

Reviews

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John Hillman, *The International Tin Cartel* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. xii + 484, £120.00, hb.

The title of this remarkable book is not strictly inaccurate because the volume provides what must surely stand as the definitive account of the international market arrangements for tin between 1931 and 1985, with particular attention to the International Tin Restriction Agreements of 1931 to 1946 – but the book is far, far more than that. Had Professor Hillman been a more boosterish author, no doubt Routledge, which has charged a cover price suggesting that it knows full well the value of its product, would have marketed the book in the manner of recent popular titles on coffee, cod, tea, salt and other commodities. Unlike so many such studies, however, this is a profoundly original and scholarly endeavour, combining the knowledge and wisdom of a distinguished academic career in a truly magisterial manner. This work will greatly enrich our knowledge of market regulation, international relations, the tin mining and processing industries, and the more general role of minerals and mineralogy in the modern world. It is, in short, a comprehensive history of tin wrapped up in a revealing study of what many will see as a distinctly ethereal world of commercial power.

Regular readers of the *JLAS* may feel that their regional interests can be adequately satisfied by reference to John Hillman's work on the leading Latin American tin economy, Bolivia, published in these pages long before its incorporation into the book.¹ While that course of action should not by any means be discouraged, it would still only provide a limited, monographic portrait, necessarily contextualised with considerable concision. In *The International Tin Cartel*, the full global scene is depicted and discussed in a rich vein of comparison that throws light not just on regional and industrial differences but also on the vital patterns of continuity and rupture that existed in the mid-twentieth century. It is assuredly not a study apt for a single reading, but, opening with a pithy quote from that maverick Tory grandee Alan Clark, the volume possesses a range of voices, a compelling set of anecdotes, statistics and illustrations, and a delightfully clear-minded and lucidly expressed treatment of an international market.

The survey stretches from the foundations of the tin industry in those epochs of human history known through metallic adjectives, right through to the crash of the market on 24 October 1985, when 'Pieter de Konig, Manager of the Buffer Stock of the International Tin Council, informed Ted Jordan, Chairman of the Committee of the London Metal Exchange, that he was no longer in a position to meet his

¹ 'The Emergence of the Tin Industry in Bolivia', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2 (1984); 'Bolivia and the International Tin Cartel', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1 (1988); 'Bolivia and British Tin Policy, 1939–1945', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 22, no. 2 (1990).

financial obligations. Overnight, £900 million in paper assets vanished'. Of course, in recent years such scenarios have become rather less rare, and we are rapidly becoming as habituated to the lineaments of market failure as we were in decades such as the 1980s to tutorials on its cast-iron success. What is offered in Hillman's book is a detailed empirical and analytical account of the negotiations and achievements of the world's first intergovernmental agreement to provide regulatory authority – through the International Tin Council (ITC) – for a world commodity through the power of controlling production. This is substantively important as well as offering many broader lessons. Hillman approaches the experience through three dimensions: the structure of the industry, the form of regulation, and the normative. In the first, he asks: how is the product used, what are the conditions under which it is produced, and how is it marketed? In the second he inquires as to who the regulators are, how they are connected to the industry, what instruments they have at their disposal, and how decisions are made about these instruments' use. And in the third, his queries are: how well did regulation solve the problem that prompted its formulation, who benefited, and who lost? In all cases, his approach is admirably fair, although he is not notably sympathetic to the assumption that regulation is an aberrant condition. The range of detailed empirical study is truly global in a manner that can only be aspired to by many shallow essays trading under the fashionable ensign of 'globalisation' studies. All continents are considered, hundreds of scholarly works and some 40 journals in half a dozen languages have been consulted (and with unnerving attention to detail). The account rests upon a formidable amount of primary documentation, not just from the ITC itself (mostly accessed through the Colonial Office records at Kew) but also from the most relevant colonies/countries (including Nigeria, the Netherlands, South Africa, Australia, Bolivia, Burma, Malaysia and the United States), the local domestic administrations within those states (for Malaya alone – Batu Gajah, Ulu Selangor, Trengganu, Perlis and Johore), the industry associations, and the companies themselves (with sources ranging from minutes books to shareholder lists). In a decades-long pursuit of these sources, John Hillman visited over 30 depositaries from Cochabamba to Kuala Lumpur.

Follow the results of that trail and you will pick up not just answers to the questions posed above, but also a history of economic thought during the Depression and beyond. You will learn that there exists a buoyant literature linking preserved foods and civilisation ('Pickles and Purity'), and that if Niger did not sell materials for Saddam Hussein's putative weapons of mass destruction, it almost certainly supplied the Phoenician bronzesmiths of Hannibal's Carthage. For students of Bolivia, perhaps the most impressive contribution of the book lies in the detailed account of the integration of so-called 'national capitalists', principally Simón Patiño, into the international arena, to the extent that their national origin becomes an entirely secondary attribute – but after a few chapters of this exceptional study, the reader becomes accustomed to learning through surprise. You may not possess the personal resources to acquire the title for yourself, but you should definitely recommend it as an acquisition for your library, where it will serve as an invaluable resource for students of international political economy, history, globalisation and business studies.

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