

Me, Mine and Yours: Mining and Imperialism

Mining Tycoons in the Age of Empire, 1870–1945. Edited by Raymond E. Dumett. Pp. 255. Ashgate Publishing, Farnham. R1201. ISBN 978-0-7546-6303-4. 2009.

When it comes to price, this British academic publisher is known for being astronomical. On that score, it is hard not to wonder whether this volume in its series is worth its weight in gold. Or, if not that, then at least its measure in copper or zinc futures. That aside, the claim staked out by Raymond Dumett's new edited volume is certainly two-fold. In part it seeks to provide an understanding of the lives and machinations of some larger-than-life international businessmen who, in the later-19th and early-20th centuries, personified what the former British prime minister, Edward Heath, once called the unpleasant and unacceptable face of capitalism. His 1973 comment was on the dodgy dealings of Lonrho and its buccaneering chairman, 'Tiny' Rowland. Appropriately enough, that conglomerate had started out in 1909 as the London and Rhodesian Mining Company which

went on to make its pile from African mining ventures.

Several of the not-so-gentlemanly 'gentlemanly capitalists' featured here bear a more than passing resemblance to the rapacious Rowland, not least Horace Tabor, king of Colorado silver extraction, who personified the 'greed and questionable business ethics' of America's 'Gilded Age' (p. 59). The book's other worth is its evocation of old-fashioned economic and social history, a fascinating blend of the history of business, labour, technology, culture, the past opportunities and constraints of the material environment, social customs, and individual human smartness and stupidity. Today, when contemporary development studies or austere political economy substitutes for the study of more distant economic eras in some South African universities, the brand of history provided by Professor



The big boots of Cecil John Rhodes.

Dumett and his contributors is particularly welcome.

In any edited nine-chapter collection of this sort, it is more or less inevitable that there will be unevenness in style, and gaps in coverage or thematic integration. Thus, there are one or two essays here that are perhaps less successful than others for one reason or another, such as an excess of detail on West African ore crushing technology or South American nitrate certificates. Equally, such things will still appeal to addicts. On the whole, though, this book contains a string of engaging, well-plotted and lucidly written essays on the international world of mining capitalists, engineers, investors, speculators and various company hangers-on at a key stage of global development. The period from the 1870s to the end of the Second World War saw galloping technological change, bloated material gain, the frantic accumulation of profit in an unsteady economic environment, and major imperial expansion. Through the course of these decades, the fat mining tycoons with their camp-followers of prospectors, diggers, labour bosses and miners turned mining enterprise into a vital bridgehead of worldwide

capitalist expansion and colonial exploitation.

This all makes for an epic international story, crafted loosely as biographical appraisals of individual tycoons which tell us not only where they sat but upon whose backs they were sitting. The rocky fortunes of Horace Tabor in the Rocky Mountains of the American West are analysed by Duane A. Smith. Not only was he pivotal to America's leading world position as a silver producer in the 19th century; as with many other wealthy mining men encountered in this volume, most obviously Cecil Rhodes, he had an eye for politics and was a dreamy egoist. The editor digs away at Edwin Cade and Frederick Gordon, aggressive Anglo-West African entrepreneurs who appreciated fully just how handy the gold supplies of Asante would be for the British banking system, and did their bit to egg on Colonial Office intervention in the Gold Coast. Following this thread, one of the book's most distinguished contributors, Colin Newbury, in 'Cecil Rhodes, De Beers and Mining Finance in South Africa: The Business of Entrepreneurship and Imperialism', re-examines his subject's enormous impact in a novel way. Probing

Rhodes's business activities and company creations, Newbury depicts him as essentially a politician in business rather than as a businessman with a voracious appetite for the politics of British territorial expansion.

Others in this collection address the rise of a new mining plutocracy and industrial expansion in the Americas. Michael Monteton tackles the Chilean 'Nitrate King', John T. North, whose ruinously intrusive meddling in affairs of state remains to this day a bitter historical memory in Santiago. Frank Morrill Murphy, the gold and copper mining and railroad mogul of Arizona, is probed by Robert L. Spude. To beguile investors he swapped pool and stage coach running for 'the look of a Wall Street banker, cane included' (p. 152). Thomas O' Brien provides a magisterial portrait of the wily Guggenheim Brothers, finance capitalists in copper mining who were as adept around smelting technology and metals refining as they were at getting into bed with the most powerful American banker of their day, J. Pierpont Morgan. Chester Beatty, the engineer, financier and entrepreneur, is examined by John Philips. With cliquy prospecting interests running from silver in Colorado and Utah to lead in Yugoslavia and on to the Central African Copperbelt, Beatty's 'love affair with mining' (p. 236) illustrates well the integrated international basis of mine enterprise by the early part of the 20th century.

The remaining two chapters focus on London and Australia. Jeremy Mouat sketches the life and dealings of the legendary Whitaker Wright, a northern English Methodist minister who early in life swapped God for Mammon. With an enormous steam-powered yacht called *Sybarite*, it was not for nothing that Wright became the inspiration for flashy characters in novels by contemporary writers like H.G. Wells. 'Better than anyone', he personified 'the late nineteenth-century mining craze, the frenzied speculation on the London Stock Exchange' (p. 149). Eventually, Wright over-reached himself with one swindle too many and committed suicide in 1904. What did him in was cyanide, the same chemical that was making gold mining scientific. A naturalised Briton of Spanish descent, Claude Albo de Bernales, is examined by Melville Davies in a sketch which reveals a devoted imperialist of truly formidable appetites for the Western Australian goldfields, for its heavy machinery and foundry industries, its diamonds and its oil technology potential. Nor were his interests entirely monied. De Bernales was a champion of

a 'White Australia' racial policy and a devoted British empire patriot who took a dim view of Canadian markets as that country was too full 'of Canadian French' (p. 183).

The centrality of that theme, mining in the age of empire and how it came to shape the course of world history, is knitted together authoritatively by Raymond Dumett in a substantial thematic introduction. The editor's prologue not only provides an opening into the maze of mining history and its interrelated fields of concern, including exploration and prospecting, technical advances, engineering innovation and monopoly company growth, land acquisition and high

finance. It also lays bare a common thread running through all of these essays, that of the intimate relationship between industrial enterprise and ambitious politicians and their empire-building governments. Lastly, like his contributors, Professor Dumett is alert to the mercurial nature of the mining entrepreneurs who are displayed here. To a man, their delusions of grandeur were wild, even mad.

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