

7-1-2002

Review of: The Diplomacy Of Involvement: American Economic Expansion Across The Pacific, 1784-1900 by David M. Pletcher

Jeffrey J. Matthews

University of Puget Sound, jmatthews@pugetsound.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/faculty_pubs

Citation

Matthews, Jeffrey J. 2002. "The diplomacy of involvement: American economic expansion across the Pacific, 1784-1900." *Business History Review* 76(2): 380-382.

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at Sound Ideas. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Sound Ideas. For more information, please contact soundideas@pugetsound.edu.

The President and Fellows of Harvard College

The Diplomacy of Involvement: American Economic Expansion across the Pacific, 1784-1900
by David M. Pletcher

Review by: Jeffrey J. Matthews

The Business History Review, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Summer, 2002), pp. 380-382

Published by: [The President and Fellows of Harvard College](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4127856>

Accessed: 08/10/2014 12:46

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The President and Fellows of Harvard College is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Business History Review*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

most of his own wealth. He warned of materialism but ultimately steered the most successful women's magazine of the day, and its readers, to new heights of consumerism. Edward Bok attempted to reconcile consumerism with idealism, and this fascinating story of his life illustrates the complicated nature of such a venture.

Jennifer Scanlon is professor and director of women's studies at Plattsburgh State University. She is the author of Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies' Home Journal, Gender, and the Promises of Consumer Culture (1995) and editor of The Gender and Consumer Culture Reader (2001).

. . .

The Diplomacy of Involvement: American Economic Expansion Across the Pacific, 1784–1900. *By David M. Pletcher.* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001. xii + 380 pp. Maps, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$44.95. ISBN 0-826-21315-4.

Reviewed by Jeffrey J. Matthews

David Pletcher's *The Diplomacy of Involvement* examines American foreign policy and economic expansion in the Pacific through 1900. The book is richly detailed, eminently readable, and meticulously documented. It serves as a companion to his 1998 volume, *The Diplomacy of Trade and Investment: American Economic Expansion in the Hemisphere, 1865–1900*. A professor emeritus at Indiana University in Bloomington, Pletcher is a diplomatic historian whose preceding monographs analyze American mining and railroad investments in Mexico, the annexation of the western territories, and the foreign policies of presidents James A. Garfield and Chester A. Arthur.

This newest book is effectively organized in two parts. The first reconstructs U.S. trade, investment, and economic policies from 1784 to 1890, beginning with an overview of America's limited involvement in the Pacific before the 1844 Treaty of Wang-hsia signed by the United States and China. The seven chapters that follow focus specifically on commercial activities related to Alaska, Hawaii, Samoa, China, Japan, and Korea (two chapters are devoted to China). The second part of the book concentrates on the pivotal decade of the 1890s, when America's economic expansion coincided with extensive political commitment, including the annexations of the Hawaiian and Philippine Islands.

Pletcher is careful to explain America's escalating involvement in the Pacific as the product of disparate factors. U.S. expansionists were intrigued with exotic cultures and ancient civilizations, committed to

Christian missionary work, driven by geopolitics, and enticed by foreign trade and investment. The latter is given the most prominent attention, and the author recognizes that businessmen, while naturally pulled by the prospects of new markets abroad, were also pushed by domestic problems of overproduction and economic recessions. *The Diplomacy of Involvement* demonstrates the importance of understanding U.S. foreign policy in relation to American business and economic history. The country's commercial competition in the Pacific with Great Britain and, to a lesser extent, with France, Germany, Japan, and Russia, sometimes led to intense political rivalries. Such developments caused the U.S. government to follow "an intermittent expansionist policy . . . that gradually involved it in commitments ever farther from home" (p. 4).

Pletcher presents readers with a series of critical factors affecting America's involvement in the Pacific before 1900. The first was the sheer geographic distance between the United States and the nations of the far Pacific. He argues that until the distance was partially overcome by improved transportation and communication systems that encouraged westward expansion, Americans were largely indifferent to these nations. A second element, not unrelated to the first, was "cultural distance," which had its origins in American ignorance of Asian cultures and the propensity of merchants, missionaries, and government officials to demean Asians as backward, unreliable, and immoral (p. 312). Another crucial factor was Japan's evolution as a formidable economic, political, and military rival.

When considering American involvement in the Pacific, China's importance cannot be exaggerated. Pletcher emphasizes the American expansionists' "overexpectation" regarding the potential of the Chinese market, concluding that the myth "of the Golden East was a major motivating force in nineteenth-century American history, as it was largely responsible for exploration and trade in the Pacific Ocean, for American interest in an isthmian canal, and in part for the whole western movement" (p. 314). In addition to harboring unrealistic expectations of China, American businessmen were poorly prepared for trading with it and thus, after the 1870s, were forced to depend increasingly on Chinese and European wholesalers and retailers. Furthermore, ethnocentric Americans often lost out to savvy indigenous business rivals who were more willing to adapt products to local needs and desires. The author also notes that conducting business in China required considerable patience and perseverance, qualities often lacking in U.S. traders and investors. Pletcher's evidence suggests, in fact, that "the most imaginative and forceful expansionists were politicians, journalists, or missionaries, not solid businessmen . . ." (p. 315).

The Diplomacy of Involvement offers a sharp critique of American attitudes and actions in the Pacific. Pletcher is especially critical of the U.S. government for not formulating a more thoughtful or consistent approach to America's expanding foreign relations. He derides state policies as "inchoate," "experimental," and "improvised" (pp. 6, 309, 317). His conclusions are intellectually sound and well supported by primary evidence. This does not mean, however, that all scholars will agree with them. While most are apt to be critical of American foreign policy in the nineteenth century (for example, the use of military force against the Filipinos and Chinese), historians influenced by revisionists such as Walter LaFeber and Thomas McCormick are likely to interpret U.S. involvement in the Pacific more as a determined, if not coherent, attempt to construct and protect an expanding economic empire.

Twenty years ago, Pletcher wrote a scathing critique of revisionist William Appleman Williams's *Empire as a Way of Life* (*American Historical Review*, 1981). While unfairly attacking Williams as a "polemicist" posing as a historian, he legitimately called for a more "balanced, penetrating analysis of the role of expansionism in the American past. . . ." Historians have written extensively on the topic since then, and many revisionists, including LaFeber, expanded their interpretations to be more multidimensional. Pletcher has thoroughly studied this literature and that which preceded it. His footnotes are extensive, and his fifty-page bibliography is comprehensive. In short, Pletcher's two recent volumes examining U.S. expansion in the Pacific and the Americas have helped to satisfy his own call for balanced and penetrating analyses.

Jeffrey J. Matthews is assistant professor of cross-disciplinary studies in the School of Business at the University of Puget Sound. He has written several articles on politics, business, and diplomacy, and is the author of the forthcoming book Alanson B. Houghton: Ambassador of the New Era.

. . .

Labor in Retreat: Class and Community among Men's Clothing Workers of Chicago, 1871–1929. *By Youngsoo Bae.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001. 320 pp. Maps. Cloth, \$78.50; paper, \$26.95. ISBN: cloth 0-791-45117-8; paper 0-791-45118-6.

Reviewed by Jo Ann E. Argersinger

Treading on familiar territory, Youngsoo Bae surveys the growth of Chicago's garment industry from the 1870s until 1929 and the rise of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers as the principal union in the men's