** This article examines the career progression of Sir Robert Cowan, governor of Bombay (1729–34), during the years c. 1710–34. This is undertaken as an exercise in the application of ethnic commercial networks in the early eighteenth century, incorporating aspects of organizational science, such as the robust action theory and the concept of grand challenges. The focus lies on the discussion of a defined Ulster-Scots ethnic network termed the ‘Presbyterian International’, which is then linked to East India Company gentlemanly capitalist networks orchestrated by the patrons and familial links of Cowan, and other aspiring privately interested traders. It is argued that Cowan’s successful Company career was based on his interpersonal relationships within these networks, providing him with necessary patronage and capital and therefore enabling him to follow both Company as well as his private trading interests. Moreover, it will be demonstrated how regional networks, governed by established customs and traditions, had the potential and means to access global markets and exert control.

## 1. Introduction\*

It may be said that the study of networks, and the theory surrounding them, can be broadly categorized as seeking to explain two generic outcomes. First, that of the choice taken, whereby the merits of comparable decisions at a given time are analyzed based on the possible results. The associated behaviors, attitudes, and actions come under the heading of social homogeneity, in which the preferences of individuals in a society are judged based on how alike they are. Second, the rate of success, which is understood in terms of social capital through action and reward. A network is a construct with a specific meaning and purpose, understood through a series of linked nodes, which is utilized for a series of actions. As Borgatti and Halgin have noted, however, it is the scholar, by choosing a set of nodes to study, who comes to more fully define a network.<sup>1</sup> This concept is a key consideration for the current study due to the aim of overlaying the career of Robert Cowan onto the concept of the proposed 'Presbyterian International' and considering his progression in terms of gentlemanly capitalism.<sup>2</sup> Recent research into the life and career of Cowan during his East India Company employment has demonstrated how he benefitted from landed gentlemanly capitalist networks, which provided him with the patronage and capital necessary to have a successful Company career in South Asia.<sup>3</sup> These networks were based in London, Dublin, and Londonderry, with the link between London and Irish landed interests being a key element of the present study. Familial and interpersonal links between Cowan, Ulster-Scots ethnic patrons, and multivocal Company interests in London are of particular interest in order to connect Cowan and the Presbyterian International to the gentlemanly capitalist order. Due to the multifaceted nature of early modern commercial networks, particularly that of Cowan, strategies, such as examination through robust action, are, it is argued, an effective way of more thoroughly unraveling networks and their functions.

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1 Stephen P. Borgatti and Daniel S. Halgin, "On Network Theory," *Organization Science* 22, no. 5 (2011): 1169.

2 The theory of gentlemanly capitalism, first put forward by Peter Cain and Antony Hopkins, argues that the British imperial project was driven by landed capital and London commercial interests. This viewpoint emphasizes the role of privately interested city finance in the expansion of empire.

3 Edward Owen Teggins, "The East India Company Career of Sir Robert Cowan in Bombay and the Western Indian Ocean, c. 1719–35," (PhD diss., Trinity College Dublin, 2020), 258–61.

By explicitly choosing Cowan and his wider ethnic network connections to act as nodes in the present study, the current understandings of regional trade as subsets of a much wider trading apparatus will be re-examined, which at the same time demonstrates the utility of emerging letter archives in the study of early modern commercial networks. The Cowan Papers, Cowan's personal archive, are held at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast, and contain approximately 3,000 individual documents. Encompassing a date range of 1719–35, this archive spans Cowan's entire career in the western Indian Ocean. The archive, as a collection of papers belonging to a privately interested Company servant, is of course subject to numerous biases. The strong Anglocentric perspective is an important consideration here, with the archive strongly aligned to personal and Company interests. Whereas the collection is for the most part written in the English language, there are also examples of documents in French, Portuguese, and several northern Indian languages. Of the latter, these are most likely Gujarati or other indigenous languages used in early modern South Asian commerce. This large, and as yet underused, archive can be used as a tool for a wide range of interdisciplinary investigations into early modern empire. Whilst the archive's existence has been flagged by scholars such as Ashin Das Gupta and Om Prakash, the full potential of the collection has yet to be realized.<sup>4</sup> The present study is merely one example of how rich a source for focused axial studies it can become. As mentioned above, the broad date range for Cowan's archive is 1719–35, though this can be widened to 1680–1750 with the inclusion of relevant documents from the National Archives, Kew, and the British Library, London. The geospatial range covers South Asia, the Middle East, China, and Southeast Asia.

It has been suggested that Cowan, and indeed others like him, benefitted from ethnic commercial networks which sought to propagate the interests of culturally, religiously, and familiarly linked individuals.<sup>5</sup> In the case of Cowan and his Ulster-Scots dissenting<sup>6</sup> background, he appeared to thrive within a networked association of transnationally interested parties of what may be called the 'Presbyterian International'. This, it is argued, constituted an aspect of what Padgett

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4 See also, Ashin Das Gupta, *Merchants of Maritime India, 1500–1800* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1994); Om Prakash, "English Private Trade in the Western Indian Ocean, 1720–1740," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 50, no. 2/3 (2007): 215–34.

5 David Hancock, "Combining Success and Failure: Scottish Networks in the Atlantic Wine Trade," in *Irish and Scottish Mercantile Networks in Europe and Overseas in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. David Dickenson, Jan Parmentier and Jane Ohlmeyer (Gent: Academia Press, 2007), 14–5.

6 Dissenters, in the history of the Anglican church and English state in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, refers to sects of Protestant Christians who opposed state interference in religious matters and founded their own religious communities in opposition to the Anglican church. Restrictions on public employment and rights were imposed upon those who did not take communion in the Anglican church.

and Ansell have developed as the theory of robust action.<sup>7</sup> Robust Action accomplishes short-term objectives while preserving long-term flexibility. It is comprised of non-committal actions that keep future lines of action open in strategic contexts where opponents are trying to narrow them. The theory's innovation was the creation of a means to differentiate active and politically relevant communities in fifteenth-century Florence through variables, such as kinship and financial, political, and patronage networks, in order to define the boundary of the Florentine elite. In this way, the structure of elite communities in Florence was reimagined, similar to the present undertaking with the example of Robert Cowan. Moreover, the style of control used by the Medici patriarch, Cosimo, in which actions seemed to benefit him without necessarily being attributed, led his behavior to be labeled as robust action. This method of control is evidenced in Cowan's chief patron, John Gould Jr., in his dealings with Cowan in empire, which once again makes it an important point for this study.

Necessarily, by invoking the argument that robust action was involved in the orchestration of what may synonymously be termed the 'Cowan network' or the 'Presbyterian International', the notion that 'grand challenges' were involved must be incorporated into the below discussion.<sup>8</sup> Whilst recent scholarship, particularly that by Ferraro, Etzion, and Gehman, has focused on robust action being used to tackle such grand challenges as climate change and international financial movements, the malleability involved in the term grand challenges – ironic, given the commonly understood immutability of the problem of grand challenges – enables a more focused discussion.<sup>9</sup> Whilst networked individuals and organizations in the early modern context did not necessarily act in the public interest, or indeed for an overtly identifiable purpose, they banded together in order to create solutions to problems which, when confronted, displayed many characteristics of grand challenges. Perhaps the most obvious facet of this was the concept of uncertainty, tied into risk. This has been highlighted as the radical form of uncertainty associated with grand challenges; effectively, the concept of Knightian uncertainty.<sup>10</sup> The justification and discussion for the use of robust action theory in this context shall be examined further below.

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7 John F. Padgett and Christopher K. Ansell, "Robust Action and the Rise of the Medici," *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 6 (1993): 1263.

8 See also, Matt Levy *et al.*, "Robust Action Strategies in a Connected but Unequal World: Revisiting American Pragmatism for Social Justice Focused Research in Information Systems," *Communications of the Association for Information Systems* 47 (2020): 113–39.

9 Grand Challenges are to be understood as difficult but important problems that are more than ordinary questions and capture the imagination of the audience. They are global problems that can be addressed through collaboration. See also, Stephen Brammer *et al.*, "Grand challenges in management research: Attributes, achievements, and advancement," *Australian Journal of Management* 44, no. 4 (2019): 517–33.

10 Fabrizio Ferraro, Dror Etzion and Joel Gehman, "Tackling Grand Challenges Pragmatically: Robust Action Revisited," *Organization Studies* 36, no. 3 (2015): 366; Frank H.

In demonstrating the inherent links between Irish landed gentlemanly capitalist interests and the wider global trading sphere through Cowan's involvement in the intra-Asian trading world, the Cowan archive has served to highlight the multivocality of Cowan network nodes.<sup>11</sup> The Presbyterian International interest in the Atlantic wine trade, in which large numbers of ethnic Scottish merchants engaged in the trade of Madeira wine between 1700 and 1815 was, it is argued, a stepping stone towards the far more lucrative prize of intra-Asian trade, though certainly one which was also profitable in its own right. This profitability was largely made possible by the signing of the Methuen Treaty in 1703, which shall be elaborated upon in the following section, serving to more closely tie English and Portuguese commercial strands together. The wine trade, it will be argued, served as a preliminary association for Cowan into Margot Finn's highly networked familial proto-state discussion. This associated the Cairnes–Gould nexus, a function of the wider Presbyterian International network consisting of two influential families important for Cowan's career, with regional trading structures acting as a laboratory for commercially-networked trading apparatuses in early modern empire.<sup>12</sup> The idea of a laboratory-esque structure for Irish involvement in trade and empire is nothing new, with Ireland being seen as a laboratory for empire used by the British.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. The Presbyterian International

Robert Cowan was born c. 1680–90 in Londonderry. His family was of Scots-Presbyterian descent, having been based in Londonderry since the early seventeenth century.<sup>14</sup> As such, it was likely that his family traveled to Ulster from Stirling in Scotland, post-1609, as part of the plantation of Ulster under King James VI & I. Cowan's father, John, was a merchant, landowner, burgess, and alderman in the

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Knight, *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1921), 19–20.

- 11 Multivocality signifies having many meanings, understandings or narratives. The suggestion is that it can be difficult to ascertain which interest is being acted in at which time. See also, Margaret C. Rodman, "Empowering Place: Multilocality and Multivocality," *American Anthropologist*, New Series 94, no. 3 (September 1992): 640–56.
- 12 The familial proto-state argument ties the idea of family into elements of the 'new' imperial history by making the role of family instrumental in understandings of capital creation, race and colonial mentalities. Effectively, the family and kin-network informed the individual as to expected behaviour, loyalty, hierarchy, and identity. See, Margot C. Finn, "Family Formations: Anglo India and the Familial Proto-State," in *Structures and Transformations in Modern British History*, ed. David Feldman and Jon Lawrence (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 101–3.
- 13 Jane Ohlmeyer, "Ireland, India and the British Empire," *Studies in People's History* 2, no. 2 (2015): 169–70.
- 14 Robert Cowan, Letter to William Cowan, Bombay, 8 January 1734, Cowan Papers, D654/B/1/2D, f. 80v, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast.

city of Londonderry from 1693 to his death in 1733.<sup>15</sup> Cowan's identity was thus that of an Irish dissenter, though it must be acknowledged that he did not express any firm religious views in his correspondence. Dissenters were Protestant Christians, such as Ulster-Scots Presbyterians, who were outside the church of England and did not take communion under its auspices. The Sacramental Test, introduced in January 1704, required all those serving in civil or military office to receive the sacrament in the established Anglican church once a year. Here, the concept of an Irish ethnicity apart from the ruling English identity was important, and demonstrates that dissenters such as Cowan were outside of mainstream politics and limited in their choice of profession. The example of Cowan's father, John, being removed from the office of Mayor in December 1703 due to his dissenting background is a good example of this.<sup>16</sup> However, through connections to powerful London and East India Company figures via an ethnic or familial network, such barriers to advancement may have been overcome. The Company, being a body politic and not an organ of the state, was able to choose which individuals to patronize through the circumvention of established norms, which is why the concept of ethnicity is important in this discussion. Further, this argument lines up with Craig Bailey's assumptions about Ireland acting as a place for ethnic patronage networks to connect to the British imperial world and in turn feeds into the gentlemanly capitalist order.<sup>17</sup>

In the context of the Presbyterian International structure, the proposed time-span ranges from c. 1660–1778. This takes in the early modern political repression faced by Catholics and Dissenters under the Penal Laws.<sup>18</sup> As such, effective collaboration to bypass restrictive legislation was a key aim of the Presbyterian International. To justify the interdisciplinary use of robust action and incorporation of the Cowan archive into the current discussion surrounding the existence of the Presbyterian International, the argument must be considered in terms of agency. The concept of robust action requires that ambiguous action leads to a series of events and results that 'just so happen' to benefit the network's agency.<sup>19</sup> Cowan's agency in this can be demonstrated by his numerous declarations of gratitude for patronage and promises to act in his patrons' inter-

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15 Londonderry Corporation Minute Books, Volumes 1–4, MIC440/1, PRONI, Belfast.

16 Londonderry Corporation Council Meeting, Londonderry, 7 December 1703, Londonderry Corporation Minute Book, Vol. 2, f. 240, MIC440/1, PRONI, Belfast; Londonderry Corporation Council Meeting, Londonderry, 21 Dec. 1703, Londonderry Corporation Minute Book, Vol. 2, f. 241.

17 Craig Bailey, "Metropole and Colony: Irish Networks and Patronage in the Eighteenth-Century Empire," *Immigrants & Minorities* 23, nos. 2–3 (July–November 2005): 163.

18 The Penal Laws were a series of edicts enacted in an attempt to force Irish Catholics and Protestant Dissenters to accept the Anglican Church. These laws severely limited access to education, land rights, official service, and marriage recognition.

19 Padgett and Ansell, "Robust Action," 1263.



est.<sup>20</sup> The construction of his own private patronage network in India, arising out of his patronage benefits, was also tied to this.<sup>21</sup> This could certainly be seen as nothing more than verbal pleasantries, but that is also rather the point. According to the theory of robust action, individuals are too intelligent not to see through such words; however, Cowan successfully made the correct statements and did not divulge what he really sought to achieve.<sup>22</sup> As such, an effective presentation to the audience was required.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, his actions can be judged in terms of his zeal in protecting the Company's interests at Surat (1722) and Mocha (1724–7), when the Company was defrauded by native brokers and merchants, and his successful private trade at the same time.<sup>24</sup> Whereas Cowan bemoaned his private trading prospects at Mocha in particular, what can actually be witnessed is a thriving personal trade from the Red Sea to China, the Maldives, and South East Asia.<sup>25</sup>

The concept of ethnicity, the belonging to a social group with shared national or cultural traditions, in the context of such networks warrants further discussion. The Ulster-Scots Presbyterian identity held by Cowan and many of his networked contemporaries derived from the above-mentioned historic plantation of Ulster during the years 1603–25. In other words, the colonization of Ulster by the English government, with thousands of British protestants being transported in the early seventeenth century to settle lands in Ulster. Scots-Presbyterians, as with Cowan's ancestry, were a large part of this and over time became known as Ulster-Scots in order to designate their mixed ethnicity in Ireland. Michael Banton's interpretation of Max Weber's work holds that in many cases the decisive factor in individuals more easily associating with others was that, to an extent, they were unaware they were following established social conventions. As such, conventions functioned as differentiating factors for communities to distance themselves from others, particularly when seeking to capitalize on social and economic problems, which required a degree of collaborative effort.<sup>26</sup> This

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20 Robert Cowan, Letter to John Courtney, Goa, 8 February 1721, f. 3v; Letter to Mrs. Gould, Surat, 20 April 1722, f. 141; Letter to John Gould Jr., Mocha, 8 Jul. 1724, ff. 3v–5.

21 East India Company Court of Directors, Letter to Governor and Council at Bombay, London, 27 February 1729, India Office Records, IOR/E/3/104, ff. 360v–361, British Library, London.

22 Padgett and Ansell, "Robust Action," 1307.

23 Stoyan V. Sgourev, "How Paris gave rise to Cubism (and Picasso): Ambiguity and fragmentation in radical innovation," *Organization Science* 24, no. 6 (2013): 1611.

24 Robert Cowan, Letter to William Phipps, Surat, 9 May 1722, f. 147; Letter to William Phipps, Surat, 22 May 1722, f. 149v; Letter to William Phipps, Mocha, 10 March 1725, f. 55v; Letter to William Phipps, Mocha, 25 April. 1725, f. 75v.

25 Robert Cowan, Letter to John Cowan, Mocha, 8 July 1724, f. 15v; Robert Cowan, Trading Accounts, 1724–5, D654/B/1/7B.

26 Michael Banton, "Max Weber on 'Ethnic Communities': A Critique," *Nations and Nationalism* 13, no. 3 (2007): 26.

understanding is reminiscent of solutions to grand challenges. Utilizing the belief in shared ethnicity allowed political communities, in particular pressure groups, to thrive. There was, it appears, a defined structural understanding of such actions, in that belief in these ethnic apparatuses strengthened constructs, and the existence of structures, be they imagined or otherwise, reinforced belief in them. Ethnicity, in this way, provided the means for a structural understanding, particularly through shared conventions, of a concept, such as the Presbyterian International.

The use of dissenting Irish contacts, connected to Scots-Presbyterian interests based in Belfast, was an important first step for Cowan as he strived for a commercial career. Therefore, he began participating in the Atlantic wine trade with Henry Cairnes.<sup>27</sup> This is in line with research into prominent Scottish-ethnic participation in the Madeira wine trade, which has stated that there was a growing number of Scottish wine distributors on Madeira during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed, between 1700 and 1815, there were a total of at least 929 individuals involved in the trade through purchasing, packing, and shipping on Madeira, with an estimated number of 66 (7.1 Percent) identifiable as Scottish.<sup>28</sup> Whilst this was not necessarily a large proportion of the total number, it did point to a specific commercial activity for Scottish trading interests in the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>29</sup>

While it was only later that the Irish joined the trade in greater numbers through their Atlantic connections, Cowan's Ulster-Scots ethnicity gave him the ability to join what was largely a Scottish trade. This implies the cooperation between Scottish Presbyterian and Ulster-Scots Presbyterian commercial interests. The connection between this grouping and London-based finance, through the alliance of the Cairnes and Gould families, which shall be elaborated upon below, comprised an aspect of the gentlemanly capitalist system whereby Ulster landed interests aligned with London capital and political power. Whilst Cowan was involved in the Atlantic wine trade with Cairnes, the fact that Irish merchants sought foreign enclaves through which to bypass trading restrictions was suggestive of his choice of Lisbon as the site of his trading house.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, the circumstances surrounding the already mentioned 1703 Methuen Treaty give an interesting perspective on Cowan's operation at Lisbon.

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27 Fitter vs. Cairnes, Bill and Answer, 1718, C/11/2614/26, National Archives, Kew.

28 Hancock, "Combining Success and Failure," 9–10.

29 Jean Agnew, *Belfast Merchant Families in the Seventeenth Century* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), 108.

30 Barry Crosbie, *Irish Imperial Networks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 38.

The genus of the Methuen Treaty was in the commercial difficulties of the English woollens export trade.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, the Portuguese struggled to compete in the international sugar market.<sup>32</sup> The treaty itself guaranteed that duties on wine imported from Portugal would be one-third less than its French competition, whilst the Portuguese removed tariffs placed on English woollens.<sup>33</sup> Whereas the Methuen Treaty was a catalyst for trade between the two nations, the assumption that the trade with these goods was lacking in general, prior to the treaty, would be misplaced. The seventeenth-century Atlantic trade saw the import of French and Spanish wines, as well as sugar from the West Indies and tobacco from America.<sup>34</sup> This pointed to a defined and long-term engagement with the regional trade. Cowan's interest in the Atlantic wine trade was therefore unsurprising, but his connection to Cairnes was intriguing.

As Patrick Walsh has discussed, the Cairnes family was heavily involved in the Belfast corporation prior to the Sacramental Test and had well-established commercial and governmental links in Dublin and London.<sup>35</sup> At the same time as Cowan's father, John, was writing letters and carrying government documents to Dublin, William Cairnes was involved in correspondence between the Irish government in Dublin and Londonderry, suggesting an early connection between the two families.<sup>36</sup> This was further reinforced by the Cairnes family being linked to the powerful Irish dissenting landowner and member of Parliament, John Conolly, who also held large landed interests at Limavady in County Londonderry. A further Cowan connection can be added to this, with Cowan's father, John, having held lands at lease in the Limavady area at this time.<sup>37</sup> Walsh has highlighted Conolly as holding numerous multivocal political and commercial interests in Londonderry and beyond in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, controlling local affairs through both his local standing and via patronage hierarchies, which he accessed through his revenue office service. With

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- 31 Signed 27 December 1703 between England and Portugal, the treaty came about as part of the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14). The treaty, in two parts, more clearly defined the war aims of securing the Spanish Empire for Charles of Austria (r. 12 October 1711–20 October 1740) and laid out trading concessions on wine and woollens between England and Portugal.
  - 32 A. D. Francis, "John Methuen and the Anglo-Portuguese Treaties of 1703," *Historical Journal* 3, no. 2 (1960): 103.
  - 33 Charles Ludington, *The Politics of Wine in Britain: A New Cultural History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2.
  - 34 Agnew, *Belfast Merchant Families*, 108.
  - 35 Patrick Walsh, *The South Sea Bubble and Ireland: Money, Banking and Investment, 1690–1721* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2014), 47–8; 51–2.
  - 36 Londonderry Corporation Council Meeting, Londonderry, 26 Sept. 1699, Londonderry Corporation Minute Book Vol. 2, f. 174, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), Belfast; 2 January 1700, ff. 178, 184.
  - 37 Conveyance between John Cowan and William Ross, Londonderry, 4 Nov. 1715, (PRONI, Londonderry Papers, D654/D/2/A/14).

Conolly an MP and thus part of the Irish Whig network of Sir Robert Walpole's government,<sup>38</sup> in tandem with the Cairnes–Gould commercial interest linking Ulster and London, it can be said that dissenting Irish interests combined to the benefit of chosen individuals, who were incorporated into their network as nodes.<sup>39</sup> This can be described as gentlemanly capitalism at work.

Cowan's acceptance into this Ulster-centric commercial network was thus a useful stepping stone towards his entry into the wider East India Company apparatus later in his career, particularly given the Cairnes' marriage links to the powerful Gould family in London, with Nathaniel Gould being the father-in-law of Sir Alexander Cairnes. The Cairnes connection tied commercial interests in Dublin and Belfast to the Gould family, thus ensuring a defined presence in both Ireland and London.<sup>40</sup> The Dublin connection also had another connotation for Cowan, however, in that Alexander Cairnes was involved in Dublin banking circles with Hugh Henry, a prominent banker for dissenting interests, and a man who Cowan used as the fulcrum of his cash remittances to Ireland.<sup>41</sup>

The East India Company connection is important here as both the Cairnes and Gould families were heavily involved in its operation, with the use of landed capital from Ireland providing the means to invest in the Company trade. This was an aspect of the gentlemanly capitalist order. The fact that John Gould and John Gould Jr. both sat on the Company's board of directors during the 1720s and 1730s also flags ample opportunity for Cowan and his ethnic network. Indeed, it may be said that the Company patronage structure itself offered the potential for robust action, given the highly personal bonding process in which new servants were proposed, and stood surety by, senior Company figures, therefore allowing for numerous loyalties within the Company hierarchy.<sup>42</sup> The suggestion being that an individual would likely act in his patron's interest ahead of the wider board of directors. This also allowed for the concept of the Presbyterian International to be active within Company networks. Cowan's own interpretation of this system was that more powerful patronage gave access to better positions and opportunities in India.<sup>43</sup>

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38 The Whig party were a British political party active between 1678 and 1859 which followed the tenets of British Liberalism. Sir Robert Walpole was the first Prime Minister of Great Britain (3 April 1721–11 February 1742).

39 Patrick Walsh, *The Making of the Irish Protestant Ascendancy: The Life of William Conolly, 1662–1729* (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2010), 114–5; 116–8.

40 Tegg, "Sir Robert Cowan," 46–51.

41 Robert Cowan, Letter to Henry Cairnes, Bombay, 25 December 1725, f. 127v; Letter to Henry Cairnes, Surat, 11 January 1726, f. 143.

42 Santhi Hejeebu, "Contract Enforcement in the English East India Company," *Journal of Economic History* 65, no. 2 (June 2005): 500.

43 Robert Cowan, Letter to John Hinde, Mocha, 20 May 1725, f. 87v.

Cowan's entry into the Presbyterian International raises questions about his path to it, and indeed what criteria he met for entry. The answer is partially found in the underlying concept of networks such as this being used as a means to regulate its participating actors. Choosing potential members from among preexisting acquaintances and familial connections could help to overcome the dangers of miscommunication and lack of cultural affinity through a form of shared memory. Similarly, the trust element involved in having shared characteristics with potential network nodes was also important given the labor-intensive nature of early modern correspondence and remittance procedures. By reducing the perceived risk, and indeed by having a quantity of risk that may be measured, however small it may be, the network managers may have had the potential for greater control and confidence.<sup>44</sup> The Scots' Madeira trade provides a fine example in this case, whereby actors shared culture, memory, and often familial links.<sup>45</sup> By analyzing the actors and potential choices associated with the respective trade, the network managers could predict possible outcomes with more certainty. If there was an existing trade with a defined ethnic connotation to it, it was unsurprising that Cowan succeeded in entering it.

Whilst the Madeira wine trading apparatus was certainly well-established, it did not guarantee that Cowan would have had easy access to it without the benefits of the Cairnes network. Invisible barriers to trade, such as closed markets, credit deficiencies, and a lack of local knowledge would likely have stymied an individual trader. These factors could be overcome through participation in a commercial network already active in the trade.<sup>46</sup> The personal nature of early modern business networks was crucial to this. In particular, the idea of shared experiences and memory between network members were powerful motivators, with common links to home, family, and ethnicity appearing to have been the most important.<sup>47</sup> As a result of Cowan's dissenting background, shared ethnicity, and adherence to customs, his father's Londonderry corporation service during Conolly's government service, as well as his locational base in Londonderry, he was likely viewed as an acceptable candidate for the Cairnes commercial network.<sup>48</sup> This in turn was, it is argued, linked to the broader Presbyterian International commercial apparatus.

In the wider context, Ireland's potential to serve as a fulcrum for initiating networks of ethnic patronage connected to the imperial sphere made it plausible that such a vetting procedure was in place. This runs concurrently with Stoyan Sgourev's assertion that disconnected actors may succeed in innovation not only

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44 Frank H. Knight, *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit*, 19–20.

45 Hancock, "Combining Success and Failure," 9–10.

46 Bailey, "Metropole and Colony," 163.

47 Hancock, "Combining Success and Failure," 14–5.

48 Teggins, "Sir Robert Cowan," 46–51.

because of their specific actions, but rather because their actions were favorably appraised by members of their audience.<sup>49</sup> The audience, in the Cowan example, is taken to mean those who were in a position to judge his actions and merit within the Presbyterian International. The specific term audience has been used to tie in with the argument regarding perceptions over actions. In the highly political and patrimonial world of Company relationships, this was a key factor. In the context of this study, it is presupposed that the Cairnes–Gould familial network operated as Cowan’s audience for the most part, with John Gould Jr., in particular, serving as a powerful political and commercial figurehead in the city of London at this time. Gould’s leading role is proposed due to the number of financial transactions between himself and Cowan, as well as Cowan acknowledging Gould as his chief patron and declaring that he would serve as governor of Bombay as long as Gould wished it.<sup>50</sup>

Linked to this idea of an elite cadre of privately interested parties is the concept of gentlemanly capitalism, through which private landed interests combined with well-connected city mandarins to aid in the creation of wealth through overseas trade.<sup>51</sup> This was represented by the union of rural landed elites and their cosmopolitan counterparts in the city, creating an essential alliance due to the economic strength derived from agricultural rents and wages throughout the eighteenth century. Thus, it was no surprise that political power consolidated itself with the control of landed estates following the Glorious Revolution of 1688.<sup>52</sup> Since, in the case of Cowan, there is an ethnic and familial connotation to his networked trade, the concept of the familial proto-state may be aptly applied. This theory posits that privately interested commercial families and kinship groups orchestrated familial alliances and sequences of patronage for network members in order to direct imperial trade and policy in the colonies.<sup>53</sup> Cowan’s progression from the Atlantic wine trade to East India Company service, with the continued patronage of the Cairnes–Gould family, was a good example of this. A favorable reception from the audience and continued adherence to established customs were essential here. Whilst this shall be expanded upon in the following section, the present question must be one of how Cowan succeeded in making the transition from a regional commercial network to an imperial one in the space of a few years. An intriguing link is to be found in his betrothal to the daughter of John Gould Sr.

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49 Sgourev, “Cubism (and Picasso),” 1611.

50 Robert Cowan, Letter to William Phipps, Parel, 4 September 1734, f. 138v; Letter to John Gould, Bombay, 2 January 1726, f. 133; Letter to John Gould Jr., Bombay, 12 January 1721, f. 212.

51 P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion, 1688–1914* (New York: Longman, 1994), 85–6.

52 Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, 58–9.

53 Finn, “Family Formations,” 101–3.

Since personal networks tended to involve network nodes in complex matrices of personal and professional involvement, it was possible for nodes to interact with each other in a variety of ways.<sup>54</sup> These interactions can be discerned in terms of the multivocality of roles and diverse hierarchical structures, something discussed as having a horizontal network hierarchy.<sup>55</sup> The most common association when building networked alliances was that of intermarriage between network members' families. In Cowan's case, he became engaged to Elizabeth Gould sometime before he sailed to India in 1719. A specific date for the formalization of this arrangement is difficult to determine, but the union was approved before he left London and he corresponded with Elizabeth in this light for many years after.<sup>56</sup> However, owing to Cowan's extended service in India, the betrothal was broken off in 1724–5, with Elizabeth instead marrying Albert Nesbitt.<sup>57</sup> Two factors are important here; first, that Nesbitt was another dissenting Irishman with London commercial links to the Gould family.<sup>58</sup> Second, that Cowan's relationship with the Gould family, and the wider Cairnes–Gould nexus, was undamaged following this divergence.

The choice of a second dissenting-Irish groom for Elizabeth Gould is indicative of a defined goal of securing network connections within the wider Presbyterian community in London and Ireland. City interests, in the form of the Gould family, acting in this way to secure regional connections for commerce on a global scale is indicative of gentlemanly capitalism at work. Indeed, the choice of Nesbitt solidified Gould links with the Nesbitt family in London, who occupied offices at Coleman Street in an existing partnership with Nathaniel Gould; further, this area of London housed numerous Irish merchants with Ulster connections.<sup>59</sup> Cowan's continued favor with the family also pointed to a recognition of the value of ongoing ethnic and familial cooperation, as per the familial proto-state. This, it is argued, was part of a wider effort to consolidate Irish commercial links. Ethnic links consolidated through marriage were important, but shared identity and adherence to common customs, as discussed above, also counted for much in terms of audience. This demonstrates that marriage was not the only means of securing patronage with such a network, but that an element of shared community and customs was necessary. Cowan had been on intimate terms with the entire nuclear Cairnes–Gould family and served as an attorney for their Indian trading

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54 Hancock, "Combining Success and Failure," 14–5.

55 Emily Erikson, *Between Monopoly and Free Trade: The English East India Company 1600–1757* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 19–20.

56 Robert Cowan, Letter to Betty Gould, Bombay, 20 October 1723, f.14v; Letter to John Gould Jr., Mocha, 8 July 1724, ff.3v–5.

57 Robert Cowan, Letter to Betty Gould, Mocha, 15 July 1725, f.98v.

58 Craig Bailey, "The Nesbitts of London and their Networks" in *Irish and Scottish Mercantile Networks in Europe and Overseas in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, ed.

David Dickson, Jan Parmentier and Jane Ohlmeyer (Gent: Academia Press, 2007), 243–5

59 Bailey, "Nesbitts of London," 235–6.

affairs for over ten years. His correspondence networks with the women of the Cairnes–Gould family are particularly interesting in this regard, with intimate letters being exchanged between Cowan and these ladies.<sup>60</sup>

Such a gendered correspondence network has been the subject of a separate network study, though a brief commentary is warranted here.<sup>61</sup> It has been argued that defined spikes in Cowan's correspondence occurred during times he was suffering from elements of colonial anxiety when posted at Goa (1721–2) and Mocha (1724–7).<sup>62</sup> In his letter books for these placements, letters addressed to female members of his network, such as his fiancé, Elizabeth Gould, and Frances Cairnes (née Gould), contained personal descriptions of his difficulties. While these letters only amounted to 16 out of 287 at Goa and 18 out of 558 for Mocha, such spikes are not witnessed anywhere else in Cowan's correspondence. This strongly suggested a defined need or want for emotional support from his ethnic or kin network, specifically through female correspondence. It must be acknowledged that although the wider debate involving colonial anxiety and its signifiers is currently undergoing an alteration in focus, the use of highly networked individual archives, such as Cowan's, can provide a great deal of insight into the structures and identity of early modern networks in the context of family and shared community.

Whilst a recognized marriage to the familial community was no longer an option, there was seemingly a significant degree of respect and effective patronage between Cowan and the Goulds based on shared emotional bonds.<sup>63</sup> This, it is argued, is connected to the value of shared memory and identity within networks, and further points towards the existence of the Presbyterian International which acted as a privately interested network.<sup>64</sup>

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60 Robert Cowan, Letter to Mrs. Cairnes, Surat, 20 April 1722, f.140; Letter to Mrs. Gould, Surat, 20 April 1722, f.141; Letter to Mrs. Gould, Mocha, 8 July 1724, f. 8v.

61 Edward Owen Teggins, "Colonial Anxiety and Identity: Ethnic Networks as Cultural Supports in Colonial South Asia and Sumatra," *Indonesian Historical Studies* 4, no. 2 (December 2020): 84–99.

62 Colonial Anxiety is a difficult subject to adequately define, and increasingly so given the recent re-examination of the field. In a broad sense, it is taken to refer to feelings of discomfort, fear of attack, feeling lost in an unknown world, cultural disconnection, or awareness of a defined lack on the part of the individual in empire. See also, Ranajit Guha, "Not at Home in Empire," *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 3 (Spring 1997): 482–93.

63 Robert Cowan, Letter to John Gould Jr., Bombay, 25 July 1729, f. 82v; Letter to John Gould Jr., Bombay, 13 February 1734, f. 121; Letter to John Gould, Bombay, 25 August 1734, 149v.

64 Hancock, "Combining Success and Failure," 15.



### 3. Robust Action in the Cairnes–Gould Network

In this section, the style of control and identity used by the Cairnes and Gould families will be discussed in relation to robust action in order to more accurately describe the Presbyterian International and link it to the theory of gentlemanly capitalism. The concept of robust action has been the subject of much debate over the past few decades and, as a topic, has great potential for future interdisciplinary studies. Indeed, the pragmatic philosophy, viewed through robust action, provides a toolkit for a multifaceted problem-solving approach that is situated, distributed, and processual.<sup>65</sup> This is in turn linked to the role of humans as problem solvers and the function of thought as being to guide action in the service of solving practical problems.<sup>66</sup> As has been alluded to above, the current experimentation with robust action and intra-Asian commercial pursuits necessitates that the problem of engaging with and controlling segments of the various trades may be classified as a grand challenge. Of this, it may be said that there is a clear linkage of distributed action and novel solutions to problems within such networks, as well as a certain complexity due to the number of actors involved in fulfilling roles as network nodes.

In the context of the current study, it is necessary to view such networks as patrimonial creations of social exchange through which collective action provided resources, capital, and expertise.<sup>67</sup> Admittedly, however, the control of networks, became in turn a great difficulty, with those approaching grand challenges being unable to view the system in its entirety. As a result, they then had to rely on trusted actors, going beyond traditionally understood patronage relationships which relied on written bonds and good faith. Effectively, too many variables and situations were in play to maintain sufficient control, so appointing those with as many commonly held attributes and customs as possible made much sense; the ethnic dimension is a key consideration here. A further problem emerges, however, in that the preferences of actors are not stable, but in fact a constantly evolving field of interests. It will be observed that the Presbyterian International, which we take as our case study, firmly consisted of a small cadre of privately interested network nodes, as opposed to the more traditional structure of public interest and a wide public impact ratio commonly associated with our understanding of grand challenges. In answer to this problem, the example of the investigation into the Medici may again be referenced.

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65 Ferraro, Etzion and Gehman, “Grand Challenges,” 370.

66 Neil Gross, “A Pragmatist Theory of Social Mechanisms,” *American Sociological Review* 74, no. 3 (2009): 366.

67 Bailey, “Metropole and Colony,” 162.

Accordingly, the term robust action has been used as a means of describing Cosimo de' Medici's style of control, whereby everything that was done in response to a flow of petitions, coincidentally or otherwise, appeared to serve Cosimo's wider interests.<sup>68</sup> This is tied to the understanding of multivocality as permitting single actions to be moves in many different games simultaneously. The Medici have been lauded for being able to exhibit great collective action, while at the same time successfully concealing their true ambitions. This was an extension of Cosimo's reputation for being anxious to remain behind the scenes and only directly acting when he had no other choice, or indeed through a chosen deputy.<sup>69</sup> The construction of the Cowan network, and the wider Presbyterian International, may be said to have functioned with a similar goal. Whilst it was clear that merchants involved in early modern trade were seeking profits, creditors desired a return on interest, and brokers sought commission on contracts, it was difficult to pin down who was acting in which interest at which time, particularly given the multivocality of roles possible in networks such as this.<sup>70</sup>

In the case of the Presbyterian International, ethnically and religiously linked nodes were actively recruited into the network, which in turn led to the increasingly overlapping array of nodes with high multivocality.<sup>71</sup> The key appears to have been in the effective projection of ambiguous behavior. Whilst others are too shrewd not to see through individual self-interest, the portrayal of one's attributed interests as multivocal is a path towards understanding the reproduction and control of networked behaviors.<sup>72</sup> This has the effect of obscuring private interests amongst a myriad of competing interests that may or may not be in play at any one given time. Such multivocality was important in order to allow actors to maintain their involvement across conflicting positions, particularly in the face of disruption or change of environmental factors. In this way, separate interpretations may be presented to varying audiences with differing evaluative criteria. Servants, such as Cowan, engaging in illicit private trade personally, or on behalf of a patron, such as John Gould Jr., are a good example of this. This again returns to arguments on audience reception.<sup>73</sup>

Therefore, one might incorporate an example of robust action at work with Thomas Edison and his team inventing the electric lightbulb through skeuomorphic design. It has been argued that Edison and his network specifically designed the lightbulb and its attendant systems to mirror the existing gaslight technology

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68 Padgett and Ansell, "Robust Action," 1263.

69 Curt S. Gutkind, *Cosimo de' Medici: Paterfamilias, 1389–1464* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), 124.

70 Hancock, "Combining Success and Failure," 14–5.

71 Hancock, "Combining Success and Failure," 14–5.

72 Padgett and Ansell, "Robust Action," 1307.

73 Sgourev, "Cubism (and Picasso)," 1611.

in order to appear familiar to customers, while at the same time not constraining the future development which ultimately follows extended usage of technology. Edison's network accomplishment was therefore twofold; first, he designed a technology that was more efficient than the existing product. Second, he laid the foundations for future technological and commercial innovation. Essentially, competitors to this new technology were pushed to the side in the present and the future, though the innovators remained ambiguous and concealed their true intention, namely the domination of the lighting industry, from their audience by delivering their products in recognizable formats in the process.<sup>74</sup>

A key factor in the effective functioning of a network is the successful flow of information, which is significant, considering Cowan and his ethno-familial network, where he served as a conduit of information for the Cairnes–Gould nexus whilst he was in South Asia.<sup>75</sup> This idea runs concurrently with the vital role which individual actors, as part of wider networks, could play in the cohesive management of intra-Asian trade and the reduction of risk in the early modern period.<sup>76</sup> Risk refers to decision-making situations in which potential outcomes and occurrences are known to the decision-maker. Uncertainty, on the other hand, highlights when outcomes and their probability are unknown. The resulting risk-uncertainty dialectic, discussed by Frank Knight, needs discussion here. Uncertainty must be understood in a radically different sense than risk, though the two terms had never been properly distinguished before Knight; whereas risk may at times appear as a measurable quantity, and others not, the same cannot be said of uncertainty. Knightian uncertainty is a lack of quantifiable knowledge about some possible occurrence, as opposed to the presence of quantifiable risk.

The concept acknowledges a degree of ignorance, limits to knowledge, and unpredictability of the future. In effect, this Knightian uncertainty posits that it is this measurable quality that distinguishes risk and uncertainty. It is therefore the 'true' uncertainty, and not risk, that forms the basis of a valid theory of profitability.<sup>77</sup> A profit-seeking man, for example, contracts for services or goods in advance based on what he expects to make by their investment. The return is, however, unknown at the time of initial investment.<sup>78</sup> Through the context of such unknowns, the concept of the Presbyterian International gains traction as a

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74 A. B. Hargadon and Y. Douglas, "When Innovations Meet Institutions: Edison and the Design of the Electric Light," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2001): 479–80.

75 Borgatti and Halgin, "Network Theory," 1172; Robert Cowan, Letter to John Gould, Goa, 25 November 1721, f. 101v; Letter to John Gould Jr., Mocha, 15 July 1725, f. 91; Letter to John Gould Jr., Bombay, 6 January 1729, f. 44v.

76 Søren Mentz, *The English Gentleman Merchant at work: Madras and the City of London, 1660–1740* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2005), 81.

77 Knight, *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit*, 19–20.

78 Knight, *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit*, 363.

solution to the grand challenge of networks entering and exerting control over regional markets on a global scale. At the same time, it is important to view diverse geopolitical spheres concurrently in order to obtain an accurate observation.<sup>79</sup>

The usage of such a system of economic control to deal with the risk-uncertainty question can best be seen through the correspondence of Cowan with his ethnically motivated patronage circle, with Cowan acting as a conduit for political and economic information.<sup>80</sup> This, in itself, runs in tandem with his emotionally driven gendered correspondence, discussed above. Key to this is the focus of robust action on the movements and decisions of individual actors. Whereas Cowan was actively engaged in his own private trade in the intra-Asian sphere, he was also an involved network node in official Company commerce and the Presbyterian International structure, and as such interested his fellow network members in his intra-Asian voyages. Cowan was thus an active node in the wider network, seemingly serving his audience, but was also acting ambiguously in terms of his own trade. Whilst it is true that Cowan included his patrons and network nodes in intra-Asian trade, fulfilling a role in their familial proto-state, it was likewise the case that he traded for his own benefit to a large degree and returned to England a very wealthy man in 1735.<sup>81</sup> The generation of such wealth, it is argued, was made possible by gentlemanly capitalist action through imperially linked networks, such as the Presbyterian International. The presentation of an acceptable set of circumstances to his audience was crucial for Cowan in order to conceal that personal gain was his true intention. Table 1, below, demonstrates the complex nature of such private trade.

In commercial terms, eighteenth-century British trade in the intra-Asian sphere was largely concerned with providing luxury items, such as cloth, pepper, coffee, spices, and indigo for European markets. During Cowan's time as governor of Bombay, the supply of pepper, coffee, and cloth, in particular, were his most pressing demands. Indeed, between 1729–31 Cowan had to contend with fluctuations in the supply and price of pepper and cloth, caused by political instability at the hub-port of Surat and the Malabar Coast.<sup>82</sup> Further, the long-term difficulties in Yemen and Persia made the supply of coffee inconsistent.<sup>83</sup> Whilst it

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79 Philip Stern, "British Asia and British Atlantic: Comparisons and Connections," *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series 63, no. 4 (October 2006): 693–5.

80 Robert Cowan, Letter to John Gould, Goa, 25 November 1721, f. 10lv; Letter to John Gould Jr., Mocha, 15 July 1725, f. 9l; Letter to John Gould Jr., Bombay, 6 January 1729, f. 44v.

81 Robert Cowan, Will of Robert Cowan, Bombay, 4 January 1735, Cowan Papers, D654/C/1/1A, f. 1, PRONI, Belfast.

82 Robert Cowan, Letter to Edward Harrison, Bombay, 3 January 1729, f. 43v; Letter to Sir Matthew Decker, Bombay, 10 January 1730, f. 26v; Letter to William Phipps, Bombay, 6 January 1730, f. 5v.

83 Robert Cowan, Letter to Mrs. Macrae, Mocha, 8 July 1724, f. 2; Letter to John Gould Jr., Mocha, 8 July 1724, f. 3v.

was preferred that English woolens were sold in India to support English weavers and exports, intra-Asian powers preferred to be paid in bullion or specie.<sup>84</sup> This meant a great deal of England's precious metal reserves were leaving the country every year, something which caused fierce political debate in conjunction with the import of Indian calicoes.<sup>85</sup>

In terms of Cowan's private trade in the intra-Asian sphere, it must be acknowledged that servants purchasing key products of interest to the company, such as pepper, cloth, and coffee, was frowned upon.<sup>86</sup> Whilst Cowan largely avoided pepper and quality calicoes, he was heavily involved in the trade for non-quality cloth and coffee between South Asia, South China, and the Red Sea.<sup>87</sup> He was also concerned in the trade for precious stones, such as diamonds and Cambay beads.<sup>88</sup> Whereas servants such as Cowan could not ship bulk commodities, such as coffee, to Europe without being discovered and fined by the Company, gemstones were small, highly valuable, and easy to conceal. In one voyage alone, Cowan shipped diamonds to the value of 9,730:0:21 Pounds to London.<sup>89</sup> Whilst Cowan was greatly interested in private trade, his account of John Gould Jr., shown below in Table 1, may be used to demonstrate his multivocal commercial performance. This more fully brings the concept of Cowan's credit transfers, included amongst his commercial accounts for the years 1732–5, in South Asia into the discussion.<sup>90</sup>

Immediately, one can discern that large sums of money were being transmitted between the two men, with the figure of 4,395:06:0 Pounds, in particular, standing out. We know that Cowan acted as attorney for Gould whilst he was in India, and so this sum was likely connected to investment carried out by Cowan on Gould's behalf. With the knowledge that Cowan interested Gould in many of the voyages he undertook in the intra-Asian sphere, Table 1 may be seen as evidence of Gould's commercial relationship with Cowan as a networked node. Moreover, the fortunate survival of archival material such as this, in terms of both

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- 84 Najaf Haider, "Precious Metal Flows and Currency Circulation in the Mughal Empire," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 39, no. 3 (1996): 299.
  - 85 Julian Hoppit, *A Land of Liberty? England: 1689–1727* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 275.
  - 86 Hejeebu, "Contract Enforcement," 501–2.
  - 87 Robert Cowan, Investment Accounts, 1732–5, Cowan Papers, D654/B/1/10B, PRONI, Belfast.
  - 88 Robert Cowan, Letter to 'Sir', Surat, 7 September 1722, f. 176; Invoice of Cambay Beads Laden on the Oakham, Bombay, 29 January 1731, f. 54.
  - 89 Robert Cowan, Invoice of Diamonds Laden on the Prince William, Bombay, 20 January 1731, f. 37.
  - 90 Robert Cowan, Account Transfers to Robert Cowan, 1732–5, Cowan Papers, D654/B/1/10B, PRONI, Belfast.

Dr		John Gould Junior Esq. to Robert Cowan Esq.													Cr
		Rupees	q	r	Pounds	s	d			Rupees	q	r	Pounds	s	d
1729							1729								
Sept. 30	To a bill of exchange on the East India Company remitted you per Morrice	1,200	–	–	158	–	–	Oct. 1	By four chests of Claret & 4 of White Lisbon wine received by the Windham	1,057	3	60	132	4	9
1729/30							1730								
Jan. 25	To Captain Robert Lyell his bill on himself	615	–	27	76	17	8	Oct. 11	By 6 chests of French wine & four chests of Lisbon received by the Prince William	1,299	1	86	162	8	8
1730/1							1731								
Mar. 16	To cash lent Mr. Edward Owen on his bond 5 per cent interest per annum	400	–	–	50	–	–	Jul. 1	By Samuel Holden Esq. for my order to pay him	2,747	1	33	343	8	4
Feb. 1	To a bill of exchange on the Company remitted per Lethulier	3,947	1	33	493	8	4	Oct. 1	By 4 Hogsheads of French wine, one pipe of Calcavellah & 90 gallons of Burton Ale received per Stretham	1,838	2	40	229	16	6
1731/2							1732								
Feb. 1	To a bill of exchange on the Company remitted by the Stretham & Oakham	4,000	–	–	500	–	–	Oct. 1	By 4 Hogsheads of Claret, 1 pipe of Calcavellah & 76 gallons of ale received by the Marlborough	1,858	–	80	232	5	6

Dr										John Gould Junior Esq. to Robert Cowan Esq.										Cr									
1732/3										1732/3																			
Jan. 28	To a bill of exchange on the Company now remitted you by the Greenwich & Marlborough	25,000	-	-	3,125	-	-			Jan. 27	By my bill in favour of Mrs. Frances Cairnes for	800	-	-	100	-	-												
											By my bill in favour of Mr. John Sherman	850	3	60	106	7	3												
											By my bill in favour of Geo Atkins Esq.	338	-	46	42	5	3 ½												
											By Coll John Johnson my bill in his favour per Oakham	361	-	80	45	3	-												
											By Mrs. Frances Cairnes my bill in her favour per Oakham	800	-	-	100	-	-												
										Jan. 28	By ballance remaining	23,210	2	75	2,901	6	8 ½												
		35,162	1	60	4,395	6	-					35,162	1	60	4,395	6	-												
										NB	Omitted to credit him for my bill in favour of Mr. Monier per Oakham, of this I advised him per Monmouth who was the last ship dispatched this year	200	-	-	25	-	-												
										Bombay Castle the 28 <sup>th</sup> January 1732/3																			
										Transmitted coppys of this account per Marlborough & Greenwich																			

**Tab. 1** Account Between John Gould Jr. Esq. and Robert Cowan Esq.

correspondence and accounts, is what enables studies like the present to reconstruct networked communities following the work into the Medici of fifteenth-century Florence. This returns to arguments regarding the agency of the scholar in denoting network nodes to construct the wider apparatus.<sup>91</sup> Crucially, however, the numerous bills of exchange transacted between the two men point towards a complicated financial structure in which credit was being facilitated by Gould, via Cowan, to other recipients of patronage in India.

While the alcohol trade, which Cowan was clearly involved in, is interesting in the above account, it is the credit transactions in Table 1, involving men such as John Sherman, Robert Lyell, and Samuel Holden, that stand out. These were all men with whom Cowan carried out correspondence and business in India, and their connection to the Gould network points towards another network layer orchestrated by Cowan in South Asia. Intriguingly, the information in Table 1 is also evidence of horizontal network theory at work, in which Cowan functioned in a dual role.<sup>92</sup> He both facilitated his patron's interests in a vertical fashion by controlling credit and investment, whilst simultaneously conducting his own trade and patronage relationships with the likes of Lyell and Holden. This was further complicated by Gould Jr. acting as Cowan's attorney for servicing Cowan's historic debts arising out of his former business partnership at Lisbon.<sup>93</sup> The key here is, however, that the two men were theoretically both serving the East India Company, but were also seen to act within the Presbyterian International. As such, this semiautonomous network was both enabled and reinforced by the Company and therefore returns to the above discussion of ethnic structures and the belief in them reinforcing each other. This implies a defined network relationship between Cowan and Gould similar to the description of Cosimo de Medici.<sup>94</sup>

How does this tie into the broader discussion of robust action in the Presbyterian International case in the Cowan example, however? As already discussed, Cowan, like many of his contemporaries, was highly involved in his own personal trade whilst simultaneously fulfilling his official Company role. The goal was to supplement their Company salary and make a fortune to return to England with, attaining the goal of what has been described as 'nabobery'.<sup>95</sup> Whilst it was understood that individual servants often traded privately, the idea that they may have traded to excess was also greatly frowned upon by the directors in London. Although restrictions were placed on the trade of Indian goods to Britain, and

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91 Borgatti and Halgin, "Network Theory," 1169.

92 Erikson, *Between Monopoly and Free Trade*, 19–20.

93 Robert Cowan, Letter to John Gould Jr., Bombay, 31 August 1734, f.144.

94 Padgett and Ansell, "Robust Action," 1262–3.

95 Philip Lawson and Jim Phillips, "Our Execrable Banditti": Perceptions of Nabobs in Mid-Eighteenth Century Britain," *Albion* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1984): 226–9.



harsh punishments applied to those who transgressed, the temptation was evident given the large profits which stood to be made.<sup>96</sup> This was characterized as putting the private individual interest ahead of the wider public interest of the East India Company and court of directors, an action that has been described as the individual engaging in an aspect of the rational actor theory.<sup>97</sup> Effectively, this theory contends that every individual conducts a personal cost-benefit analysis to determine which action is worth pursuing for their own personal benefit. This assumes that the individual, or actor, is consistent in their decision-making for personal gain.<sup>98</sup> Whilst it was certainly true that Cowan was acting in his own interests, and made a vast fortune as a result, it may also be said that, by conducting trade on behalf of his wider Presbyterian International network, he was also acting on behalf of his audience. This returns to the gentlemanly capitalist theory and the assertion that success and innovation may be ensured through a positive appraisal of one's actions by a given audience.<sup>99</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

The Presbyterian International, as discussed above, demonstrates the complexity and multivocality of early modern commercial networks, as well as how they connected to distant global spheres through trade, and has been strongly aligned with the gentlemanly capitalist theory. The Ulster-Scots ethnic component, together with aspects such as customs, shared memory, and barriers to entry, has been a fascinating point of discussion for the current study. The gentlemanly capitalist theory, in which regional landed interests connected to metropolitan centers to benefit from capital and political influence in the creation of wealth, has been a key part of connecting the Ulster-Scots and London networks. The alliance of the Cairnes and Gould families was a good example in this regard, with the influential Cairnes family providing Ulster connections to the powerful Gould family involved with the East India Company.

In many ways, this study is an examination of the benefits of interpersonal relationships in mitigating risks in long-distance trade. Whereas the ethnic network in this context perhaps made vertical control hierarchy seem simplistic, there was also the danger that the sheer distance involved in many trading ventures would make it difficult to understand the motives and thus lead to multivocality at node level. Essentially, this comes down to ambiguity amongst the lesser network actors akin to the rational actor theory. Furthermore, the absence

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96 Hejeebu, "Contract Enforcement," 498–9.

97 Erikson, *Between Monopoly and Free Trade*, 108–9.

98 See also, Kristen Renwick Monroe and Kristen Hill Maher, "Psychology and Rational Actor Theory," *Political Psychology* 16, no. 1 (March 1995): 1–21.

99 Sgourev, "Cubism (and Picasso)," 1611.

of defined network roles allowed individual nodes to expand into each other's lives through marriage, again suggesting multivocality. This lack of definition also returns to the discussion surrounding the importance of ambiguity of action when attempting to assert control. It has been discussed that Cowan succeeded in pleasing his patrons in London by fulfilling his official role through trading on behalf of his Company patrons, whilst at the same time making a great fortune for himself. However, he did not occupy the 'top' spot in his network, as Cosimo de Medici did in his, because, despite generating ties of personal loyalty in South Asia, he was directed and provided with opportunities by landed and city interests. The example of John Gould Jr. has been proposed in this regard owing to his high multivocality and great control over lesser network nodes, such as Cowan.

The second key development in this study is an overarching ethnic network referred to as the Presbyterian International which represented, and perhaps controlled, dissenting Irish interests across geopolitical spheres in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The use of robust action within such a network can be warranted owing to the myriad of interests that were active, yet seemingly also converged at appropriate times to provide the means for political agency and the creation of wealth in Europe and the colonies. This has been demonstrated through Cowan's progression from his Londonderry home to the Atlantic wine trade, and further on to East India Company service, which has in turn been linked to the gentlemanly capitalist order and the activity of a familial proto-state. In this way, family, ethnicity, and shared identity or memory have proven to be key considerations in the study of early modern commercial networks. The multidisciplinary approach of the study is supported through the utilization of elements of management science and theory, such as robust action in the analysis of the Cairnes–Gould network. This, in particular, has enabled Cowan's network connections to be more effectively examined. Additionally, the incorporation of aspects such as risk, uncertainty, and audience reception, offers exciting new possibilities for the discussion of early modern networks.

Finally, there was clearly a global aspect to the construction of commercial apparatuses like the Presbyterian International, which results from the need to view various geopolitical zones concurrently to get an accurate vision of the myriad of factors at play. Accordingly, the wider Cowan network was global in its application by sheer necessity in order to prosper. Connecting landed capital interests in Britain and Ireland, and then bolstering them with city-political and -commercial contacts, provided the means for the creation of wealth in Asia. The initial stage, incorporating the regional Atlantic wine trade, serves to draw the debate more firmly into global discussions of empire since similar actors were involved in largely similar roles in both the Atlantic wine trade and the intra-Asian trading world to simultaneously benefit their network and fulfill obligations. In terms of trading multivocality, Table 1 is a good example: whilst actors completed tasks, such as the allowance of credit, transfer of bills of exchange, and sale of qual-

ity goods, and made money, the identity of the controlling element, however, remains elusive, thus granting sufficient ambiguity to confirm the presence of the robust action theory at work.

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