
As is well known, from the early nineteenth century Dundee began to establish itself as a major coarse textile manufacturing centre, so that by the end the century no other British town of comparable size was so dominated by a single industry: jute. As early as 1863 Dundee had earned the title “Juteopolis” – recognition that it was the world’s major producer of jute cloth, then the universally used bagging material. However, Dundee’s ascendancy was short-lived. Competition from Calcutta – near to the source of the raw material, Bengal – was intense, and within decades Calcutta’s mills and factories were out-producing Dundee. Yet Dundee’s jute firms carried on, albeit in increasingly difficult circumstances. Serious decline was delayed until the 1930s, and checked from the time of the Second World War until the later 1960s. Jim Tomlinson’s book – his second on the subject – examines the rise and century-long decline of jute in Dundee. The framework in which Tomlinson sets Dundee’s experience is the British Empire (which incorporated both rival cities, Dundee and Calcutta), along with “imperial globalization”, a process in which Dundee was in the forefront and a major beneficiary. That is until Dundee and its inhabitants were subject to what Tomlinson calls “the full blast of competition” (p. 5) in its main markets, above all the USA, from the low wage economy of another imperial city, Calcutta: what in other contexts has been termed the race to the bottom.

In a work that draws heavily on cultural and economic theory (“orientalism” is one of these) as applied to other British industries under threat from abroad, classes and regions, one of Tomlinson’s main concerns is the responses of Dundee’s jute employers and jute workers to Indian competition. What was their nature? Were they identical? How deeply entrenched, he asks, was the culture of free trade, and how did attitudes to state intervention alter over time? Tomlinson is alert too to the gender dimension, as women were not only workers but consumers too, mainly of
imported foodstuffs, a situation that might have complicated their response – as (albeit poorly paid) producers – to overseas competition and tariffs. What he concludes is that Dundee’s response was far from uniform. Employer demands for protection fell on deaf ears, with London governments in the 1920s and 1930s being keener to keep India content within the empire than the constituents of parliamentary seats in Dundee, Angus and North Fife. It was only belatedly, from 1945 until 1963, but then too late, that the state intervened to prop up the industry thereby underpinning the industry’s final flourish of prosperity in the 1950s and 1960s.

Although Tomlinson delves into social and cultural history along with politics and economics, this is a book for the specialist. But if it is not popular history it is certainly important history. It is also uncompromising. Tomlinson has no reservations about condemning as “misleading” Tom Devine’s claim that Dundee jute firms cut their own throats by opening mills in India. Tony Cox’s depiction of the “paternal despotism” of Dundee-trained mill overseers who allegedly took their brutal supervisory practices to Calcutta, is rejected in a forensic examination of working practices in the rival cities’ mills and factories.

This then is a significant contribution to our understanding of the politics and even the popular culture of industrial decline in Britain. It is not exhaustive however. Rightly, emphasis is placed on raw material and production costs as the critical elements determining the competitiveness of Dundee jute, and the lack of alternative strategies available to Dundee’s manufacturers in responding to overseas competition. But efforts were made to enhance the quality of the product, and to improve the industry’s machinery (and its productivity), and find alternative uses for jute cloth. Colleges for industrial art and to serve the technical needs of Dundee’s textile industry were established at the end of the nineteenth century. Tomlinson has little to say about the design aspects of jute, so there is an opportunity for an art historian or someone similarly trained to explore this neglected aspect of coarse textile production. For the foreseeable future though, it is unlikely if anyone will better Tomlinson’s work on the industry’s economic history.

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