

G. Roger Knight, *Trade and Empire in Early Nineteenth Century Southeast Asia. Gillian Maclaine and his Business Network*. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2015). 193 p. ISBN 9781783270699.

No need to beat about the bush when discussing Roger Knight's latest scholarly effort. This thoroughly researched and well-written monograph is a must-read for a multitude of reasons. A selection below will suffice. With approximately 175 pages of plain text this book is a rather slim volume, Still, from a theoretical, analytical as well as empirical perspective it is surprisingly rich. Knight covers a lot of territory carefully managed by a well-structured and contextualized approach. With the help of a great variety of primary and secondary sources he

tackles wide ranging theoretical themes dealing simultaneously with the intricate details of the personal, family, and business life of his protagonist Gillian Maclaine (1789-1840). Most of these details were extracted from 'a great many of Gillian's Maclaine's own letters 'back home', extending more or less continuously from 1816 until 1839' – a unique primary source partly in private hands in the United Kingdom (note 6, p. xiii).

On the first page of the preface Knight takes care to point out that the reader has not stumbled upon a traditional biography nor is about to read a company history. In his words: 'The book is more than a biography, however, since the story of Maclaine's activities as both merchant and planter intersects with key debates about the dynamics of Western imperialisms in Asia; the imperatives of commodity chains and the character of 'diaspora' commercial networks; and the associated – and problematic – nexus between colony and metropole.' In agreement with the author the book is different in providing a micro-level account of business developments primarily known to historians on a broad macro-level (p. xi).

Maclaine's letters contain a wealth of information with regard to the different commodity chains in which he participated (coffee, cotton cloth, opium).¹ Mention should also be made of the important agency services for banking and insurance companies and international shipping lines he offered to traders and planters in Java as part of a diversified portfolio strategy. Knight stresses that these letters are not 'business letters' per se, but the letters of a business man to non-business people (primarily his mother, uncle and brother). Therefore in his view the book is not a company history either. It is the narrative of an individual's career in business, located within a broader historical setting, and enlivened by the subject's acute personal observations (p. xiii).

After thus setting the stage Knight proceeds by covering the life of Gillian Maclaine in four chronological chapters (Ch. 2-5). These chapters are preceded by an indispensable introductory and concluding chapter exploring the study's theoretical and analytical framework (Chapters one and six). Here Knight contextualizes his study of a Scots Émigré merchant living and working in colonial Java by outlining several theoretical concepts, such as metropolitan core versus (colonial) periphery (World Systems theory), the circulation of goods in global commodity chains, intra-Asian commerce and the so-called 'Country Trade', and finally the impact of mercantile family firm networks and diasporic (Scottish) culture in Asia. Placed within the context of these important debates Gillian Maclaine's person-

1 Modest participation in sugar, a most important commodity chain in Asian commercial life, was a fact towards the end of Gillian Maclaine's life. Eventually Maclaine Watson & Co., the trading company he founded in 1827, would become one of Asia's most prominent sugar traders, but only well after its founder had passed away. Nevertheless, initial access to Java's sugar production resulted from long-standing connections in the Principalities of Central Java as early as the 1830s.

al considerations and activities gain considerable meaningfulness in the process.

Chapters two and three paint a picture of the young Scottish entrepreneur, his economic activities and above all his social interactions. A central theme in Gillian Maclaine's considerations during this period is his great longing for financial independency as can be gleaned from many passages in his letters sent to Scotland (pp. 34-35). After an apprenticeship in London at the trading firm of McLachlan Brothers (1816-1820), Maclaine heads for Central Java where he starts out as a coffee planter. In 1822 he sets up his own trading business Gillian Maclaine & Co. and moves to Batavia. As a result of severe (financial) discontent with business partners Maclaine finally gains his treasured independency by severing all financial and business links with troublesome superiors in Britain and Calcutta. Together with his business partner Edward Watson, a former colleague for five years, Maclaine Watson is established in 1827.

Chapters four and five focus on the 'adult' part of the story until Maclaine's untimely and tragic death when sailing home to Scotland with his entire family in 1840. From now on the business activities of Gillian Maclaine or Maclaine Watson are to be found in the dynamic intra-Asian commercial theatre set within the framework of a developing Asian economy. Knight provides his readers with a far more detailed and accurate view of the rich complexity of the country trade and so-called periphery than is usually the case in World Systems theory considerations. His story clearly highlights the autonomy of the colonial periphery tapping the resources of a mercantile network of family firms (primarily of Scottish-Dutch origins). Maclaine's business network rapidly branched out to include Fraser Eaton in Surabaya, McNeill & Co. in Semarang, and Maclaine Fraser in Singapore. Without any discernible head office this network would stay in existence until the early 1960s. With regard to the provenance of capital Maclaine relied on capital mobilized within the colony from known and trusted sources. The fact that Maclaine Watson never became a limited liability company is a clear point in case.

There appears little to hold against Knight's valuable contribution which sets the record straight with regard to the European contribution in the expansion of intra-Asian trade. For sure this study could have done with more than the single, and rather schematic map presented on page x. Fortunately, the index enables a better grasp of the many locations, enterprises, and in particular the large number of individuals that populate the scene of the story. Still, inclusion of some schematic representations elucidating the dizzying variety of interconnected families and businesses would have been of great benefit.

Of somewhat more consequence is Knight's lengthy description of Maclaine's possible involvement in the opium commodity chain (p. 143-150). Knight links the proceeds of this trade to the successful revival of fortunes of Maclaine Watson during the 1830s. But, he only provides circumstantial evidence of Maclaine's

participation in the drug trade. Knight acknowledges this himself, and admits to a speculative element in the conclusions he reaches (pp. 146-147). This does not withhold him from asserting that 'Maclaine and his partners made such considerable amounts of money in the 1830s that trade in the drug seems likely to have been a major source of income' (p. 148). This seems to be stretching the argument a bit too far. Shedding more light on this episode and erasing some of Knight's many question marks in this particular section is urgently required.

Notwithstanding these remarks let me conclude with one of the many gems to be found in this volume. Knight's short description of the devastating Java War (1825-1830) and the impact on the coffee industry (pp. 87-90) in which young Gillian Maclaine had invested all he possessed, testifies to the richness in detail and many surprising perspectives on offer. With the indispensable help of Maclaine's letters a vivid picture is painted of the threat of war, the possible and actual loss of life and looming destruction of property. Of equal interest is the description of the Dutch as well as Javanese support network at his disposal (particularly the help of the Surakarta aristocrat Buminata, a major leaser of land to European planters), the fortunes of war (Maclaine's own plantations were largely or totally unscathed by the war), and the unexpected observation that coffee continued to be harvested and continued to reach the coast. In 1828 one eyewitness found 'the road nearly covered with packhorses and oxen conveying coffee ... from the interior to Semarang' (p. 89). This surprising richness in (personal) detail enables Knight to bring his Scottish protagonist to 'real' life, and this is unquestionably the book's greatest achievement.

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