

Book Review

Raymond E. Dumett, *Mining Tycoons in the Age of Empire, 1870-1945: Entrepreneurship, High Finance, Politics and Territorial Expansion*, Ashgate, Farnham, UK, 2009. xv + 255 pp. ISBN 978-0-7546-6303-4. HB.

This book contains nine case studies of various personalities and their roles in the financing of mineral exploration across the globe, all interacting through the financial mechanisms of the City of London. It is truly a tale of enterprise, finance and at times of no little chicanery and jobbery. It is tempting to say that the mix of possibly legal but scarcely ethical practices merging into the illegal, and predation on the careless investor, is a thing of the past, but the recent financial problems of the ‘advanced economies’ suggest that credulity is still often suspended. Certainly some of the risky ventures appear to have attracted many in past history and the present alike. Political and Imperial ambition are included here too, but the majority of the entrepreneurs appear to have been very much concerned with maximisation of their own profits and where possible, the use of political and military power to further their own interests.

There is little positive evidence of scrupulous concern for any duty of care to the countries the chosen entrepreneurs operated in, whether to their investors, to indigenous ‘owners’ of the resources and lands, or to the welfare of employees. Mel Davies attempts to make a positive case for Claude de Bernales as reviver of the Golden West, but how avowedly community orientated de Bernales’ efforts were, is less than certain to this cynical reader. The more general impression of those covered in the book is clearly less favourable. To quote from page 120, with respect to the insider knowledge and destabilising political impact of the operations of John T. North in Chile, ‘His conduct is reminiscent of global speculators today who place immediate, paper gains over political outcomes for the Third World.’ Michael Monteon goes on to observe, in that chapter, that the British private financial interests certified a nation’s credit worthiness, in the absence of an International Monetary Fund. I suspect this was written before mid 2008 and the current ‘financial crisis’ else the comparison might be with the likes of Standard and Poors, as much as with the IMF. Monteon’s chapter was one of my favourites for mixing the tales of finance and the unhappy political outcomes for Chile in the late nineteenth century as well as reprising the role of North in the rebellion

against president Balmaceda in a more positive light than some have done. Robert Spude's description in chapter 6 of Frank Morrill Murphy, as engaging in intrigue, but in less double dealing than most, both condemns with faint praise and sets the general tone of most of the key actors' behaviour.

The entire content of the book is too vast to cover effectively in a review of this size, and this would be redundant in any case, since the introduction to the book, which takes some 40 odd pages, does that job in very fine fashion. It clearly reveals that the subsequent individual author's pieces are consistent in dealing with the general theme, a theme so general in fact that it could and does accommodate a variety of approaches and interests.

In the introduction there are references to underlying structures and theories, such as Alfred Chandler's work, or the observation that greater wealth brings more savings and investment and interest in risky ventures (p. 10 and repeated in footnote 30 on p. 13), I assume in case we missed it in the text. The main thrust of the book, however, is historically grounded rather than being engaged with economic or business theory.

The majority of the time period covered is the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but accounts of the activities of de Bernales and the Guggenheims move into the inter-war and second world war period. Some chapters appeal as more interesting than others. Apart from chapter 4 on North and Chilean Nitrates, my particular favourite was the editor's own study of Edwin Cade and Frederick Gordon and the vast Empire carving operations of the Ashanti Goldfields Corporation in West Africa. These are personal choices and there is likely to be something of interest to anyone inclined to wonder about the financing of mining and smelting operations. No chapters are weak or out of line in their approach and all make an important contribution to the overall study.

Any book which mentions a personal longtime favourite but seldom met writer on financial and mining matters such as Raymond Mikesell (cited on pp. 9 & 199), has my vote, but this at times racy tale of intrigue, duplicity and the odd sensational suicide does not need much assistance.

Overall this book contains a well-chosen collection of interesting histories that are pulled together in fine fashion by the introduction, in a well-presented and well finished volume.