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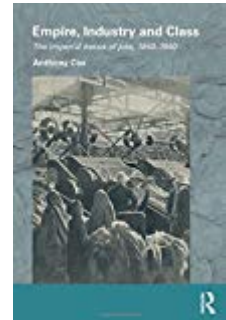
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Anthony Cox. *Empire, Industry and Class: The Imperial Nexus of Jute, 1840-1940.* Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013. xvi + 270 pp. \$155.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-415-50616-8.



Reviewed by Jonathan E. Robins

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Commissioned by Charles V. Reed (Elizabeth City State University)

Jute is not a particularly glamorous commodity. The “golden fiber,” as farmers, merchants, and manufacturers called it, is a container for other commodities. Jute bagging covered the cotton bales that fueled Lancashire’s rise. Jute sacks held wheat from Canada and coffee from Cuba. Jute fabric provided the base for the linoleum flooring that so many homeowners, like myself, are busily ripping up. Jute is strong and biodegradable, but its most important attribute is its cheapness, because there were and still are many other fibers (flax, hemp, cotton, coir, henequen, and so on) that can do the same job as jute. In *Empire, Industry and Class*, Anthony Cox explores the historical processes that made jute a key industry in the British Empire, and which kept jute cheap over more than a century of economic and political change.

The book is an important contribution to the history of labor in Britain, India, and the British Empire. It uses the “twin cities” of jute, Dundee and Calcutta, to examine the working-class experience in an imperial context. Cox’s book is not

the first comparative study of jute. Gordon Stewart’s *Jute and Empire* (1998) also took Dundee and Calcutta as case studies. Stewart ably showed how Dundonians brought their capital and expertise to Bengal and launched an industry that would eventually ruin Dundee’s staple trade. Stewart argued that the story of jute complicated typical narratives of imperialism: in this case, the periphery (Calcutta) successfully industrialized and drove the metropolitan core (Dundee) to extinction.

Empire, Industry and Class differs from *Jute and Empire* in two important ways. First, Cox uses a “dual economy” model to examine the jute industry, arguing that by the 1890s Calcutta had replaced Dundee as the “primary” sector. Like Lancashire’s cotton industry, Dundee’s jute industry discovered that it had little influence on the high politics of empire, particularly where India was concerned. Under political and economic conditions reminiscent of more recent periods of globalization, enterprising Scots moved technology, personnel, and capital from one low-wage corner

of the empire to an even lower-wage region in Bengal. Free to sell their goods across the empire and the world, Scottish (and eventually Marwari) capitalists in India drove their colleagues in Scotland out of key markets.

Dundee's jute barons did not give up, but instead assumed Calcutta's old role as a "secondary" supplier of manufactured goods, seeking out new products and new markets and benefiting from boom periods when Calcutta (the primary sector) could not keep up with global demand. This "dual economy" perspective offers a better explanation of the persistence of jute in Dundee than the typical "core-periphery" model. The Scottish sector suffered tremendously across the twentieth century at the hands of Indian competition--before and after the end of the empire--but the industry was surprisingly long-lived. (The last jute spinning mill in Dundee operated until 1999.)

The second difference between *Jute and Empire* and *Empire, Industry and Class* is the latter's focus on labor history. Stewart's book was essentially about capitalists, the jute wallahs who worked in India and created an imperial identity that did not fully belong in Scotland or India. In his review of the literature on working-class history in Bengal and Dundee Stewart pointed to some similarities between Scottish and Indian workers, but *Jute and Empire* focused "on matters at the level of the boardroom and government conference chamber" and never touched "the world of the factory floor and mill district" (p. 3). Cox's object "is to reveal the connections that existed between different phases of class formation in Dundee and Calcutta as a result of the central role played by the development of jute dependency and the imperial nexus of jute" (p. 11). He argues that similarities in the recruitment and management of labor in Scotland and Bengal were not accidental, but were in fact products of a single process.

Cox charts out that process in eight chapters that cover the period from 1840 to 1940. Three

chapters focus on Dundee, two on Bengal, and two take both cases together. There is a strong comparative element throughout the book, regardless of the location examined by each chapter. In chapter 2, for example, Cox examines changing labor migration patterns in India but draws an explicit comparison between the recruitment of "up-country men" in Bengal and the recruitment of Irish workers in Dundee. Rejecting Dipesh Chakrabarty's claim that migratory labor patterns and patterns of labor organization in Bengal's jute industry emerged in response to a particularly colonial form of capitalism, Cox shows that workers in Scotland were just as colonized by jute (or least as immiserated) as their comrades in India.

Cox avoids the temptation to draw an equivalency between the imperial experiences of Dundee and Bengal, but he presents ample evidence showing that Dundee's working class lived and labored in conditions that were among the most miserable in the empire. Infant mortality rates among jute workers in Dundee were staggeringly high (59 percent), and constant malnutrition resulted in "a race of stunted mill workers in Dundee who bore a closer resemblance to their Indian counterparts than to any comparable group of British male workers" (pp. 73, 80). Cox concludes that "Individual entrepreneurs, shareholders, managers and supervisors all benefited from the 'coal face of Empire', particularly as the Scottish seams bore less and less, but Empire also produced a low-paid, unhealthy and increasingly pugnacious working class" (p. 192).

That "pugnacious working class" is Cox's chief concern, and he shows similarities in the evolving culture and political attitudes of jute workers in several chapters. In both jute regions, millenarian and then Marxian social and political movements emerged. These movements, like patterns of labor recruitment, were produced by a single process that connected the two industrial centers. What Cox calls "the imperial nexus of jute" worked "as

a driving force in the process of class struggle and [class] formation” (p. 45). Scottish managers embraced a philosophy of “paternal despotism” in mills along the Hooghly as well as those along the Tay to control workers, and workers in both places responded with wildcat strikes, riots, and trade union organization. Cox shows that the processes and tools of imperial capitalism were applied in Scotland just as they were in India.

The book is at its heart an old-fashioned labor history, concerned with the origins of class consciousness and labor organization. Cox criticizes Eric Hobsbawm and other earlier scholars of Marxian labor history, but he also takes issue with the subaltern school as well as feminist interpretations of labor history in the book. The result is a pragmatic interpretive framework that owes much to earlier Marxian ideas, but which also takes into account the power of culture, identity, and the imperial experience in shaping class relations and class development.

This ambitious comparative history is at times too detailed; Cox presents readers with a vivid picture of life in Dundee and Bengal and assumes readers are familiar with at the basic history of both places. Cox frequently employs words from Bengali and other Indian languages in the text alongside Scottish words and colorful expressions in the “oary” dialect of Dundee’s mill districts. At times the languages and places are intentionally juxtaposed to demonstrate the close connection between Bengal and Dundee. Readers not familiar with Dundee or India will be frequently flipping to the helpful glossary the author has included.

Labor historians will likely be the main audience for this book, but scholars interested in imperial history will be rewarded with a good example of comparative history that recovers the experiences of everyday people living in, and traveling across, imperial spaces.

(pp. 46-48)

(pp. 44-45)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-empire>

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