Scottish Affairs, no. 42, winter 2003

REVIEW: THE RISE AND FALL OF THE CLYDE

Christopher Harvie

Lewis Johnman, Ian Johnston, and Iain Mackenzie, **Down the River**, Glendaruel: Argyll Publishing, 2001, 128pp, ISBN: 1902831314, £12.99.

Seven years ago, when my book **Fool's Gold**, on North Sea oil, came out, I was en route to the Radio Clyde studios at Clydebank and the taxi-driver was telling me my argument: 'there's this man has written a book aboot the oil...' He was, inevitably, one of the hundreds of apprentices taken on annually in the 1950s and 1960s by the shipyards: exactly the sort of greying, sharp-eyed middle-aged-to-elderly folk - fifty of them - interviewed by Johnman and Johnston, and tellingly photographed by Mackenzie. Their handsomely produced, intensely readable book is also one of the saddest I've encountered in years.

Down the River is topped and tailed with narratives of the rise and fall of the Clyde as a shipbuilding centre, but works effectively as an oral history of the last half-century. One of the interviewees remembers working on a triple-expansion engine, more remember the last of the rivetters, but theirs was the diesel age. That was the trouble.

Of the twenty or so yards that survived the inter-war depression - and east coast firms such as Grangemouth, Robbs of Leith, Caledon of Dundee, Burntisland - only Govan, Yarrow and Ferguson of Port Glasgow are still in production. Clydebank and Burntisland build oil modules. Without public sector orders for warships and ferries there would be no Scottish shipbuilding

---

Christopher Harvie is professor of British and Irish Studies at the University of Tübingen.

at all, although Govan's recent completion of a satellite launch control ship shows that the industry can still build vessels of unique complexity.

From the evidence offered by the interviewees, the causes of the Clyde's decline were complex but cumulatively deadly. The historic strength of cheap and easily-worked Monklands iron had already gone by 1900, and the expertise derived from the compound, triple and quadruple expansion marine engines after the 1850s was giving way to turbines and diesels even before World War I. The yards inevitably over-concentrated on warships in 1914-18; diversification into tanks and aircraft among the engineering works was unhelpful. Post-war losses in this area probably inhibited investment in new techniques: pre-fabrication, undercover construction, later on the use of computers. But, had this investment been made, would the outcome have been much different? The standard Clyde freighter was around 6,000 tons. The supertanker/bulk carrier/container revolution accelerated by the Suez Canal closure in 1956 would rapidly make this sort of ship as archaic as the clipper.

Added to this were the river's notorious labour relations, essentially predicated on management sacking the workforce once an order was completed. This made the highly specialised crafts short-fused about other privileges; managers and customers were not above mixing it by provoking demarcation disputes to give an excuse for a layoff, or delaying the purchase of ships for which no cargoes were available. While World War II sinkings were being made good, German and Japanese yards were rubble. Their recovery coincided with Suez, 'full' employment, wage-drift, and yards weakened by decades of underinvestment. It is obvious that 'both sides' could see what was about to happen, but bringing about reform was like trying to stop a supertanker.

One problem was probably the sheer range of alternatives which by 1960 were presenting openings for construction workers and engineers: light industries, Rootes cars at Linwood, motor engineering to cope with the doubling of the car population. North Sea oil probably didn't help. Few orders for its specialised vessels came the way of the Clyde; and much skilled labour went off to the rigs, supply depots and platform yards.

A more palpable missed opportunity was the revival in the 1980s and 1990s of large ferries and cruise liners: the 'hotel ship' market in which the Clyde had once specialised. Govan's Norsea, completed in 1988 and very successful in service between Rotterdam and Hull, turned out to be a one-off. The yard

subsequently concentrated on sophisticated freighters and liquid petroleum gas carriers. Scott Lithgow's fate was to move from supertankers (slugged by the oil crisis after 1973) to undertake a sophisticated 30,000 ton drilling rig, the Ocean Alliance, ordered by the then state-run Britoil concern. Completed years late in 1988, it ruined the yard, which was demolished in favour of a call-centre park.

It would be unfair to select any of the interviewees for special mention, as the insight count is too high. I suspect that Johnman and Johnston have, legitimately enough, edited contributions to provide an historical flow: a bit of jinking about, sure, but the story is there. It is informative, ribald, self-critical, always interesting:

> There were shipping company representatives in the works, and if any of the lads fancied going to sea as engineers then it was almost as simple as knocking on the door of, say, Denholm's, and you were in.
>
> The riveters were really hard-working though. They were on strict piece-work and they would just pee or shit where they were working so they didn't have to stop. There was a wee bloke ... the gaffer would give him a line to clean it up. Mind you he got something like half a crown a shit and I think he used to do half of the shitting himself. Made himself a fortune.
>
> There would be very few wives who would have had a clue what their husband's earnings were if they worked in a shipyard. If someone got taken into hospital injured, the main concern, as likely as not, was to ensure the wife didn't find a wage slip in a jacket pocket.
>
> We tended to limp along like twentieth century Long John Silvers, from one crisis to next. If the industry hadn't been nationalised it would have disappeared.
>
> The level of distrust on both sides of the industry was intense, even things that seems really minor now. The QE2 was the first launch where workers were invited on to the platform. That seemed so serious at the time, we only built the things after all, that we had to have a stewards' meeting about it to see if we would accept.
>
> I could go into Connell's and I could get a haircut, play chess with a chessmaster, watch somebody do **The Times** crossword in ten minutes -

you had this range of skills, knowledge ... I could go in on a Monday morning feeling terrible, and if I wasn't laughing after ten minutes there was something wrong.

I feel sorry for the wee kids. It used to be exciting to go down the river but now it's so quiet.

January 2002