In his concise study, Glenn Melancon challenges the conventional view that the motive underlying the Opium War (1840-1842) was the British government’s intention to open China to free trade. On the basis of hitherto unexplored sources, in particular the private papers of leading British politicians, Melancon provides compelling evidence that until the autumn of 1839, the Melbourne ministry harboured no such desire. On the contrary, its main concern was to avoid any disruption of the China trade, especially the all-important tea trade. The British cabinet was therefore willing to comply with the strict trade regulations imposed by the Chinese government. Only a minority of Country Traders who were involved in smuggling opium into China, the commercial and manufacturing circles of England’s industrial cities and their parliamentary spokesmen, the Radicals, openly favoured unrestricted free trade.

Various reasons were responsible for the liberal Melbourne ministry’s change of mind. After the deregulation of the China trade in 1833, Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston repeatedly failed to formulate a clear China policy and communicate it to the British trade commissioners who had replaced the agents of the former monopolist, the East India Company. Besides, both the men on the spot and the decision makers in London did not take into proper account the Chinese government’s ban on opium that took effect in 1836. When the Imperial Commissioner Lin Ze-xu forced the foreign merchants to surrender their opium in the spring of 1839, Superintendent of Trade Charles Elliot declared the British merchants’ stocks government property. Although Elliot was not authorized to undertake such a measure, his aim was not to lure the reluctant British government into a war, but to normalize trade relations with China. The Melbourne ministry, however, not only faced both a domestic and colonial crisis as well as conflicts in Latin America and the Eastern Mediterranean, but also had all but lost its majority in Parliament. Harassed by the Conservative opposition, it had to resort to an alliance with the Radicals, who were pressing for a more aggressive China policy. The decision to declare war on China was a result of that alliance.

Melancon does not stop there, however, but goes on to argue that economic motives played only a secondary role in the decision-making process. Far more important, in his view, was the problem of national honour, a point that Melancon explains at great length. On the basis of a revisionist interpretation of British history, he views Britain not primarily as a modern, industrialized country. On the contrary he points out that its social and political elite continued to be influenced by the values of the landed aristocracy, among which honour was one of the most prominent. Cabinet members therefore felt more strongly about the insult Elliot had had to suffer at the hands of the Chinese during the opium crisis of March 1839 than about the economic losses of the British merchants. That they perceived that insult as a violation of Britain’s national honour was the crucial factor in their decision to go to war.

Yet this argument seems somewhat inflated. According to Melancon’s analysis, it holds true only for the decisive cabinet meeting of 1 October 1839. But even Melancon is doubtful whether Palmerston’s appeal to national honour alone could have enabled the ministry to defeat the non-confidence motion of 7 April 1840, the alliance with the Radicals being of far greater importance. Besides, the evidence that Melancon provides to highlight the controversial public debate on the coming war does not focus on the question of national honour.

Although there are some flaws in one of the crucial points of Melancon’s argument, on the whole his study is a fine example of empirical analysis and critical scholarship. Melancon does prove that the British government had no long-term strategy of „opening“ China by force, and in his concluding remarks he rightly cautions the reader against taking the effects of an event for its cause. Free trade imperialism was not a grand strategy preceding...
the Opium War, it was a consequence of that war.