

The European Cable Companies in South America before the First World War. *By Jorma Ahvenainen*. Helsinki: Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, 2004. 427 pp. Photographs, maps, notes, index. Paper, €35. ISBN: 951-41-0947-3.

Reviewed by René De La Pedraja

The economic ties of Latin America with the developed world have traditionally evoked extensive discussion and many generalizations but less empirical study. Among the areas least studied have been the submarine cables linking South America to the outside world. This book attempts to fill an important gap in the scholarly literature and follows upon the author's previous *Far Eastern Telegraphs* (1981) and *The History of the Caribbean Telegraphs before the First World War* (1996).

The book is divided into three parts. The first, and briefest (pp. 1–57), chronicles the earliest proposals and the failed attempts to link South America to Europe by submarine cables prior to 1872. The second, and longest (pp. 59–244), covers the period from 1872 to 1899, when private companies laid most of the cables linking South America to Europe and to the United States. In 1874 British companies made Brazil the first South American country to have a submarine cable connection with Europe. The next year, the Brazil cable reached Buenos Aires, a city that the Transandine Telegraph Company had connected by land cable to Valparaíso, Chile, in 1872. In 1876 a submarine cable linked Valparaíso to Lima, Peru. A direct cable to the United States reached Lima only in 1882. The third part (pp. 245–387) covers both the laying of additional submarine cables and the struggle to break the monopoly of the British companies before World War I.

Because even the most basic facts on telegraph service in South America are not readily available, Ahvenainen has devoted a prodigious amount of effort to examining archives, both private and official. Apparently no archive in Europe has escaped his notice, and not just in the major countries but also in places off the scholar's beaten path, such as Denmark. The masses of archival material, however, have not been very revealing, either for business history or for other scholarly fields. Summaries of contracts and agreements take up most of the book, and no detail is too small for Ahvenainen, who,

for example, insists on presenting all the terms of each stock issue. Many pages consist of raw data, and he does not explain the value or show the significance of these many small details. A context to understand the minutiae is lacking, and readers who were exposed to the broad-ranging discussion of the subject in *The Invisible Weapon* (1991) will miss the deft touch of Daniel Headrick. In one of many examples, had Ahvenainen familiarized himself with the extensive scholarly literature on British ties to Brazil, he would have been able to put into proper context his many references to the Baron de Mauá. Another error was calling the Brazilian Baron de Rio Branco “a protégé of Reidy” (p. 360).

The business records proved particularly disappointing, and even the author admits that the board minutes frequently remained silent on the key issues facing the companies. A history as seen from the boardroom can still be valuable, but the dry and terse nature of private business records generally result in page after page of deadening prose. In my research on the operation of steamship companies during the same period, I discovered that British firms frequently preserved only records of possible legal value, and I sense that Ahvenainen ran into the same problem. Revealingly, Chapter Ten, the best in the book, relies almost exclusively on diplomatic documents to reconstruct the fascinating struggle of France and Germany to break the British monopoly on submarine cables. Business historians routinely value corporate records over other sources, yet this book suggests that the quality rather than the nature of the sources is a more important consideration for writing insightful history.

This book is basically a compendium of details that only an unfortunate few scholars will have to plow through. Not even color maps and appropriate photographs can enhance its appeal. Although an above-average index usually makes it easy to locate pertinent information, the essentially reference nature of the book requires an even better index. For example, entries with many page references, such as Rio de Janeiro or Hooper’s Company, need more subentries. The reader interested in ships has to look under “cable ships” in the index, not under the individual ship (fortunately, ships’ names appear in bold in the text).

The neglect of two areas is particularly striking. First, only after many pages and then not until much later, does the book offer an isolated sentence on the technical nature of the telegraph operations. Readers need at least several pages of explanation in order to

grasp how the evolution of technology for operating telegraphs and laying submarine cables affected the business decisions of the individual companies. Second, there are only the briefest of references to the customers who used the cables. Who composed the initial roster of consumers, and how did that change over time? Since the cable companies were seeking profits, a discussion of the changing market for telegraph services would have added a value that the seemingly endless recounting of agreements and other legal documents could not provide.

Readers expecting an assessment of the impact of the submarine cables on the economy, the society, and politics will find very little along these lines, in spite of the presence of potentially useful tables on telegraph rates. Had Ahvenainen followed the approach of Headrick's classic account or consulted books such as *The Telegraph: How Technology Innovation Caused Social Change* (1997) by Annteresa Lubrano, he would have been able to construct a narrative useful to more than a handful of scholars. A large issue is also at play in the age of the Internet: if historians can do no better than deliver undigested facts, the competition from electronic databases puts the historical profession in danger of extinction.

This book again proves that documents alone do not make history. It is a pity that the author missed the chance to make a meaningful contribution to our understanding of the economic links between South America and Europe.

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