GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

One of the commitments of the 'Studies in Imperialism' series is to a 'de-centred' imperial history, that is, a modern approach which sees the relations of imperialism as constituting something far beyond a set of radiating connections between the metropole and the so-called periphery. This was an image that was regularly perpetuated in the world maps of trade and steamship lines common in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It symbolised the manner in which empire was a global terrain at which writers and cartographers looked from the vantage point of the so-called 'Mother Country'. But the establishment of colonial rule created something much more complex than this, with 'sub-imperialisms' being set up in various parts of the world, with intercolonial relationships establishing complex webs of economic, social and cultural networks. As Frances Steel demonstrates in this timely book, this was never more true than in the area of steamship histories, not least in the Pacific.

There are a number of new perspectives established in this focus upon New Zealand and Oceania. First, steamship lines are no longer seen as capitalist organisations that connected the centre of European empires to their colonial outposts. Second, the emphasis shifts from the prime concerns of past histories which have examined the Atlantic and Caribbean worlds, as well as steamer connections with Africa, the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, Australia, South-East Asia and the Far East. Third, earlier works, both popular and academic, have tended to look at the large companies, the high-profile shipping lines which constituted (in the words of the title of an earlier book in the series) the 'flagships of imperialism'. Finally, past studies have invariably privileged ships over people, economics over social and cultural relations.

As I have myself written in the past, there has long been a need for studies of the apparently smaller – and no less significant – enterprises of the empire of steam.

The Straits Steamship Company, the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company, Burns Philp of Sydney, steamers on the African lakes, and many others are as deserving of research as Cunard, P&O, Union-Castle and British India. The Union Steam Ship Company of New Zealand comes into the same category. These companies with a lower profile (at least in Europe) had a powerful impact upon the coastal, riverine, lakeshore and archipelagic areas in which they operated. They were equally

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significant in bringing the transformations of the imperial relationship to bear upon indigenous peoples and their multiplicit relationships with Europeans and the British world. Moreover, each ship was itself an imperial microcosm, carrying within itself evidence of new building techniques, of steam technologies, of human class and racial hierarchies, of social and culinary conventions, of working relationships, of the variable mobility of peoples, and of the cargoes which were representative of each regional economic system. Among the passengers and crew of each vessel were to be found varied examples of dominant and subordinate peoples, travelling and working in a wide variety of guises within colonial systems. Moreover, steamships imposed themselves upon indigenous nautical traditions which had transferred peoples and goods along coasts, between islands, around lakes, even across continents (like the Indian Ocean dhow or the Chinese junk). But they seldom achieved a sudden or easy victory. Such older methods survived and coexisted, performing parallel, related or different functions which colonial rule never quite succeeded in eliminating. These rich textures are more than adequately surveyed in this fascinating work.

It is a special pleasure and privilege for me to introduce this book since it is a field that has intrigued me since childhood, even although I have contributed comparatively little to its study. An upbringing near the docks in a great imperial port (Glasgow) provided me with a fascination with steamships, their operations and the people who worked and travelled in them at a time when quaysides were readily accessible, even to schoolchildren, and health and safety regulations were unknown. Glasgow was proud of its ships, shipbuilders and seafarers, although it is true that, as Frances Steel observes, the local press invariably privileged ships over people in its pictures and stories. From the 1950s onwards and over many decades, I have been fortunate enough to travel back and forth by sea to Africa, North America, South and South-East Asia. As an adventurous young academic I travelled on steamers on African lakes. Later, I developed an acquaintanceship with the operations of the British India Line, a high-profile company founded in India, particularly with its vessels which connected Bombay (Mumbai) to the Persian or Arabian Gulf and eastern India to Singapore. This gave me a long-standing interest in the hermetic world of the ship, which continued to reveal its social and racial hierarchies into the post-colonial world. On the BI I found Indian, Goanese, Chinese and other crew member all performing what I have described as 'invented traditions of ethnic specialisms', a phenomenon that was also evident in other parts of the world. Visits to Australia and New Zealand, not least to their maritime museums, introduced me to the companies, people and trades centred upon those territories and

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the network of routes that fanned out in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. It is for all these reasons, as well as the quality of the research, the writing, and its many people-centred insights that it gives me pleasure to introduce this book into the MUP 'Studies in Imperialism' series. It should secure an audience well outside its specific hemisphere, for the insights and methodology encapsulated here are readily applicable elsewhere.

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