

Knight, G. Roger

Trade and Empire in Early Nineteenth Century Southeast Asia. Gillian Maclaine and his Business Network. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2015, 193 pp. ISBN 9781783270699. Price: GBP 65.00 (hardback).

Roger G. Knight's empirically rich and analytically nuanced study on the Scottish entrepreneur and adventurer Gillian Maclaine (1798–1840) sheds fresh light on the role of the Indonesian Archipelago in wider networks of commerce and exchange in the early nineteenth century. By providing an in-depth reconstruction of Maclaine's life and business activities, the study analyzes how the merchant used his presence in Java to capitalize on the flow of cotton, coffee and opium across the globe. Instead of assuming an asymmetrical relationship between Europe and colonial Indonesia, Knight thus unravels a polycentric landscape of trade in which clear boundaries metropolitan cores and colonial peripheries cannot be drawn. Like other merchants in the area, Maclaine and his company were never only simply subordinated to metropolitan interests but formed rather part of a well-connected maritime merchant community which spanned across entire (Southeast) Asia. Except for a schematic map in the beginning, the study is not illustrated. The index at the end of the well-written monograph is helpful since the reader is introduced to a large number of individuals who were associated with Maclaine in Asia and the UK.

Knight's study is divided in six chapters. Each of them is based on in-depth research in numerous private and public archives in Britain, the Netherlands, Australia, and Indonesia. In the first three chapters, readers get an overview of Maclaine's life and the wider world in which he was socialized. Knight also uses these chapters to deepen his reflections on the 'World System' theory, global commodity chains and the historical impact of Scottish diasporas in Asia. After an apprenticeship in a London based trading firm, Maclaine moved to Java in the early 1820s where he started out as coffee planter high in the mountains of the semi-independent Principalities. Owing to financial problems and discontent with his partners in London and Calcutta, Maclaine eventually established—together with other Scots his own trading firm in Batavia in 1827. The firm (Maclaine Watson & Co.) operated independently of his former superiors in London. While developing his narrative, Knight gives readers a deep insight in the challenges of conducting business in early nineteenth century Java: next to difficulties to accumulate sufficient capital, governmental support, agricultural expertise, shipping capacity, and labour force, Maclaine's local efforts were, as Knight convincingly shows, threatened by fluctuating prices for coffee on the world market, a financial crisis which hit London's

financial world in 1825 (South Sea Bubble), and shifts in trading and production patterns of key commodities in Asia and South America.

The remaining three chapters focus on the years after Maclaine had declared himself independent from his superiors in Britain and Calcutta. Of particular interest to readers might be chapter five which focusses on the company's history in the years before Maclaine's unexpected death in 1840. With a good eye for detail, Knight describes how the Scottish entrepreneur successfully developed his little company into a solid trading house in the area which eventually even possessed its own little fleet. The key to his success was, as Knight suggests, threefold: first, Maclaine managed to build a business network of expatriate entrepreneurs based in Surabaya (Fraser Eaton), Semarang (McNeill & Co.), Singapore (Maclaine Fraser), and Calcutta. Second, Maclaine tied his firm in the so-called Country Trade, the shipping of goods, mostly cotton, from Bengal in India to Canton in China. Maclaine and other merchants in Batavia and Singapore profited, as Knight highlights, from the Malay peninsula's function as area of transit for this century old trading route. And third, the Scottish entrepreneur diversified his portfolio by offering insurances and banking services to other businessmen and agricultural entrepreneurs in Java. The study closes with more general reflections on the firm's development into one of the biggest European sugar trader in the Indonesian Archipelago in the century after Maclaine's death on his journey back to Europe in 1840.

Knight has managed to write very detailed but analytically strong monograph which will serve scholars as important starting point for further research on the circulation of goods which traversed insular Southeast Asia in the early nineteenth century. In particular, in the fascinating chapter on Maclaine's growing engagement with the intra-Asian Country Trade during the early 1830s, one longs for more details on how the interaction of European and Asian merchants looked like in practice. Although sources remain largely silent about it, parallel cases and circumstantial evidence might help to reconstruct how traders dealt with, to name just two examples, the rich variety of currencies circulating in the area and different weights and measurement techniques which merchants used. In sum: Knight's study is more than a history of an individual merchant and its business network. The author's ability to use his empirical research to destabilize scholarship which thinks in world systems theory or commodity chains makes the book a valuable read for anyone who is interested in global histories of material circulation and exchange.

Andreas Weber

University of Twente, BMS-STePS

a.weber@utwente.nl