

North East England, 1850–1914: The Dynamics of a Maritime-Industrial Region. *By Graeme J. Milne.* Woodbridge, Suffolk, U.K.: Boydell Press, 2006. Index, notes, bibliography, maps, tables. xi + 230 pp. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN: 1-843-83240-2.

Reviewed by Maurice Kirby

This book is a contribution to the “new maritime history,” in that it analyzes the economic and business history of one of Britain’s most distinctive regions from the perspective of its maritime engagement with the external world. The English North East provides an ideal exemplar of a region that, during the seventy-five years before 1914, emerged as a “maritime-industrial” zone that combined structural complexity with interconnections and complementary functions. Industrialization was facilitated by the development of river and coastal ports from Middlesbrough in the south to Blyth in the north. Above all, the rivers Tyne, Wear, and Tees, navigable in their lower reaches, provided ideal settings for exploitation by an industrial hinterland that proved able to develop export links both within and without the North Sea interface with northern Europe and Scandinavia. The industries in question—coal mining, iron and steel, heavy engineering, and shipbuilding—were linked by an integrated railway network, which traversed the three rivers, a fact that provided a regional definition that was recognized by contemporaries and continues to resonate today.

In terms of its maritime orientation, the North East was an important element in propelling and sustaining Britain’s status as a “globalising commercial economy.” In its politics, the region was a bastion of free-trade liberalism, which, in itself, contributed to a sense of internal cohesion. Yet, as the author points out, the region’s economic development was consistent with heterogeneity in port populations and perceptions. This was exemplified in the coal trade, where competition coexisted with complementary specialization. New entrants to the trade in south Durham, for example, secured their future by “working round” the established interests to the north. In this case, the Tees-based outlets for the southern collieries, notably Middlesbrough and the Hartlepoons, succeeded in developing a greater variety in commodity flows than their northern

counterparts. It is also important to remember that individual industries and trades could possess multiple hinterlands, some of them stretching beyond the North East. In the case of West Hartlepool's timber merchants, for example, sales agencies existed as far away as Halifax and Bradford in south Yorkshire, and Liverpool, well to the west of the Pennines. The North Sea Fish Quay at the mouth of the Tyne served a variety of inland market towns across the whole of England as the railway system developed. The point is exemplified further in the iron and steel industry. In this case, it is true that riverside sites were favored by manufacturers, most notably on Teesside, but major works existed inland in Darlington to the west and Consett in the northwest. In both instances, location away from ports was facilitated by a rapidly expanding railway system, which was simultaneously contributing to industrial clustering in and around the North East's ports.

While railways were a decisive factor in clustering, the industrial districts were hardly static. Some clusters broke up over time as economic and commercial relations continued to evolve. In the mid-nineteenth century, the manufacture of iron was a staple activity on Tyneside, as were chemicals toward the end of the century. But, in both instances, a major realignment of geography was inaugurated by the growth of port activity and railway development on the Tees. The easy availability of coking coal from south Durham and iron ore from northeast Yorkshire made Teesside an ideal location for the iron industry, and although the local ores ultimately proved to be unsuited to the Bessemer process (thereby threatening the transition to steel manufacture), Middlesbrough's shipping links permitted the import of Spanish ore. So too in the chemical industry, changing technology rendered the availability of brine a more important locational factor than coal, especially in relation to the production of salt. Salt could, of course, have been imported from Cheshire and brine pumped to Tyneside, but the development of the Tees salt industry, enjoying a more favorable location, led to the virtual eclipse of chemical production on the Tyne by 1914.

For business historians, chapter seven, "Business and the Maritime-Industrial Complex," is likely to be of most interest. Here, the author provides an excellent analysis of the interconnections between businesses as long-term tendering and ordering connections were cemented by "economies of trust and reputation," reinforced by physical proximity. That said, the overall conclusion is that the North East possessed a

fragmented *business* structure based upon fiercely independent family firms and partnerships, far removed from corporate capitalism. The North East *industrial* system may have been integrated, in that it is easy to demonstrate the intensity of commercial relations between iron and steel manufacturers and shipbuilders, coal producers and shipping firms. But even here, the author is careful to emphasize that the region as a whole was underpinned by a “binary division,” in which Tyneside and Wearside contrasted with the more diversified Teesside and the Hartlepoons.

In concluding, the author moves the story forward to the interwar period of the twentieth century. In depressed trading conditions, international economic collapse, and the intensification of protectionism, the structural weaknesses of an “integrated export-oriented economy” were brutally exposed as the staple industries experienced precipitate decline. In itself, this dramatically different experience serves to emphasize the uniqueness of the pre-1914 era, which was underpinned by free trade, rapidly rising exports, and the increasing globalization of British business.

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