

Maritime Enterprise and Empire: Sir William Mackinnon and His Business Network, 1823–1893. By *J. Forbes Munro*. Woodbridge, U.K.: Boydell Press, 2003. ix + 525 pp. Index, notes, illustrations, maps, references, tables. Cloth, \$130.00. ISBN 0-851-15935-4.

Reviewed by Michael Miller

For close to a century, the Mackinnon Mackenzie group, later known formally as the Inchcape Group, was one of the leading expatriate firms in the Indian Ocean region. Founded in 1847 by William Mackinnon and Robert Mackenzie, both from Campeltown, Scotland, the firm and its related enterprises grew to include agency and shipping activities in India, the Persian Gulf, East Africa, and Australia. Mackinnon Mackenzie was best known as the founder and manager of the British India Steam Navigation Company (BI), at one time the largest shipping company in the world. In British shipping circles, only the Alfred Holt network stands as an equivalent model to the shipping and ship-agency relationship established between Mackinnon Mackenzie, British India, and P & O, with which BI merged in 1914. The group, however, also managed tea estates, jute and cotton mills, and a riverboat feeder company between Calcutta and Assam, and its members continued to act as trading companies after the core Mackinnon Mackenzie house had abandoned these undertakings to concentrate on its maritime ventures. In addition to BI, Mackinnon Mackenzie ran the Netherlands India Steam Navigation Company (NISM), an interisland shipping operation in the Dutch East Indies (until it was ousted in favor of a purely Dutch firm toward the end of the century), and another coastal shipping firm in Australian waters. Despite the prominence it achieved, its history has often been relegated to fragments in larger studies. Percival Griffiths's *A History of the Inchcape Group* (1977) and Stephanie Jones's *Two Centuries of Overseas Trading: The Origins and Growth of the Inchcape Group* (1986) did review the main group firms, but the focus of each, as their titles indicated, was the Inchcape successor. The full story of Mackinnon Mackenzie in its founding century awaited J. Forbes Munro's biography of William Mackinnon, the man who built the company (Mackenzie drowned in a shipwreck off the Australian coast in 1853). After a series of tantalizing articles, Munro has now produced a superb study of Mackinnon and his firm,

and of the wider historical context of shipping, trading, and empire within which it operated.

Munro's book is a large one. It is constructed out of an in-depth reading of the relevant archival collections, including Dutch materials, to relate the history of the NISM. There are sections, like those on the expeditions of Henry Morton Stanley, where readers too risk becoming lost forever in the thickets. We do not learn what William Mackinnon had for breakfast on any given morning, but few other details of this energetic and empire-minded man (in the largest sense of the term) escape his biographer's attention. What holds the reader, however, and converts deep narrative into a major work of analysis, is Munro's exceptional command of the overriding historical issues that informed nearly every turn in Mackinnon's unrelenting entrepreneurial adventures. Two themes in particular—networks and empire—pervade the telling of this life. In both instances, Munro's treatment of their relation to business enterprise, and the reverse, is exemplary. The Mackinnon group houses were typical of the networked format that historians have identified as an alternative path for growth and diversification to the now classical concept of the internally integrated company. Munro takes some pains to place his subject within this larger debate, and to identify the interlocking networks, based upon family and community (here Scottish), that provided both motor and glue to the driving expansion of the Mackinnon-related firms. His special contribution, however, is to delineate, in lush, fascinating detail, the networked connections of funding, information, and influence through which William Mackinnon made his business way, especially in garnering the mail contracts that preceded BI expansion along the Indian Ocean sea lanes. In his later years, Mackinnon deployed his networks to advance personal and social pursuits rather than family enterprise. Munro terms this a dangerous turning, but he is reluctant to speculate on whether the failures of the last decades were more the consequence of personal quirks and stumbling or of systemic flaws in the networked approach to business. This is perhaps the one weakness to an otherwise powerful demonstration of how networked enterprises actually utilized networking skills and personal introductions to build successful enterprises abroad. Few historians have proceeded from theory to practice as successfully as Munro has done here.

Central to the assembling of networks was Mackinnon's close business relationship with Sir Henry Bartle Frere, whose geopolitics placed shipping and trade at the center of imperial expansion, influence, and security. The overlap between Frere's visions and Mackinnon's ambitions and resources shaped forever the fortunes of BI, although the pattern of successful influence peddling converted Mackinnon into what Munro calls a public contractor, prepared to commit to further expansion only under the financial cover of the flag. The influence was far from unidirectional. Frere delivered the contracts, but Mackinnon caught the Frere bug. In his future hobnobbing with King Leopold of Belgium, Stanley, and a host of other colonial magnates and visionaries, Mackinnon exhibited the same concoction of imperial, commercial, and socially conscious motivations as his patron, and these drew him deeper and deeper into African ventures that bore only a marginal relation to his core agency activities elsewhere.

Occasionally Munro is more generous toward Mackinnon enterprises than is warranted. In his recounting of the loss of the Dutch East Indies mail contract, he covers well the relevant issues, but a nostalgia for NISM possibilities lingers. In fact, the NISM never had a chance, not only because Dutch business and colonial interests were determined to replace it with a Dutch concern, but also because it had failed to divert archipelago traffic from Singapore to Java, and because its drive to develop new trades and territories was wanting. On the other hand, Munro has no qualms in chronicling both his protagonist's misjudgments and failures and his inability to comprehend that there were clubs where he would always be an outside figure. Closure for the NISM forms, in fact, a central episode in what Munro identifies as a shift in the imperial-business framework. Imperialism had buttressed firm growth, but in the latter decades of the century, increased imperial competition interfered with further commercial penetration. Throughout this tale of success, deviation, and disappointment, Munro casts personal and firm biographies against the interwoven backdrop of maritime enterprise and empire on a near-global scale with considerable mastery. Unfortunately William Mackinnon died in 1893, too soon to measure the successes of the Mackinnon group enterprises when boom times returned in the long springtide before the First World War. Too often, in the second half of this volume, there is the feeling that biography, through chronology as much as personal focus, constrains the business history contained within it. Nonetheless,

Munro has produced a very fine history of which the Boydell Press should be proud. They, in turn, have served him less well, and should hire a proofreader, or at least a new one.

Michael Miller is professor of history at Syracuse University. He is the author of The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869–1920 (1981) and Shanghai on the Métro: Spies, Intrigue, and the French between the Wars (1994). At present he is writing a book on Europe and the maritime world in the twentieth century.