

Claus Gossler. *Die Société commerciale de l'Océanie (1876-1914): Aufstieg und Untergang der Hamburger Godeffroys in Ost-Polynesien.* Bremen: MontAurum Verlag, 2006. 592 S. EUR 44.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-937729-20-6.



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Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (November, 2009)

C. Gossler: *Die Société commerciale de l'Océanie (1876-1914)*

This study, based on documents held in the Hamburg Staatsarchiv, and originally written as a PhD dissertation at the University of Hamburg, is a fascinating history of the presence of the Hamburg Godeffroy firm in eastern Polynesia. The author, Claus Gossler, had a career in international business before turning to this investigation, which resulted from an interest stimulated by papers shown to him by an acquaintance who was a Godeffroy descendant. The book starts with a background on Johann Cesar Godeffroy, known as "König der See", and a history of his firm Joh. Ces. Godeffroy & Sohn, which, from its establishment in Apia in 1857, was one of the largest trading firms in the Pacific, exporting copra, coconut oil and cotton, and importing European industrial goods. Up till 1876 the Godeffroy firm was represented in Tahiti and the Society Islands by way of a 50% share in Wilkens & Co in Apia, but with Wilkens' departure for San Francisco in 1875, Godeffroy founded a new firm known as the *Société commerciale de l'Océanie*. Godeffroy hoped that the French name would help the firm to become accepted in this part of the Pacific, which was coming increasingly under French influence.

Gossler explains that the British annexation of New Zealand in 1840 had led to a chain reaction on the part of France, which had initially been solely interested in obtaining coaling stations for its navy, but which now annexed the Marquesas Islands and by 1876 had established a protectorate over the Windward Islands of eastern Polynesia, including Tahiti. Gossler also goes into the rivalry between France and New Zealand over the Cook Islands, which the French thought would naturally want to be associated with French Polynesia; such thoughts were stymied by the establishment of a British protectorate there in 1888. The SCO had a trading station in the Cook Islands. The trading station, set up in Rarotonga by 1878, had a number of ups and downs, not least under one sea captain, whose management methods were described thus by the SCO director in Papeete: "Morgens auf nüchternen Magen werden 5-6 Rum Cocktails gegossen & then he is befuddled for the day." (p. 195) As Gossler explains, it was the import duties imposed by the New Zealand government after its annexation of the Cook Islands in 1900 which led to the reorientation of trade away from French Pacific territories towards New Zealand.

Gossler's history of the Société commerciale de l'Océanie brings to light some most interesting facts, such as the 1882 ban on selling opium to the indigenous population. The Chinese who had settled on the Marquesas Islands had established quite a trade in opium, and the SCO had, along with other companies, been importing and selling it without penalty. Another matter of interest is that of the common currency in that part of the Pacific, which was normally the Chile Dollar, also referred to as the South American Dollar, and equal to the United States Dollar.

The main exports from French Oceania, Gossler explains, were copra, mother of pearl shells, cotton, and vanilla. The book devotes one section to each of these exports. While copra and cotton were products that were mainly in the hands of Europeans, vanilla was produced primarily by the indigenous population. The SCO's competitors in the Pacific included Donald and Edenborough, known from 1910 as A. B. Donald Ltd, whose store in Aitutaki was, incidentally, visited by the German raider von Luckner when he was on his way across the Pacific in a lifeboat after his Seeadler ran aground near Tahiti in 1917. To collect and distribute its products, the SCO operated its own fleet of schooners around the Pacific and to and from San Francisco, which became one of the main trading hubs for the Pacific. Auckland remained more of a relay station, though the Auckland agents Seegner, Languth & Co. did pass on telegrams for the SCO.

Gossler shows that relations between the French and the Germans in Tahiti, while at times strained, remained largely cordial right up to 1914. That all changed with the outbreak of World War I, which left the SCO held responsible for compensation for the damage caused by the German frigates Scharnhorst and Gneisenau when they bombarded Papeete on 22 September 1914. The French governor closed the SCO office in 1914, and though the SCO continued to operate from Hamburg, it met with little success and was liquidated in 1934.

Given the interesting subject-matter and the obvious care with which the book has been written, it is a great pity that the accompanying illustrations are of such poor quality. This applies particularly to the maps on pages 587 and 588, whose place names are impossible to decipher. The photograph of the Darsie and Brander families on p. 140 has been cropped to such an extent that three of the individuals named are only partially visible. The book is historically accurate, though one wonders why Gossler refers twice (pp. 23 and 43) to Apia as being situated in present-day 'West-Samoa', whereas Western Samoa ceased to exist in 1997, and is now referred to simply as Samoa, or by its official title, the Independent State of Samoa. And it is a great pity that no index has been provided. Overall, though, this book makes riveting reading and is a mine of information not just on the SCO but on trading in the Pacific in the second half of the nineteenth century.

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Citation: James Bade. Review of Gossler, Claus, *Die Société commerciale de l'Océanie (1876-1914): Aufstieg und Untergang der Hamburger Godeffroys in Ost-Polynesien*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. November, 2009.

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