



Jim Tomlinson. *Dundee and the Empire: 'Juteopolis' 1850-1939.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014. 233 pp. \$120.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7486-8615-5.

Reviewed by Timothy Forest

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

Much has been made of the boom in so-called commodity histories, in which the story of a particular product or good, say sugar in Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (1986), salt in Mark Kurlansky's aptly titled *Salt: A World History* (2003), and jute in Gordon Stewart's *Jute and Empire: The Calcutta Jute Wallahs and the Landscapes of Empire* (1998), is used as a window of sorts by the author to reveal the interconnectedness of global or imperial history, for better, for worse, or both. Likewise, another popular subfield of history has been the localized case study, where a scholar investigates a region, a city, a village, or even a neighborhood in order to analyze discrete themes of race, class, and gender, etc., how such theme(s) impact that locale, and what the implications of the author's arguments may be at the broader level, either alone or in comparison with similar studies.

Jim Tomlinson, a professor of economics and social history at the University of Glasgow, merges these two approaches. He looks at a particular place--Dundee, Scotland--and even more specifically that city's signature industry--jute manufacturing--from its heyday in the 1800s through its decline in the interwar period. He then posits this analysis as a metaphor of the wider history of Britain, its hold over its empire, and how the empire impacted Dundee. He does this in order to

uncover what he claims are "British responses to this complex world of imperial and global connection, over a period and in a place where this relationship became more and more problematic" (p. 3). Tomlinson starts with two chapters that deal with the rise of "Juteopolis," his nickname for Dundee. The city grew rich starting in the mid-1800s from spinning cheap raw jute, imported from India, into higher-value cloth, bags, etc. Much of this wealth, however, was contingent on the low wages paid to the relatively large female workforce in Dundee's jute mills (compared with other British manufacturing centers), and the near-monopoly the city's firms had on jute manufacture worldwide at that time.

This started to change, however, as early as the 1870s, when competing jute mills opened in Calcutta. Their operators took advantage of India's even lower labor costs, and they imported managerial expertise and machinery from Dundee itself. The next two chapters deal with Dundee's response to this threat. Tomlinson first focuses on how the city's "jute barons," or its mill owners, reacted to this competition. Through such organizations as the Dundee Chamber of Commerce, they unsuccessfully pressed the British government to extend domestic regulations of working hours and conditions, particularly regarding women and children, to India, to reduce

Calcutta's competitive advantage in these areas. They also continually pressed the city's unions to ally with them in this cause. These unions, however--the Dundee Trades Council (representing the skilled trades), the Dundee and District Mill and Factory Operatives Union (which mostly consisted of unskilled male laborers), and the Dundee and District Union of Jute and Flax Workers (whose base was the female factory workers)--rebuffed these attempts to create a "producers' alliance" (p. 68).

Tomlinson proceeds, in his fifth chapter, to analyze a transitional period, starting with the Liberal triumph in the 1906 general election, and continuing through World War I. He argues that this was when many elites in the city began to clamor for outright protection, either through British tariffs on Indian finished jute exports or by Britain imposing export restrictions on India of these goods. Surprisingly, however, Tomlinson argues that it was the working classes, and not the elites, that opposed this. They at this time supported the Liberal Party and its devotion to free trade. This was evidenced by Dundee notably electing Winston Churchill on an explicitly anti-protectionist platform as one of its MPs in 1908. This allegiance to free trade continued after World War I, even as Labour displaced the Liberals as the leading political voice of Dundee's working class in the 1920s. Tomlinson uses the example of Thomas Johnston, the city's MP from 1924 onward. Johnston believed in worker solidarity worldwide. He therefore advocated the improvement of working conditions in India, over protection, as the preferred solution to the high unemployment and reduced wages that Dundee's workers increasingly faced because of this competition.

The 1930s represents for Tomlinson the decade when a common consensus in favor of protectionism finally emerged in Dundee. This is the main subject of the book's final two chapters. Yet even then, the coming together of Dundee's industrialists, the local Conservative Party, and the

city's unions, was still unable to get the British Government to impose trade barriers to value-added jute products from India, nor could they convince it to persuade the self-governing portions of the empire--Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa--to reduce their own duties on Dundee's jute products. Tomlinson points out that protection for the British jute industry was finally adopted by the postwar Labour government, exactly when increased competition from synthetics and changing consumer demand conspired to end the jute industry in Dundee altogether.

In many ways Tomlinson's book is a response and a counterpart to Stewart's *Jute and Empire*, but from the perspective of Dundee, whereas Stewart focuses squarely on Calcutta. Tomlinson in doing so employs rich archival materials, particularly those of the Dundee Chamber of Commerce, the minutes of the local union of jute and flax workers (the DDUJFW), and the Dundee Year Book, along with contemporary newspaper coverage of events, in order to gauge public opinion of the industry and to measure how jute production impacted and was impacted by the city's links to London and to the empire. (The author points out that comparable records--journals, transcripts, and the like--for the three unions he investigates are either missing or unavailable.) Tomlinson also raises some excellent ideas about the complex relationships between class, gender, and imperialism, as they were borne out in Juteopolis and possibly how they can be extrapolated from there. In doing so he reveals how the local intersected with the national and the imperial levels in driving, or attempting to manipulate, British responses to changing circumstances, and how this impacted the everyday lives of Britons.

Yet some of these issues could have been more fully developed. In particular, the role that gender played, in a real and in a metaphorical sense, in the local jute industry in Dundee (evidenced by the uniquely large presence of female workers in the mills, and their determination ear-

ly on to unionize), appears with promise early in the book, but remains undeveloped following that. Attention to potentially hypocritical and ironic attacks on Calcutta's use of female and child labor, state "paternalism" towards Juteopolis and its "feminized" workforce, and how concepts of gender operated in London's dismissal of Dundee's interests and its attitudes towards economic protection as a whole (i.e., "dependence" of the state vs. free market capitalism), would have developed this line of analysis further. This and other arguments the author makes in his introduction, like assessing attitudes of the differing constituencies in Dundee towards imperialism in general (rather than just the direct threat Calcutta's mills posed to Juteopolis) and their views of India--and Indians--more specifically, considering the direct economic and indirect racial threat they posed to Dundee and its jute industry, are largely absent. Perhaps anticipating this, Tomlinson points out that such conclusions are inherently difficult to measure. That said, union pamphlets, private letters, government and party correspondence with the Scottish Office, the Department of Labour, Whitehall, and with the local and national Conservative and Liberal Labour parties, all contain evidence that might shed light on these themes, instead of Tomlinson's reliance on secondary sources.

There also remains the case of exceptionalism. While Dundee had clear and established links with India because of jute, the city's connections with the rest of Britain and with the empire remain unclear, outside of them serving, to varying degrees, as passive customers. Its apparent impotence in affecting imperial policy throughout the entire period in question, compared to other cities, limits any possible generalizations. Investigating other, similar British metropolises, say Manchester and its cotton industry (which Tomlinson does, briefly), or Glasgow and shipbuilding (which Tomlinson does not), might have proven useful in answering this charge. Perhaps a chapter that situated Dundee within the broader

changes of imperial politics and economics throughout this period, or one that made these direct comparisons, would have been instructive. Nevertheless, Tomlinson affords his readers a concise and detailed analysis of how one city's fortunes rose and fell with those of Britain and the empire, how it responded to these changes and challenges, and how it attempted--albeit unsuccessfully--to shape Britain's response to them.

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