


BOOK REVIEW

## Nicholas D. Jackson. *The First British Trade Expedition to China: Captain Weddell and the Courteen Fleet in Asia and Late Ming Canton*

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In this ground-breaking monograph, Nicholas D. Jackson has brought back to life the Courteen fleet's expedition to Canton (Guangzhou), China in 1637. Utilizing English, Chinese, and Portuguese sources, he carefully reconstructs an arresting story of the pioneering British trading fleet in Goa, Macao, and Canton, full of treachery, audacity, frustrating negotiations, and battered hopes.

The book is divided into a prologue, nine chapters, and an epilogue. In the prologue, Jackson highlights the historiographical neglect of, and sources related to, the expedition, and introduces Chinese scholars' circumscribed analysis of the incident. Chapter 1 sets the story in the context of British-Luso contacts in late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. By 1635, the East India Company (EIC) had engaged with the Dutch and the Portuguese in East Asia and aspired to trade with the Chinese. The story thus unfolds with the genesis of the Courteen Association in chapter 2. Captain John Weddell, resentful of his perceived unjust treatment by his employer, the EIC, planned a venture that would threaten the interests of the company; with the backing of the court (including Charles I and Sir William Courteen), they successfully attracted a large crew for the voyage, including the Mountney brothers and Thomas Robinson, who would leave important accounts of the voyage. Predictably, the upstarts triggered the acrimony of the EIC.

Jackson presents an engaging account of the voyage in the next five chapters. Having departed England on April 24, 1636, the Courteen fleet reached Goa in October, only to receive an unfriendly letter from the EIC chief William Methwold, dictating that commerce in India "will not endure competition of the same nation" and that they would not succeed in dealing with the Portuguese (51). Indeed, they were coldly received by the Portuguese before sailing up to Macau through Melaka (chapter 3). The month following their arrival in Macao on July 7, 1637 proved to be frustrating; while the Courteens sought Portuguese assistance to trade with the Chinese, their hope was only battered by the obstructionist approach of the Portuguese; by August 8, they decided to bypass Macao to engage the Chinese in Canton directly and independently (chapter 4). But things did not go for the better at Pearl River estuary, as their request to the Chinese for provisions and trade was first stalled and then received with hostility; when the discontented fleet bombarded a fort in late August, they were finally allowed to present a petition to open up trade to the authority in Canton (chapter 5). While it seemed that the Courteens' envoy was busy negotiating and trading with the Chinese in Canton, it became increasingly clear to Weddell that the Portuguese were sabotaging their mission; what is worse, on September 20 the fleet barely

escaped a surprise attack by the Chinese, which turned into a British onslaught in the following days (chapter 6). Forced to protest to Macao, the Courteens were told by the Portuguese that they were duped by their Chinese middleman, who had completely misrepresented the Cantonese authority's categorical refusal to their petition and ultimatum to depart as an invitation to commerce. Through Portuguese brokerage, the Courteens promised never to return, while their envoy, detained at first, was now actually trading with the Chinese. When the envoy returned to the Courteens, frictions ensued between the British and the Portuguese in Canton and Macao, before the fleet left for England in early 1638, with most of its crew to vanish in the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic (chapter 7).

In the final two chapters, Jackson scrutinizes Chinese sources with the help of secondary literature in Chinese (131n5, 134–8n21–41, 143n54–5, 144n58, 145n60). He concludes that Chen Qian, the Cantonese commander of the navy (*zongbing*, 总兵), and superintendent (*haidao fushi*, 海道副使) Zheng Jinguang, used the middleman Li Yerong to deceive the Courteens, and attempted to rob their silver and goods in the surprise attack; they might also have received Portuguese bribery (130–45). He then questioned whether the imperial authority of Ming China could prevent such a disaster had they learned more about the West and not solely relied upon the deceiving Portuguese. Rather, the British seemed to be much more diligent in learning what was going on. In the epilogue, Jackson concludes that the incident of 1637 was but a precursor of the clashes of the Opium Wars.

Jackson's command of primary sources and secondary literature in Chinese strongly demonstrates the importance of *understanding others from within* in doing transnational history of early modern Britain. This is arguably the book's greatest achievement. In contrast, however, his comments on the failings of the Ming authority (145–55) and the Opium War (epilogue) can seem the cliché that any change of the stagnant Chinese empire was but responding to the impact of the West if a reader does not possess sufficient knowledge about late imperial China. Ultimately, the Ming was failing in the 1630s and could not curtail corruption on the ground, while local people and officials were eager to trade with foreigners, as discussed in a Chinese monograph cited by Jackson (Li Qingxin, *The Overseas Trade System of the Ming Dynasty* [Beijing, 2007]: 312–16, 337–42, 347–55, 381–86). Furthermore, a frustrated Weddell did not take Nathaniel Mountney's advice to return the fleet to its previous, less intrusive position in the Bogue (97) to facilitate negotiations in Canton—postures as such (or not) *are* significant in *any* diplomatic negotiation. Might not it be helpful to probe more deeply into the context of, on the one hand, how much the Courteens had been frustrated by the monopolistic EIC and Portuguese since Goa, and, on the other hand, a collapsing Ming regime incapable of running overseas trade on the ground?

Such reservations, however, do not overshadow my deep appreciation for an engaging global microhistory that should be read by historians working on both early modern Britain and late imperial China—professors and students alike. Ultimately, Nicholas Jackson's profoundly admirable effort should be followed up and taken further ahead in any similar enterprise.