

Review

Empire, Industry and Class: The Imperial Nexus of Jute, 1840-1940

By Anthony Cox (Routledge, 2013, ISBN: 9780415506168)



From the 1840s onwards, as the commercial success of jute as a packing medium grew, the fortunes of the city of Dundee, the British centre of jute manufacturing, became intertwined with that of one of Britain's central Indian possession, Bengal. While jute cultivation, and hand manufacture was concentrated in Bengal, successes in the mechanical manufacture of the fibre led to the development of a "jute dependency" in Dundee where jute became the main employer and economic sector. After the setting up of the first jute manufacture in Bengal in 1855, the following decades witnessed the floating of many new companies around Calcutta, with Scottish – and mostly Dundonian – machines and men. By the 1890s Calcutta had become the prime centre of jute manufacture, consigning Dundee to a secondary position.

While a number of articles and monographs have been devoted to the

Calcutta mills and their workforce, Dundee has attracted less attention, while the singularity of the connection between both centres, although noticed, has seldom been studied in depth.¹ Exception must be made for Gordon Stewart, as his *Jute and Empire*, focusing on the business and managerial levels, captures the ambiguous relations that developed between both industrial centres up to the end of the

¹ On Calcutta see D. Chakrabarty, (1989) *Rethinking Working-Class History, Bengal 1890-1940*, Princeton and Delhi: Princeton University Press, A. De Haan, (1994) *Unsettled settlers, Migrant workers and industrial capitalism in Calcutta*, Rotterdam: Verloren Publishers, Rotterdam, S. Sen, (1999) *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, P. Ghosh, (2000) *Colonialism, Class and a History of the Calcutta Jute Mill Hands, 1880-1930*, Hyderabad: Sangam Books Ltd, S. Basu (2004), *Does Class Matter, Colonial capital and worker's resistance in Bengal, 1890-1937*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. On Dundee see B. Lenman (1969), *Dundee and Its Textile Industry 1850-1914*, Dundee: Abertay Historical Society, W. Walker (1979), *Juteopolis. Dundee and its Textile Workers 1885-1923*, Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, E. Gordon (1991), *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland*, Oxford: Clarendon Press

colonial period.² Arguing that “the Dundee Calcutta relationship not only concerned shareholders and industry magnates but also acted as a driving force in the process of class struggle and formation”³ Anthony Cox takes on a new perspective by focusing on the workforce employed in both industries, and his *Empire, Industry, and Class* endeavours to look at processes of class formation in Scotland and Bengal against the background of the “imperial nexus of jute”, namely the intertwined network of relations linking both industrial centres.

Indeed two stories run parallel in the book, as is mirrored by its structure. The opening and closing chapters respectively narrate the development of the “imperial nexus of jute” and its demise. By the end of the 19th century, while Calcutta had established itself as the main centre for jute manufacturing, Dundee was led to diversify into finer types of production. (Ch.1) The economic Depression of the 1930s dealt a fatal blow to this equilibrium as shifts in the Calcutta mills’ production strategy induced them to move into markets that had so far been the preserve of Dundee. (Ch. 7) The core of the book,

organised along chronological and thematic lines, focuses on the parallel development of working class organisations and militancy in both centres. Thus conditions of life and work of the migrant labour employed by the Calcutta industry is studied, as are first instances of industrial agitation in the 1890s (Ch. 2). The interwar period, and the development of nationalist and communist interest in the jute workers, as well as renewed labour militancy then come into focus (Ch. 5). After a detailed description of the working and living conditions in Dundee (Ch. 3), the book moves on to look at the development of jute workers’ militancy in Dundee, and the rise of Socialist, Millenarist and Trade Union movements in their midst (Ch. 4), while the 1920s and the growing tensions between Communist and Labour movements are tackled separately (Ch. 6). Within each chapter, parallels are drawn between both industrial centres thus endowing the book with a strong comparatist perspective. The variety of sources used, including official report, newspapers articles, personal papers of various political figures and union leaders, as well as of jute manufacturers, and interviews conducted in Dundee and Calcutta with former jute workers and

² G. T. Stewart (1998), *Jute and Empire: The Calcutta Jute Wallahs and the Landscapes of Empire*, Manchester: Manchester University Press

³ A. Cox (2013), *Empire, Industry and Class, The Imperial Nexus of Jute, 1840-1940*, Routledge, p. 61

manufacturers allow the account to mirror a multiplicity of viewpoints.

Focusing on workers and labour movements in both industrial centres, the aim of the book is twofold. Taking on a comparatist perspective, it runs both stories of working class formation in parallel. At the same time, A. Cox is also careful to look at interactions between the two centres, especially highlighting how the growth of Calcutta's industry impacted on Dundee's working classes and working class movements. Through the case of Dundee the book endeavours to capture "the impact of colonialism on the development of British industrial economy and working class formation."⁴ In some instances, however, claims related to the concordance of different phases in working class movements in both centres, and to the impact of the imperial nexus on the situation obtaining in Dundee, for instance in terms of composition of the workforce or managerial practices, could be better substantiated. Overall, the book is a welcome addition to the scholarship

on the Dundee jute industry. This dual case study of the British and Indian industrial centres provides a vantage point to study the features and consequences of British colonial ventures on industrial workers at home and in the colonies. It also tackles a number of important issues relating to India's and Britain's labour histories. Students of Indian labour history will find the comparison of the two industrial centres an interesting endeavour to question what is too often considered the specificity of India's industrialisation, for Cox makes the point that such features as "paternal despotism" on the side of management, or the use of "spare hands" or "floating labour" were not specific to India, but also to be found in Dundee. The account of the way different leftist formations in Dundee, such as the communists, or the Jute and Flax Workers Union positioned themselves vis-à-vis the Indian jute workers, on the other hand, is an interesting case study of the difficulties faced by British labour groupings when addressing the colonial question. 🇮🇳

Camille Buat

Institut d'Etudes Politiques Sciences Po Paris, Camille.buat@gmail.com

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4