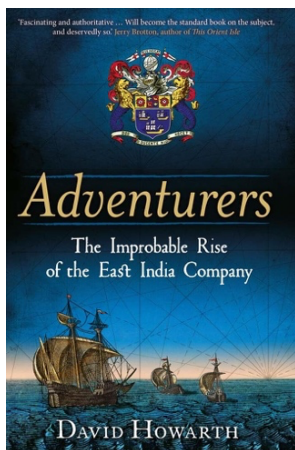


David Howarth, *Adventurers: The Improbable Rise of the East India Company: 1550-1650* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022. 480 pp. ISBN:978-0300250725



David Howarth's lively and engaged study of the early years of the English East India Company provides an encyclopedic view of the major events and personalities who were drawn together to formulate Tudor England's exploration of the Early Modern World. By tracing some of the major figures of London's late 16<sup>th</sup> Century political, commercial, and social circles, Howarth has shown how the activities of seemingly disparate men from a range of professions came together to support and oversee the rise of the East India Company. *Adventurers* not only traces these individuals but gives a clear account of the different voyages undertaken by the Company and their importance as experiments in trade and diplomacy. Some failed miserably, others showed far greater success, the factors governing these outcomes were sometimes organizational and sometimes based on the individual personnel dispatched to man them. Furthermore, at times the Company's voyages met with unexpected hazards or situations which curtailed what might otherwise have been commercially successful ventures.

The book is mostly concerned with the internal operation of the Company from its foundation in 1601 in the dying days of the Elizabethan era. This was a time when England's engagement in international trade was taking off, with missions to Muscovy, the Ottoman Empire, and the New World under the auspices of different private companies, were taking English goods and merchants across the globe. Into this constellation of new trading initiatives came the EIC, which was headed by the redoubtable Thomas Smythe as its first governor. Smythe was able to navigate the Company through the maze of political and commercial difficulties that arose thanks to his long experience as both a merchant and diplomat in his own right. The survival of the Company hinged upon Smythe's early management and his association and familiarity with the exploits of England's foremost mariners, be that Drake and Hawkins' piratical voyages against the Spanish or the scholarly and legal pursuits of Mun and Purchas. Howarth presents us with a worldview that point inexorably towards the Company having come at a time when England, defined especially through London's mercantile and political elite, was ready for it. Not only this, but that earlier developments in cartography and the Iberian experiences of long voyages and the profits available from a global trade, allowed for English merchants and travelers, like Thomas Coryate to move more freely than would previously have been possible.

Howarth equally explores the important differences between the English and Dutch entries into the trading networks of the Indian Ocean and Asia. Where the Dutch were motivated by a military imperative to dispossess the

Spanish and Portuguese of their strongholds in the East, the English were far less focused on military action. While the English deployed violent means, notably against the Portuguese in battle at Swally Hole and Hormuz, the Dutch were far less discriminate, launching campaigns of colonial violence in the Spice Islands, while attacking other Europeans with relative impunity: The Portuguese at Malacca, Macau, Goa and Diu, the English at Amboyna, and the local inhabitants of Indonesia. The Company was by no means innocent, especially considering Henry Middleton's piratical escapades, even after his own Sixth Voyage was viciously attacked by the authorities in Aden and Mocha. Howarth suggests that the English model was far more concerned with making and returning a profit, while the Dutch indulged in "...annexation of territory, extermination of peoples, fabrication of forts and sowing of settlements...". It's perhaps important to say that the English Company's tactics and aims differed markedly from the Dutch but would resemble them very closely by the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Howarth's view of the differences between the English and Dutch model is also well formulated, not only from the perspective of the Dutch attitude to competition whether from local powers or other Europeans, but also in the way that they were managed. In many ways, the EIC was a private project formulated by private merchants, supported by private capital. In contrast to this, the VOC was an organ of the early Dutch state, supported, financed, and managed by men who were intimately connected to the government of the States General, the cities in which they resided. The influence of Oldenbarnevelt and other Dutch statesmen was therefore plain in the organizational makeup of the VOC, not to mention its fundamental mission. Howarth outlines this difference particularly in the case of the Banda Islands. On the one hand, the English strove to make treaties and supply contracts with the islands' natives, later accepting them as subjects of James I after they requested to be so. On the other, the Dutch carried out vicious campaigns of displacement and ethnic cleansing to wrest control of the vital spice growing islands, even to the point of openly blockading their English rivals and capturing their ships. In this case, Howarth argues that the VOC was in some ways carrying the States General's war with Spain to Asia, while also following their own former colonial master's example. This close connection with government, absent from the EIC's early years would manifest later, but Howarth argues effectively for historians to be more discerning in separating the approaches of the two organizations, both in their structure and their actions.

The chapters on the Company's early entries into different markets, especially Persia and Japan are particularly interesting for the perspective they bring on the decisions which led Smythe and the Court of Committees to explore these areas. Howarth dedicates a chapter each to these two ventures, outlining the Company's differing interest in the two regions as potential markets. The Persian taste for woolen fabric made them an ideal export market for English cloth, while Persian silk was seen as a potentially lucrative import to Europe. Japan, meanwhile, was seen as a valuable source of silver specie and an ongoing back door to the far larger markets of China. Like other histories of the Company's early years, Howarth's view of the Persian trade rests heavily on the attempts to harness silk as a European cash cow, with the Company's merchants estimating its potential at £1m. Similarly, Howarth devotes some time to the organization of the campaign to take Hormuz from the Portuguese. He adds great value here by considering the personalities and conduct of the Company merchants who organized this venture, especially the personal rivalries between Monnox and Connock, further complicated by the presence of the Shirley brothers and their influence over the Persian court, such as it was.

Howarth's treatment of Japan is interesting as it calls to the reader's attention the interconnectedness of Japan not only with China, a trade dominated by the Portuguese and local merchants, but also with Southeast Asia. Here,

communities of Japanese merchants and mercenaries were acknowledged features of commercial ports. In Japan itself, the Company was unable to make much headway, in part due to the political upheavals caused by Christian rebels, which led to the expulsion of all Europeans barring only the Dutch, exiled to Deshima in Nagasaki harbor. In the 10 years that the Company operated there, they were varyingly foiled by their own misunderstandings of Japanese hierarchies, the unwillingness of the Company's merchants to work with William Adams, despite his long tenure in Japan, and a lack of desirable goods. Japan was unsuitable for woolen cloth to any great quantity, instead, local customers were interested in purchasing luxury items, the costlier the better. This trait would be of little surprise to a modern visitor to Ginza, but proved an insurmountable barrier for the Company, who could never form a big enough market for anything they brought with them, all the while constantly looking with one eye at other opportunities in the ports and cities of Siam, Cochin and the Malay Peninsula. In sum, Howarth argues, the mission was doomed from the start.

*Adventurers* will rightfully join a growing canon of recent works dealing with the Company's early years, such as the recent works of David Veevers, *The Great Defiance-How the World Took on the British Empire* (Ebury Press, 2023) and Nandini Das, *Courting Empire-Seventeenth Century England, Mughal India and the Origins of Empire* (Pegasus Books, 2023), however, it suffers from a few drawbacks. While the style of the work is engaging and well-paced to the most part, there are occasional lapses into digression from the original topic or idea. At times, this makes the narrative of the book hard to grasp. Equally noticeable is the insufficient concentration on the rendering of foreign words and names. The Persian *shahi* coin is universally written as "shaki", among other examples. This would be understandable if a correction was present in either the text or the footnotes but appears nowhere. This example is not the only one. Likewise, names in other languages are often misspelled or written in differing ways throughout the text, sometimes with diacritics, sometimes without. While these inaccuracies do not detract from the work as a whole, they are distracting.

Howarth's work will suit both a public and scholarly audience interested in the Company's history and the Early Modern World, giving a broad, but detailed overview of the important figures and events that featured in the rise of the EIC to be a global power, and England (later Britain) along with it. It will act as a useful accompaniment to *Courting India* by Das, *The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019) by William Dalrymple and *The Great Defiance* by Veevers.

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