

Chronicles of British Business in Asia, 1850–1960: A Bibliography of Printed Company Histories with Short Accounts of the Concerns. *By Lionel Carter*. New Delhi: Manohar, 2002. 227 pp. Index, appendix. Cloth, 500 Rs./25 BPS. ISBN 8-173-04470-8.

Reviewed by Catherine R. Schenk

For once, a book does exactly what its title indicates. Lionel Carter, the recently retired librarian of South Asian studies at the University of Cambridge, has collected a wide-ranging variety of publications, both books and articles, spanning more than a century of British enterprise in Asia. According to his criteria, a company was included if it had “an actual physical presence in some part of Asia and [was] run by British people” (p. 10).

The opportunities for trade associated with imperial expansion in the nineteenth century drew many British entrepreneurs (particularly Scots) into overseas businesses. Most of the companies listed in the collection serviced this international trade: merchants, shipping companies, railways, or banks. The interwar depression of global trade and capital markets caused many of these concerns to fail. The survivors became subject to the political upheavals that occurred after 1945: in South Asia, many companies were nationalized; in China, companies were forced to depart after the establishment of Communist autarky. Carter’s “short accounts of the concerns” range from a few paragraphs to a few pages, tracing companies from their founding until their demise or takeover. The personalities of the founders are covered in considerable and interesting detail, often drawn on “insider” company histories.

The listed books and articles cover the gamut of quality, from vanity publications written for internal circulation or to commemorate milestones of the company’s existence to scrupulous scholarly accounts based on archival research and applying modern models of business history. In some cases, Carter has annotated an entry to clarify its focus. Most of the books are available in the British Library, but when this is not the case, their location in another British library is noted.

The collection is organized into geographic groups, and then into separate sections for multinational companies. The geographic coverage is somewhat uneven. For example, there is one entry for all of Central Asia and twenty-seven entries for South

Asia, no doubt reflecting the link between business interests and empire, but also perhaps stemming from the author's particular expertise. Fourteen firms that spanned Asia have their own section, as do British multinational companies whose activities were not restricted to Asia. Separate appendices list histories of British shipping companies serving Asian ports and of Indian railway companies that were originally British. Altogether, the collection lists 126 companies, many with multiple histories and related biographies. The interactions among these firms are acknowledged in a comprehensive system of cross-referencing. The addition of an index of companies and persons supplements the general index, making the collection easy to use.

In sum, this volume is a good starting point for identifying British businesses in Asia and is a helpful, if brief, initial source of information. However, there is no reference to archives for readers who wish to extend their study of these companies. Some entries can be linked to archival collections by referring to Volume Two of the *Dictionary of Scottish Business Biography*, edited by A. Slaven and S. Checkland (1990), which covers men who were involved in the processing, distribution, and service companies that traded in Asia. A useful companion work is the *Dictionary of Business Biography* (1984–86), edited by D. Jeremy and C. Shaw, which covers England and Wales. Other sources include *Overview of Business Archives in Western Europe*, edited by Lesley Richmond (1996), and *Company Archives: A Survey of the Records of 1000 of the First Registered Companies in England and Wales* (1986). Carter's work should certainly be recommended for libraries' reference collections of business and economic history, British history, and imperial history.

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