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H. V. BOWEN, John McALEER and Robert BLYTH, *Monsoon Traders. The maritime world of the East India Company*, London, Scala Publishers, 2011, 192 pp. ISBN: 9781857596755.

As befits a Scala publication, this is a sumptuously illustrated book that reads almost as if it were a museum catalogue. Given that the chief contributor to this volume, John McAleer, was at the time curator at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, this choice of format becomes easier to understand. Textually, the book is an amalgam of narratives focusing on the development of the East India Company from its beginnings right through to its “demise and its legacies, c. 1830-70” and transversal thematic essays on topics like encounters, diplomacy, conflict and conquest. Referencing is relatively light and in the form of endnotes, and there is a lightness and fleetingness to the text which, along with the relatively short nature of this book (under 200 pages), makes it more appealing to the general reader and less of an academic monograph.

The illustrations cover an eclectic range of portraits, oil paintings of company shipping, East India Company buildings, curios such as semi-fossilized barnacles, and cannonballs that were shot during the Second Anglo-China War (1856-60). There are battle plans, sea chests and ship pennants. All of these illustrations are provided with explanatory legends. Eagle eyes have been enlisted to decrypt the Chinese characters on painted ships (fig. 7), but also to uncover the meaning and type of reception offered Europeans bringing materials for an observatory to the Celestial Court, as expressed in a dedicatory poem sewn into the eighteenth-century *K'o-ssu silk* tapestry (fig. 40). It is a pity that the same pair of eyes could not have helped us to attribute the aforementioned painting more precisely – it simply goes under “Chinese school, 19th century” –, given the large amount of recent scholarly work on the production of locally produced applied arts and the *scholae pictorum* fostered in the Far East by leading Europeans like, albeit at an earlier moment in time, the Jesuit visitor Alessandro Valignano in Japan.¹ Is it perhaps the product of the same hand as the similarly anonymous *U.S. Clipper Ship* from around the same period housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York? Elsewhere, those eagle eyes might have been enlisted to make sense of the oriental (plausibly Armenian) merchants conversing in the shaded foreground of the view on the East-India House in 1802 (fig. 46), whose important role Margaret Makepeace’s work has brought attention to.² Many illustrations otherwise spring from the amateurish drawings which fill the manuscript of Edward Barlow’s *Journal* (1659-1703), others would seem to be objects in the collections of the Maritime Museum.

The text reads more like an extension of Anthony Farrington’s *Trading Places* than a rather drier recapitulation in the manner of Kenneth Andrews’ studies of the English East India Company, and the images certainly help to bring the many micro-stories to life.³ It is helpful to have portraits of captain James Lancaster alongside an account of his 1601 voyage to the East Indies, in the same way it is helpful to see a portrait of Robert Knox

¹ Alexandra CURVELO, “Nagasaki, an European artistic city in early modern Japan”, *Bulletin of Portuguese/Japanese Studies*, issue 2, 2001, pp. 23-35.

² Margaret MAKEPEACE e Vahé BALADOUNI, *Armenian merchants of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries: English East India Company sources*, Philadelphia, American Philosophical Society, 1998.

³ Anthony FARRINGTON, *Trading Places: the East India Company and Asia, 1600-1834*, London, British Library, 2002; Kenneth ANDREWS, *Trade, Plunder and Settlement: maritime enterprise and the genesis of the British Empire, 1480-1630*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984.

alongside an account of his captivity in Sri Lanka. Next to well worn stories pertaining to English stalwarts in the East like Thomas Roe, this book includes the instructions to lesser known personalities in the Company like the factor on the sixth company voyage, Lawrence Femell.

While the appeal and enjoyability of such a book immediately score many plaudits, one nevertheless wonders whether more could not be achieved with greater thoroughness and systematic handling of the various themes. Here it is always one or two examples (with respect to shipwrecks, descriptions of life on board), and then on to the next point. Similarly, while Edmund Burke is invoked in relation to his emplotting the British Empire on to the great “map of mankind”, moving from India, to China, and then South Africa in scarcely more than a breath irons out much of the difference and space between these different civilisations and their respective worlds. One wonders where the new, ground-breaking research is going on in East India Company history; repeated references lead the reader to books like *Encounters: the Meeting of Asia and Europe, 1500-1800*, which in conception is a somewhat similar, glossy, image-led book.⁴ There are of course the various themes constituting the transversal chapters, which harness the narrative somewhat, and here diplomacy and encounters have indeed attracted a lot of recent historiographical attention. Perhaps I felt the lack of any grating paradoxes, bones of contention, or simply comparisons – how, for example, the Honourable Company stood on various issues in relation to its rivals, the “crusading” Portuguese, or the “bureaucratic” Dutch – or the moralised debates that still get caught up today with the theme of “empire”. Perhaps I felt the lack of distance the authors take from the ignorant prejudice of their subjects, when Thomas Roe criticises the lack of “civil acts, but such as straggling Christians have lately taught them” (worth comparing here with Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s essay “Frank submissions: The Company and the Mughals between Sir Thomas Roe and Sir William Norris”).⁵

But these complaints cannot overshadow what is a very nice book to have on one’s shelf and where one’s abiding pleasures draw from the intermixture of text and image and wonder at the sheer quantity of bizarre and beautiful objects that remain from a forgotten and integral part of Britain’s imperial past. There is a very real danger otherwise of simply forgetting these treasures in museum vaults. Just from a superficial recent perusal of provincial museums and galleries like the Glynn Vivian Museum here in Swansea, one can be reassured that there are many more such imperial curios to draw upon for future comparison and analysis.

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⁴ Anna JACKSON e Amin JAFFER (ed.), *Encounters: the Meeting of Asia and Europe, 1500-1800*, London, Victoria & Albert Museum, 2004.

⁵ Sanjay SUBRAHMANYAM, “Frank submissions: The Company and the Mughals between Sir Thomas Roe and Sir William Norris”, in Huw Bowen e Nigel Rigby e Margarette Lincoln (ed.), *The Worlds of the East India Company*, Woodbridge, Boydell, 2002.