

Sammelrez: East India Company

Stern, Philip J.: *The Company-State. Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011. ISBN: 978-0-19-539373-6; 320 S.

Sutton, Jean: *The East India Company's Maritime Service, 1746-1834. Masters of the Eastern Seas*. Rochester: Boydell & Brewer 2010. ISBN: 9781843835837; 311 S.

Makepeace, Margaret: *The East India Company's London Workers. Management of the Warehouse Labourers, 1800-1858*. Rochester: Boydell & Brewer 2010. ISBN: 978-1-84383-585-1; 242 S.

Bowen, Huw; McAleer, John; Blyth, Robert J.: *Monsoon Traders. The Maritime World of the East India Company*. London: Scala Publishers 2011. ISBN: 978-1-85759-675-5; 192 S.

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There seems to be an endless interest in the history of the East India Company (EIC). During the last ten years about twenty books came on the market, all of them by British authors and by British publishing houses. Striking are two new tendencies: Firstly, while research in the 1970s broadened the traditional emphasis on economic aspects including social history, recent studies focus on administrative-cum-commercial subjects. Some of them, despite the vivid criticism, reproduce the narrative of a trading company being transformed into an administrative organisation (between 1770 and 1830) and present it as clear evidence for the empire building in the „East“ and the ascent of the British Empire to global dominance. The process appears as inevitable, once set into motion it could not be stopped. Accordingly, the history of the EIC after 1833 becomes a kind of postscript to a development that had already taken its route. Only few publications reconstruct the EIC in a differentiated manner emphasizing its course in its own terms which departs from the established lin-

ear success story.¹ Secondly, again in contrast to older research the company's activities in London, Britain and in its settlements abroad are dealt with extensively while the interaction between the EIC's merchants and their Asian partners – be they merchants, producers, politicians of various kinds – are blended out almost completely.²

Both problematic tendencies can also be observed in the books under review here. They deal with the early company state in South Asia, the Company's maritime service, the Company's Asian trading activities and its London employees and Scottish intellectuals. Asian actors do, as already mentioned, hardly appear and if so, they play a marginal or extra role. The EIC seems as if it had been a self-sufficient, self-satisfied enterprise contributing to Britain's imperial superiority in the nineteenth century which fledged out to a unique success-story of the world's probably first globally acting capitalist undertaking. Despite its heavy struggles with interlopers, free-merchants, pirates and the British state during the first century of its existence and the complete restructuring of the two existing East India Companies at the turn of the seventeenth century, the EIC seems to have barely passed through any troubled waters.

Philip J. Stern's book on the Company-State re-interprets the historical meaning of the first half of the EIC's history up to the middle of the eighteenth century. Stern rethinks „the dynamics of transition between the 'first' and the 'second' British empires, pointing instead to a more continuous, gradual and contingent story that envisions the evolution of empire as part of the transformation from the early modern to modern form of state, sovereignty, and political power.“ (p. 7) The history of the EIC is thus not merely a story of trading activities but of corporations. Stern convincingly argues throughout his study that the EIC, from its inception in 1600, formed a government, a corporation developing institutional and ideological foundations of a Company-State, a political community that could act

¹ See my review at H-Soz-und-Kult, 24.02.2011, <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2011-1-139>> (24.07.2012)

² Vide, for example, the seminal study of Kirti N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660-1760*, Cambridge 1978.

in its own right. Moreover, this state formation overseas runs parallel with state formation in England and other parts of Europe – and, one may add, Asia. From the very beginning, Stern argues, the EIC claimed jurisdiction over English trade and traffic in Asia and thus over ships, wares, and subjects. It performed government duties like administering law, collecting taxes, providing protection, inflicting punishment, performing stateliness, regulating economic, religious and civic life, conducting diplomacy and waging war, in short: the EIC was a body politic.

Chapter 1 describes the EIC's network of forts, fortresses, factories and settlements established in the Indic and Southern Atlantic during the seventeenth century. Like other contemporary (English) trading companies (e.g. the Virginia Company) the EIC understood itself as a colonising agency which organised peopling, planting and, essentially, efficient government. Chapter 2 gives ample evidence of how the Company pursued these aims. In chapters 3 to 5 Stern analyses the emergence of the jurisdictional foundations of the colonial network but also the use of diplomacy and war for expanding its role as a local body politic. Chapters 6 to 8 describe the Company's attempt to acquire territorial power at the end of the seventeenth century.

However, at the same time the EIC had to face fierce opposition by interlopers, freebooters, pirates, members of parliament and the king heavily attacking the EIC's monopoly. The chapters of the book mark the EIC's transformation from a company chartered by the prerogative of the king towards a company privileged and gradually controlled by parliament. This transformation process, as Stern argues, reflects state formation as it was going on in England at the same time. In short, state formation is much more than the emergence of a territorial state in Europe but the organisation of a body politic along the idea of a centralised, efficient and, in the wake of that, powerful government, be that at home or abroad. To widen the scope of the book I would argue that this could also be observed in some countries and states of South Asia. Yet this was not the subject of Stern's study which, in any case, deserves a wide reader-

ship comprising more than established EIC-historians.

Jean Sutton has a closer look at the maritime service of the EIC from the middle of the eighteenth century until 1834 when the EIC's trading monopoly ended due to an act of parliament. The Introduction is a rough and ready short history of the 'rise and fall' of the EIC. Rather than taking a critical view of that historical narrative Sutton re-tells the well established yet outdated British narrative of the „Honourable Company“ as it was told until the second half of the twentieth century. The following chapters comprise the history of ship voyages to and from Asia throughout the mentioned period. The huge amount of nautical details (plenty of longitudes, latitudes, minutes and seconds etc. on almost every page) makes the reading somewhat tiresome, at least for a historian whose historical actor is more or less based on firm ground. A maritime historian, however, may be fascinated by the multitude of nautical information as it provides him with orientation in the vastness of oceans.

The book proceeds chronologically, trying to pursue the family history of the Larkins for about one-hundred years. However, a more systematic approach would have been more inspiring. Each chapter is full of interesting details ranging from social life on board a ship including sporting (catching fish), jurisdiction and punishment as well as sanitary conditions which get somewhat lost between the nautical and other maritime details. A more serious shortcoming of the book is the blurring of borders between facts and fiction, especially when it turns into speculations on the general characteristics of historical processes, and when past is in some way romanticized (cf. e.g. pp. 93-4). In many instances the reader cannot verify whether a fact actually belongs to a certain voyage described in the book or whether that fact may be considered as general information about conditions on board a ship.

Another major defect of the book is the rather obsolete narrative of British expansion in the Indian Ocean. In chapter 4 the history of the EIC appears (again and still) as a success-story, Robert Clive being depicted as hero, conqueror and founder of the British

Empire in India, and the 'Battle of Plassey' as the most decisive moment in South Asia's modern history. Likewise the narration in chapter 5 is full of anti-French *resentiments* which one would have expected in an EIC-history of the nineteenth century. A look at the footnotes and the literature which has been used thus come as no surprise: Dodwell and the Cambridge History of India of the 1920s is the main 'source' for the narration. Recent research has been rarely referred to.

Finally the reader may feel somewhat disappointed because the promised family history of the Larkins throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is seldom part of the narration. Only the last chapter throws some light on their commercial activities. It is only the Conclusion which highlights the differences between the middle of the eighteenth and the middle of the nineteenth century as well as the development of trading patterns and which also highlights the Larkins' family politics during the said time. Complemented by some details from the preceding chapters the Conclusion would have been sufficient for depicting the family history of the Larkins. All in all, the book does not fulfill scientific standards as; in the first place, it does not reflect the latest academic literature on the subject. Secondly, the predominant descriptive narration does not always suit scientific research. Yet, scientific standard may not have been the aim of the book.

In contrast to the former book, Margaret Makepeace's study on the EIC's London workers is a fine piece of academic labour history. It is fairly innovative though a more systematic approach (again) would have highlighted even better the social background of the labourers. The study abounds in archival sources which give the reader a good impression of the labour conditions of the Company's workers between 1800 and 1858 when, after the 'Great Rebellion of 1857', the EIC was dissolved by an act of parliament. The study is in the tradition of 'history from below' otherwise also known as 'subaltern studies'. As is the case with many subaltern studies contributions it is rather difficult to make the subaltern speak. In fact in Margaret Makepeace's study we get to know many things about the

lower classes through the correspondence of the EIC's writers giving information on the labourers. But her study also provides plenty of petitions of the labourers giving ample evidence of and through their voices.

The author wants to „relocate the East India Company in its rightful place at the centre of the early nineteenth-century London economy by examining how the Company functioned as an employer and how it behaved towards its staff. It explores the Company's direction of commercial operations in London, the management structure in its warehouses, and the strategies adopted to control and regulate a large and expanding labourer workforce.“ Apart from this Margaret Makepeace looks „at the labour processes involved in handling high-value dutiable goods, and focus[es] on recruitment, timekeeping and labour discipline.“ (p. 9) Taking this point of departure at face value one can hardly imagine a 'history from below' since this is still a top-down perspective. However, as already mentioned, there are plenty of sources in which the labourer actually speaks, especially in chapter 7 which I will refer to soon.

Many new aspects of the EIC's labourers are highlighted for the first time. To start with, the recruitment of labourers as soldiers in the Royal East India Volunteers. Several hundred men were to serve in addition to their daily labour (receiving additional payment as well) as soldiers during the Revolutionary and Continental Wars (1791-1815). Second: The location of the labourers' residences reflect the then general trend namely that commercial premises took the place of homes in the City itself. Third: EIC labourers are not representative for London's labour class as they had much better working times and received higher wages. Due to the 6-hours working-day many labourers and employees were able to have a small part-time job outside the EIC which improved their monthly income as well as the social status.

Fourth: The EIC management was known for its social politics. The Company was among the first in London enterprises setting up an invalidity fund and paying occupational pensions. This included early pensions due to infirmities or incapability to perform labour duties. The 'carrot' included free

medical assistance being one of the first company medical services in Britain. This kind of company politics has been termed „Christian mercantilism“, a combination of paternalism, welfare and patriotism comprising also religious aspects. The ‘stick’ consisted of a system of surveillance and supervision. The administration kept files of each worker on their efficiency, behaviour, sick leave etc. Since pilfering was omnipresent, daily routine body searching took also place.

However, one may doubt the overall efficiency of the EIC with regard to control and surveillance. The example of pilfering demonstrates that theft was rather endemic than an exception. As an archivist, Margaret Makepeace reads her sources with certain naivety. Keeping files and records and body checking does not by far create a system of control. Despite the Company’s bureaucracy there lots of pilfering occurred indicating that the system was either not efficient or that there was no system at all. The comment of a searcher that thorough searching would be impossible because then 24 hours would not be enough clearly points towards the insufficiency of the system (p. 109). Yet one has to admit that the labourers seem to have been, *cum grano salis*, satisfied with their employer since no strike occurred during the considered period.

Chapter 7 is the most interesting regarding labour history. From numerous petitions we get to know about the every-day living conditions, mostly against the financial background, of wages, pensions, accidents in the warehouses etc. According to her findings Makepeace compares the EIC’s labourers with what Eric Hobsbawm has described as ‘labour aristocracy’. It was characterised by regular and a certain level of earnings, social security, good treatment from masters and foremen, relations with the higher and lower social strata, general conditions of living and future advancement of the labourer and his children. To a very large extent this is also true for the Company’s labourers. Yet, Makepeace makes one important addition: she rather wants to distinguish between secure and insecure labour conditions for workers than between skilled/unskilled, aristocracy and non-aristocracy labourers since the former became

the dominant feature of labour conditions in London during the first half of the nineteenth century.

The most dramatic cut in the Company’s London history was the abolition of the trading monopoly. After 1834 the EIC had to dismiss or to pension most of its labourers. The free medical service was also suspended. Often pensions did not suffice for making a living which is why there are again masses of petitions providing information on the living conditions of the Company’s labourers. Yet sometimes the quoted material abounds with details. And sometimes details (prices etc.) are given which do not make any sense as comparative numbers are missing (cf. e.g. p.184). Yet these shortcomings do not affect the overall positive impression of the study. It deserves to be read by a wide readership as it provides a new perspective on London’s labour class in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Monsoon Traders impresses with its amount and brilliance of pictures. Many of them are not simple illustrations but can be ‘read’ as sources. The accompanying text divided in five chapters is, however, somewhat disappointing as it re-narrates (for the third time in this row of four books) the established success-story of the EIC. Despite the heavy ups and downs of the Company’s history in the first century of its existence the overall picture is that of a successful enterprise steering safely through troubled waters. Apart from this the Company, *pars pro toto* for England, seems to heroically standing against a multitude of European adversaries. „The failure of these often heroic effects meant England was left with no alternative than to try to assert itself against its rivals ...“ (p. 33). Was England then driven into isolation or did it prefer to be isolated? Why is England’s historiographical self-image of self-isolation told again? Does present-day England feel isolated within Europe? Or is that self-depiction simply an old imperial narrative?

Chapter 2 is based on quotes from travelogues and journals representing an exclusively European perspective on Asian (China, India, Southeast-Asia and East Asia) countries, cities and trading partners as well as

the merchandise and curiosities brought back home. This kind of historical representation is by far outdated. Only on pp. 86-7 is the reader provided with a non-European, Chinese perspective of Europeans. And also in this book the reader is told the imperial narrative of Robert Clive conquering Bengal in 1757 and founding the British Empire in India, despite plenty of differing historical evidence which has been published during the last couple of decades. Historical actors are the British, whilst Asian countries, cities and people provide the coulisses between which the action takes place.

Fairly interesting are the paragraphs on the social history on board an East Indiaman. Between 1760 and 1820 when more civil and military personnel was shipped to India the social structure and dynamics changed massively (pp. 118-21). Also interesting is the aspect of interlopers, buccaneers, freebooters and pirates in the Indian Ocean affecting heavily the trade of the EIC (ch. 4). Yet it also shows that this is a field which has hitherto been fairly neglected by the historical sciences. So far, only two studies have substantially dealt with piracy and renegades in the Indian Ocean.³ Strangely enough, this literature is not referred to. Even more, one would have expected some reference to the so called „Round Voyage“ of the pirates at the turn of the seventeenth century connecting the maritime economies of the North Atlantic, the Caribbean and Arabian Sea.

The Great Rebellion in South Asia 1857-9 is in an outdated fashion and in the tradition of imperial historiography referred to as the „Mutiny“ (pp. 176; 178ff). The „military nature“ of the revolt is pointed out to highlight the naval, military and maritime resources the EIC was able to procure, transport and apply to subdue the Rebellion. Somewhat whinily reads the abolition of the EIC. Rather than pointing out the defects which led to its dissolution it is stated that „what had once been the most powerful commercial organization in the world and an Asian power of considerable might slowly passed out of the national consciousness. Its inglorious and ignoble collapse obscured both its astonishing longevity and its undeniable glorious past.“ (p. 181) As it is the case with many other

publications on the EIC this seems to be the true reason for remembering the „Honourable Company“ as she reminds every Briton of his and her glorious past.

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³Jan Rogoziński, Honour Among Thieves. Captain Kidd, Henry Every, and the Pirate Democracy in the Indian Ocean. Mechanicsburg, PA 2000; G. V. Scammel, European Exiles, Renegades and Outlaws and the Maritime Economy of Asia c. 1500-1750, in: *Modern Asian Studies* 26 (1992) 4, pp. 641-61.