

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Catherine Pickett. *Bibliography of the East India Company: Books, Pamphlets and Other Materials Printed between 1600 and 1785*. London: British Library, 2011. Maps. 301 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7123-5844-6.

Reviewed by Philip J. Stern (Department of History, Duke University)

Published on H-Albion (July, 2013)

Commissioned by Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth



Sometime around the mid-1780s, an East India Company employee named Thomas Wilks set about the task of collating printed tracts about the company; the project, which only covered pamphlets from 1661 to 1726, stalled permanently at his death in 1791. Despite his efforts, systematically collecting and cataloguing printed materials about the company was never as high a priority for either the company or its institutional successors as command over its manuscript and archival records. Although we have come to recognize in recent years the importance of writing in various forms to the making of the company's regime at home and abroad,[1] very few have attempted the Herculean, if not Sisyphean, task of giving order to the magnificent chaos of the world of printing by and about the East India Company, especially in the period prior to its relentless territorial expansion from the late eighteenth century onward. It is not hard to see why. By her own telling, it took Catherine Pickett more than three decades and the introduction of digitized catalogues to make something like this possible, but for the reader and researcher at least, *Bibliography of the East India Company* was well worth the wait. This book catalogues the history of printing by and about the East India Company from its first chartering in 1600 until its constitutional transformation with the creation of the Board of Control in 1784. Scouring holdings primarily in the British Library, but also in repositories elsewhere in the United Kingdom and the United States, Pickett has produced a publication of immense value. It could not come at a better time, as the growing interest in the early East India Company among students and scholars has only been matched by the daunting availability and awareness of such texts through ever-expanding online databases and

collections.

This volume can be recommended equally as a starting place for those just getting interested in the early East India Company, as a handy reference for a seasoned veteran scholar, or as a solid guide for anyone who may fall in between. In addition to the many more general uses of such a bibliography, it provides a one-stop shop of sorts for a variety of aspects of publishing on the company that can be elusive or tedious to trace. For example, the book lists multiple copies of works, complete with shelf marks or archival citations. It also offers, when necessary, annotations explaining a publication's content, detailing its attribution, or providing material information about the texts themselves. Pickett has traced works dedicated to or published under the patronage of the company, as well as reprints or later collections of older writings that shed interesting light on the continuity of debates over the company's affairs. (On pages 151-152, for example, I learned to my great delight that Henry Dundas, the first president of the Board of Control, seems to have owned a 1771 imprint of the collected works of the seventeenth-century political economist Charles Davenant.) The book also offers separate title, author, and subject indexes, the last of which is brisk but effective in allowing anyone interested in particular themes or genres of printing—say, cargo lists or sermons—easy access to such material across the span of the period covered in the book.

However, this bibliography should be approached not only as a resource for historians but also as a history of the early company in its own right told *through* its engagement with print. Primarily chronological in its organization, it draws out crucial themes as they developed,

particularly in the form of brief introductions to selected years throughout. Along the way, Pickett traces through the company, its advocates, and its rivals' use of print a remarkable number of issues related to the company's history: early voyages, battles with interlopers and rivals, the Amboina massacre, the emergence of the "new" Company and their union, eighteenth-century warfare and territorial expansion in India, and many more. In the process, it becomes evident just how integrated this history was with many of the critical flash points of early modern British history: Elizabethan and Jacobean overseas expansion; seventeenth-century Anglo-Dutch rivalry; Cromwell and the Interregnum; the Glorious Revolution; the South Sea Bubble; the war of the Austrian Succession, the Seven Years' War, and the American rebellion; and of course, the history of print, the book, and the public sphere.[2] In fact, a reader can see quite conspicuously both the periodic flash points and the mounting importance of the East India Company to British politics, culture, and finance in the balance of the publications over time: the company's first century occupies only the first seventy-eight pages of the *Bibliography*, and a significant amount of that is focused alone in the decade after the Glorious Revolution. By comparison, the period covering 1700 to 1785 takes up almost twice that space, with the period between the debates over the 1773 Regulating Act and the aftermath of the 1784 India Act occupying the last hundred pages of the book.

As Pickett notes, one could nor should not expect a work such as this to be comprehensive. There is no doubt that specialists on some aspect or another of the company's history will immediately be able to find one or two books or pamphlets missing from the list, or perhaps might arrive at a more or less restrictive definition of what counts as print "about" the company. In fact, many of the boundaries put on this study are self-consciously imposed. Given limitations on space and time, for example, newspapers have not been included, and given its chronological frame, the book only tangentially touches on the vibrant history of print in British India, particularly in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Calcutta. Pickett also warns the reader early on that one might be surprised by the "paucity of material relating directly to India," which she credits to the failure of the public to be interested in the issues of governance in India until the debates of the 1770s (p. viii). In a relative sense, it may be quite true that qualitatively and quantitatively a remarkable amount of print by and about the company was dedicated to "domestic" affairs, ranging from the publication of routine sales to its place in the

great political controversies of the day. Still, one cannot but wonder if this perception might be vitiated slightly had company-related print been extended to include a more significant amount of writing by early modern English travelers in Asia, so much of which was by its very nature a comment of some sort on the East India Company; for example, one finds here Robert Knox's *Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon* (1681) (presumably owing to its dedication to the company), but not such works as John Fryer's *A New Account of East-India and Persia* (1698) or the interloper Alexander Hamilton's scathing critique of the company in his *A New Account of the East Indies* (1727). The book does include a good many printed maps of Asia in its ambit, though it might also be mentioned that other visual texts are less well represented, such as the sorts of political caricature and cartoons that played a pivotal role in shaping later eighteenth-century debates over the company's affairs.

These are, however, merely passing observations, prompted more by the great wealth of what is here rather than any great gap in what is not. In the end, this book is a real accomplishment, representing original, painstaking, and enterprising work in an increasingly crowded field of company studies, which will certainly be of great use and interest not only to historians of British India but also to historians of early modern Britain, print culture, political economy, and many more besides. I certainly know it will be one East India Company book sure to be perched conspicuously within reach on my shelf for years to come.

Notes

[1]. See most notably Miles Ogborn, *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the English East India Company* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007).

[2]. In addition to Ogborn, above, see as well, among others, Douglas R. Burgess Jr., "Piracy in the Public Sphere: The Henry Every Trials and the Battle for Meaning in Seventeenth-Century Print Culture," *Journal of British Studies* 48, no. 4 (2009): 887-913; Anthony Milton, "Marketing a Massacre: Amboyna, The East India Company and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England," in *Politics of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England*, ed. Peter Lake and Steve Pincus (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 168-190; and Jeremy Osborn, "India and the East India Company in the Public Sphere of Eighteenth-Century Britain," in *The Worlds of the East India Company*, ed. H. V. Bowen, Margarette Lincoln, and Nigel Rigby (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2002), 201-222.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Philip J. Stern. Review of Pickett, Catherine, *Bibliography of the East India Company: Books, Pamphlets and Other Materials Printed between 1600 and 1785*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. July, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35269>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.