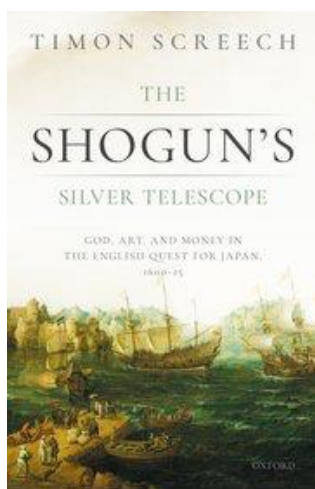




Timon Screech. *The Shogun's Silver Telescope: God, Art and Money in the English Quest for Japan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 336 pp. ISBN 978-0198832034



This book explores the commencement of the East India Company's interest and exploration of trade with Japan in the first two decades of the seventeenth century. Screech balances a lucid narrative with informative subject matter taken from an impressive source list, especially in English and Japanese. The claim that, "The aim of this book is to put Japan back into a central position in the whole Company thinking, and see why it mattered to them" is far from unfounded (p.7). This book creates a great platform for introducing the complexity, temporality and distance of the Company's trade, while additionally providing an insightful method for considering the wider uses and applications for Company sources. The accessibility of this work makes it an ideal primer and guide for future studies concerning specific aspects of Company

history, particularly by examining the broader political and cultural impetus behind otherwise purely economic decisions.

The first three chapters set the scene, providing a welcome tableau of early modern England's recent history and the attempts by English merchants to diversify and extend the reach of their trade. These contextual chapters introduce some of the key concepts and strategic decisions driving England's trade with Japan, with an extensive consideration of the importance of woolen cloth and its exportation, particularly after the introduction of the Cockayne plan (an attempt to concentrate all aspects of cloth weaving, dyeing and finishing in England). We also see here the introduction of the telescope, its history and the place of scientific instruments and *objets d'art* in the rapidly changing landscape of post-Reformation Europe. The section concerning the telescope as a direct challenge to the Jesuit missions in Asia is particularly thought provoking, as is the diversification of artistic depictions of biblical scenes coded in agreement with Protestant theological stances. These themes recur time and again throughout the book; the inclusion of prints and paintings on military, as well as classical subjects making up a large part of English cargoes being particularly notable. This admixture of European cultural politics with the exploration of wider trade is a particularly engaging part of the book as a whole. The second chapter's further

consideration of the alterations to the built landscape of London is also evocative of a distinct shift in English attitudes to the potential of global commerce.

The following chapters track more closely the procession of Company voyages which sailed around the Cape into the Indian Ocean and beyond. Screech follows the progress of English ambitions to provide cargoes of spices and luxuries, which are then feted on the stages and floats of London's theatres and processions. While England was exporting a vision of a new, Protestant and, arguably, humanistic and scientific future, the presence of spices in markets and Ottoman, Indian and Central Asian emperors in plays was reciprocally broadening England's view of the world. The success of early English trade to Japan appears, however, not to have been driven particularly either by telescopes, or paintings, but instead by far more mundane items, from the all-important woolen cloth, to clay galley pots. While English artworks rarely survived transit Eastward, Japanese lacquerware, pottery and screens arrived in England for sale to the elite, not least of all to the King.

The focus on the Japanese theater of the Company's operations again shows its value. While it is true that the Company was particularly concerned at this time with breaking the Portuguese stranglehold over the spice trade in Southeast Asia, Japan, like Persia, offered the EIC a range of opportunities. The failure of the Company to secure the longevity of the Japanese trade has failed to attract much scholarship, with no single volume or new perspectives on this trade appearing for quite some time. By making the Japanese case the focal point of this study, Screech is in many ways going counter to the perception of Japan's place in Company history. While the English may well have been expelled from Japan, along with all other Europeans excepting the Dutch, their presence in the country had otherwise been anything but a failure. They had succeeded in spreading and fanning the already burgeoning Shogunal apprehension over the success and influence of the Jesuits and other Catholic missions in the Empire. Similarly, they were able to carry out a competitive trade with the Dutch, including the shipping of silver back from Asia to Europe, a heretofore unheard-of event. In the end, according to Screech, it was not the Company's commercial interests that doomed them, but instead the finalization of a peace in Europe that saw Charles I married to his Portuguese wife, Catherine of Braganza. The Dutch wasted no time in making sure that this news reached receptive ears in Japan, leaving the Company painfully exposed.

This book permits for a growth in studies of the Company's presence in the world beyond the traditional bounds of India. The Company's records, as well as those from Asian contemporaries can give a much broader view of the Early Modern World than has previously been appreciated. By exploring the mixture of success and eventual downfall of the Company in Japan, scholars and readers ought to be encouraged to consider other arenas where the Company's records might be utilized. Screech's work fits into a growing body of scholarship which uses this methodology. Dutch East India Company records have already been used in this way, most recently through the work of Clulow and Ruangsilp on the Dutch in Japan and Siam, or Sher Banu Khan's monograph on the Sultanahs of Aceh.

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