

The Company and the Shogun

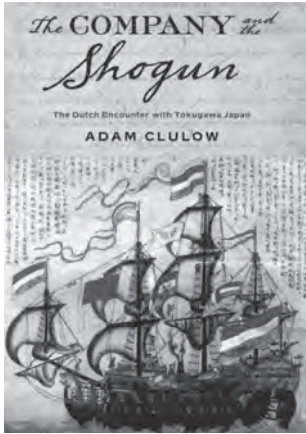
The Dutch Encounter with Tokugawa Japan

By ADAM CLULOW

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Reviewed by John A. Tucker



The *Company and the Shogun* examines the “politics of encounter” operative between the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, or VOC) and the Tokugawa regime during the so-called first age of globalization corresponding here to the seventeenth century. Along the way, the book addresses general questions regarding the extent to which European power was apparent in Asia, how Europeans managed their encounters with Asian states such as the Tokugawa, and the nature of the place that Europeans

such as those associated with the VOC came to occupy within the local political orders. By examining three dimensions of the VOC-Tokugawa relationship—diplomacy, violence, and sovereignty—the book challenges the notion “readily visible in textbooks that 1500 represented a crucial historical moment when a confident, well-armed Europe surged ahead both in the New World and Asia, thereby creating the modern world” (5). *The Company* also challenges the interpretive line, advanced by Holden Furber, that the politics of encounter between Europe and Asia resulted in an “age of partnership” wherein intimate “bonds developed between Europeans and their Asian interlocutors” (8). Instead, the book, endorsing the interpretive line of Sanjay Subrahmanyam, highlights the “underlying violence of the period and the incessant conflicts that took place between Europeans and Asian rulers” (9). Following Subrahmanyam, *The Company* thus views the VOC-Tokugawa relationship as one resulting in an “age of contained conflict in which interaction was defined not by a relatively harmonious partnership but by a sequence of clashes” (15). Rather than cast the Dutch as moderate, secular merchants interested primarily in trade, *The Company* claims that the VOC “veered precariously from confrontation to confrontation” as an essentially “violent and disruptive presence in Tokugawa Japan” (16). The story is not a happy one for the VOC, because despite its claims to rights to diplomacy, violence, and sovereignty, the resulting conflicts occasioned by those claims led to “VOC withdrawals, concessions, and outright surrender.” In the end, *The Company* emphasizes that the Dutch refashioned themselves alternatively as “meek merchants,” “loyal vassals of the shogun,” and as “legal subjects of the Tokugawa state,” who did not so much master Tokugawa Japan as they were mastered by it (17). As portrayed in *The Company*, the VOC was itself transformed into “a faithful vassal” of the Tokugawa, one ready “to act in the service of the shogun and to preserve the Japanese realm with ... [their] last drop of blood” (18). The most telling example of this willingness came in 1638, when the VOC voluntarily served the shogunate by firing on Christian rebels associated with the Shimabara Rebellion (19, 121–22, 125–28).

Methodologically, the volume “eschews a more comprehensive approach in favor of a focus on a series of key moments” in the politics of

encounter between the VOC and the Tokugawa shogunate. Thus, rather than any attempt at a history of the Dutch in Japan, the author explores three moments thematically defined as “diplomacy,” “violence,” and “sovereignty” that ultimately resulted in conflicts landing the VOC in increasing states of subordination to the Tokugawa authorities. It might be questioned whether the study has selected, from the broader and comprehensive relations between the VOC and the Tokugawa, moments that revealed the Dutch in their worst circumstances, ones compounded over time in ways resulting in VOC determination to foster trade over all other values, material or ideal, even to the point of seemingly abject servitude. It is perhaps unfair to criticize a book for what it does not attempt to do; a more comprehensive examination of relations contextualizing the moments of conflict within the larger field of ongoing pragmatic interaction, if not partnership, might have resulted in a different set of conclusions.

Religion is broached on occasion but not given much attention, despite the well-known fact that it was at the center of a crucially important dimension of the politics of encounter between the VOC and the Tokugawa. The Dutch did not develop their relations with the Tokugawa in isolation. Instead, their place vis-à-vis the new regime was shaped by over a half-century of previous interactions between the Portuguese, the Spanish, and the English in Tokugawa Japan. In each case, the Tokugawa were ultimately able to turn the European powers away from its shores, exemplifying the ability of an Asian nation to say no, not just to one, but a collection of Western forces. Considered in that spectrum, the Dutch approach does appear to have been more of compromise and pragmatism, even to the point of pledging fidelity to a regime that it was loyal to only so long as that loyalty brought profit to its coffers. Along the way, the Dutch bowed to the anti-Christian demands of the Tokugawa, willingly stepping on the cross, as Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver’s Travels* astutely noted, rather than permitting faith to trump trade and profit. An in-depth account of Dutch religiosity and its successes in the face of anti-Christian Tokugawa laws would have enriched the insightful and provocative interpretation presentations featured in *The Company*.

No doubt this work offers high school and survey instructors of world history a variety of innovative interpretations that will supplement traditional accounts about Western interaction with East Asia. It might be questioned, however, just how “established” the traditional interpretations, emphasizing unrelenting Western dominance, actually are among teachers of American history who know well that the West lost colonies, such as Sir Walter Raleigh’s at Roanoke, North Carolina, and that there were “trails of tears,” such as those following the massacre of Tucarora tribal peoples at the Battle of Nooherooka in 1713, along the very uneven road to European dominance. That notwithstanding, as a well-written analysis of VOC-Tokugawa relations, *The Company* is a provocative achievement in scholarship and one strongly recommended for devoted instructors of world history. ■

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