
First things first: this is a splendid book, the product of prodigious research and intelligent reflection. Anyone interested in the nuts and bolts of the world maritime economy created by Europeans from the eighteenth century on, anyone interested in who made it work and how, needs to read this book.

Professor Miller’s introduction nicely sets up what follows. His book, he writes, “is about how ‘maritime’ Europe ordered the flow of peoples and things around the world…” and is also intended “to examine the exchanges between maritime history and the larger currents of the twentieth century.” What came as a surprise to this reviewer was the emphasis throughout on the personal. The reader will not find organizational charts for the many corporate entities covered, nor statements of corporate earnings. The reader will instead find great detail about how individual businessmen, with names, created networks linking their firms and ports with the rest of the world.

The book is in two sections, the first (“Networks”) examines the nature, assumptions and operations of the European maritime organizations which first connected the world to create a kind of globalism before the term was invented. It is broadly organized around the three subjects of ports (particularly Rotterdam, Antwerp and Hamburg), shipping, and agents. It is a cogent explanation of the old business system which was fully articulated by the mid nineteenth century, its networks and manners, its values and virtues.

The chapter on ports was particularly good. Miller takes pains to explain how leaders in, for example, Hamburg produced success. Typically, he focuses on a family enterprise, the house of Vorwerk, to explain the process. The Vorwerks were traders and bankers and much else. We learn about the founder, George Friedrich Vorwerk (1793-1867), his sons and grandson, their connections through marriage with other business families, and the extraordinarily close connections they made with business enterprise in distant places, especially Chile. So close, in fact, that by the 1920s it was unclear whether the firm was more Hamburg or Chilean. The networks these men created united Hamburg, its hinterland, and enterprises in Chile so tightly that not even the calamity of world war could destroy them.

When Miller turns to shipping, he again highlights the personal. HAPAG, founded in Hamburg in 1847, became a company global in reach. To help explain how it operated Miller predictably chooses to follow the work of particular individuals. In this case he describes a business trip two HAPAG executives – Marius Böger and J.H.F. Loepthien – made to the United States in 1928. We learn, in typical detail, that

“Arriving at the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce, Böger was invited to attend a working luncheon on cold-storage facilities in the harbor. Seizing on the occasion, Böger worked the room, making the acquaintance of the chamber’s foreign trade manager, the manager of United Fruit Company, the traffic manager of the Admiral Line..., the head of a harbor tugboat company, and the foreign trade manager of the Southern Pacific. Two days later, the chamber of commerce arranged a breakfast in Böger’s honor…. ‘I had,’”

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Böger wrote in his report, ‘the opportunity to know the following people,’ among whom figured representatives of Standard Oil, Union Oil, the Paraffine Company, Douglas Fir Exploitation and Export Company, Western Pacific, the Southern Pacific, and various steamship lines” (76).

Doubtless grand conceptions and designs and sharp-eyed accountants were important to business success, but for Miller the key was the tireless cultivation of personal connections, without which all else would likely come to naught.

What is different about his account of trading companies and their agents, at least to his reader, is Miller’s description of the relationships between companies and empire. We learn that firms such as the Dutch Internatio and Steel Brothers of London so “immersed… trade with empire, that imperial culture – life experiences, expectation, forms of expression in language or dress, enabling mechanisms, and ways of relating – as well as commerce came to be mediated by these companies” (114). Once again, to show how it worked, Miller focuses on a few individuals, for example in this case Harold Braund of Steel Brothers. We learn about his typical day: “He is at his office desk by six in the morning, stops at about nine to bathe, shave, and eat …” Then about the company facilities he finds when in Burma he is moved to remote Indaw: “the staff is much smaller and the facilities more primitive, but there is still a club with a bar, a library, a billiards table, and a tennis court” (116). We see him preserving much that was Anglo but also learning local languages and suffering from local diseases. However, intimate though the connections were between these companies and locals, there were limits. Marriage between company men and indigenous women was generally prohibited and most field agents were single men who delayed marriage until their return, usually in early middle age, to metropolitan headquarters. In focusing on Braund the detail might be overdone at times but the point is effectively made: individuals in the field created and maintained the vital networks which connected companies with global business to local producers.

The second section (“Exchanges”) is quite brilliant but also quite sad. It first describes and in its own way celebrates the remarkable resilience of the old global business networks even in the face of disasters of the scale of WWI and WWII. The author clearly admires the old networks that depended on face-to-face contact and accumulated experience, where affability, good clubs and good drink were vital to business success. This was a male world and “Male camaraderie, buttressed by adherence to a common code, held [a]firm together, engendered trust within, and provided a reputational face without” (119). Many of the details of that world are affectionately recounted.

But then the denouement - all this was annihilated by the revolution of containerization in the last third of the twentieth century. But before explaining all that, Miller provides a fascinating account of the durability of the old trading networks. For each of the main participating maritime nations, World War I created disruption and some huge losses. But often there were gains: “…the war was a gift to Allied trading companies. Vast quantities of materials were dispatched overseas, and German markets were invaded or simply liquidated.” (236) Even Germany bounced back quickly. The German merchant fleet had disappeared, sunk or surrendered, and formerly great companies had few if any seaworthy vessels left in 1919 but by 1929 the
companies and ports had recovered. Hamburg handled more seaborne cargo traffic in 1929 than in 1913. The ships had been lost, but not the know-how, the networks and the work ethic.

There were some similarities with the post WWII years. Within ten years shipping and trading companies and ports were once again booming, but there were also many differences. World War II destroyed the old empires and with them many of the old patterns of trade. Miller argues that “In the years after the war the very meaning of globalization was cut loose from its former imperial base” (278). What had been a form of globalism centered on Europe rather rapidly became multi-centered as firms in the East, under indigenous direction, became important players. Internatio, for example, continued making profits in Indonesia until 1957, but then it was taken over. European maritime networks remained profitable and important but they were no longer dominant.

It was not, however, the two world wars, the Great Depression or the loss of empire that destroyed the European networks so lovingly described by Professor Miller. It was containerization, a new factor in shipping. Miller explains it about as well as it can be done and once again emphasizes a few key individuals.

The idea of containerization was simple. Instead of the customary slow and expensive procedure of loading and unloading general cargo packed in bags or crates, everything would be packed into large containers, essentially standardized metal boxes. Easily loaded and unloaded, huge sums could be saved, not just by reducing labor costs but also by almost eliminating theft. Though the idea was simple, implementation was not. Using containers would require redesigning the entire system of maritime transport. It meant new ships, radical new port design and equipment, and the elimination of almost an entire class of traditional labor.

Making it happen obviously involved many people but Miller emphasizes two Americans, Foster Weldon, a Johns Hopkins Professor, and a North Carolina trucker named Malcom McLean. Before reading this book I had never heard of them but Miller shows just how important they were. McLean created his first “container ship” in 1956, then by 1966 the first containers were being shipped across the Atlantic, and by 1972 they were dominant. Miller includes a 1972 photo of Rotterdam Harbor, a place traditionally teeming with longshoreman of all types. Now it was filled with cranes, trucks and containers---but almost no people. Everything had changed.

Miller acknowledges the important benefits of containerization, the reductions in cost, in theft, and the amazing increase in speed, but he is especially good in explaining its effect on the very nature of globalism. For centuries European maritime operators traded products produced in one place for those produced elsewhere, such as rubber from Malaya for, say, machines from Britain. With containerization transport costs are so reduced that more and more products are globally constructed. Different parts of a product are contracted to wherever the part can most cheaply be produced and then the parts are sent to wherever they can most cheaply be assembled. Shipping costs are largely insignificant. Miller cites the famous example of “the Barbie doll created out of hair from Japan, plastic from Taiwan, clothes from China, molds from America or Europe, and assembled in Indonesia, Malaysia and China, all the components moving across the seas to Hong Kong where they were gathered together and then ultimately shipped back to America” (343).
Having admirably explained the benefits, Miller makes clear the price. The old system so warmly explained depended on expertise accumulated over a lifetime, or several. Often a top official had begun as an apprentice, served for years overseas and only then was considered up to the task of high responsibility at headquarters in Liverpool or Antwerp or Le Havre. That kind of expertise is no longer important: “...the hegemonic conception of management as a profession learned in business schools and applicable across industry and sector...put a premium on new kinds of expertise” (357). The revolution destroyed the significance of personal relationships in maritime trade. An old system run by people who knew, personally, ports and ships and agents was replaced by a new one run by programmers for whom such things exist as numbers on spreadsheets. Companies that were rooted in the culture and history of their home ports gave way to companies whose globalism led, among many other things, to the use of flags of convenience. Miller reports that “in 2000 the top five world fleets, in descending order, were, preposterously, those of Panama, Liberia, the Bahamas, Malta, and Greece” (348). The old men, and their kind, many of the old ports and most of the old companies are gone.

This is not a book for general survey courses or for those whose historical interests run to war stories and narrative. It is important, it is impressive, but it is not for a general readership. Moreover, interesting anecdote is not Professor Miller’s forte. He does retail one incident in which a merchant ship supposedly delivering vital supplies to the allies at the height of the U-Boat campaign of WWI was found inexplicably loaded with rhododendrons. It was a welcome story and one which made a good point about how difficult the business of supply was---but it was an exception, one longed for more. In place of anecdote is detail and here I pause to quibble. Detail can be substantively important and can give a reader confidence in the author’s expertise, but it can also suffocate. We are told for instance not just that Hamburg’s Grapow & Wellman commissioned Busch & Co. to secure the release of goods on board an interned ship, nor that that company was located in Brazil, but that they commissioned Busch & Co., located at 14 Rua Conselheiro Mafra in Florianopolis (italics mine). This was done via a Danish company, Salmon Davidson, located at 3 Brogade, Copenhagen (my italics). Such detail does not really hurt but constantly repeated does not make a difficult subject any easier.

The subject is vast but the only matter which Professor Miller passed by without the kind of comment and analysis which I rather expected was the forming of “pools and conferences” among maritime trading interests according to which they came to agreements which took the edge off their competition for business. Miller puts it this way: “To tame the ruinous side to competition, the industry’s answer, like railroads, was to apportion traffic and sustain rates through pools and conferences”(181). In 2013 “pools and conferences” seem rather like conspiracies in restraint of trade and clear grounds for legal action by governments now generally promoting free trade. How much of these arrangements was public at the time and how much carefully Unpublic? Was it legal? We are not told. Of course, this too is a big subject, perhaps for his next book, but I would have liked more in this one.

The book is securely based on an impressive bibliography which extends some thirty pages. Miller has not only mined the secondary sources but also company and port archives throughout northwestern Europe. Consistent with his emphasis on the personal in making the old system work, he also interviewed around forty men who had had careers in maritime companies and a
few who still do. I suppose that it is possible that there are gaps, other sources that could have been tapped. If so, the omissions will have to be pointed out by someone who specializes in international business history.

Cambridge University Press has produced a handsome volume but some older readers might consider the Kindle version (as I did) so as to be able to adjust font and lighting. As is usual, more maps would have been welcome. There are only four in a book about often intricate trading patterns in obscure places. It is not easy to follow the description without maps of traffic even in Britain but in, say, Burma it can mystify. Still, my quibbles notwithstanding, this is a well-edited volume written by an outstanding historian.

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