Review of Dr Christian Ostersehlte, maritime historian in Bremen, in Canal-Mitteilungen, no. 29/30, Rendsburg 2013, pp. 156-158:

This academic biography on the Apenrade shipowner and politician Michael Jebsen (1834-1899) is not only imposing from its size. (…) Because the Jebsen Company, after a very unsettled fate between the German and Danish states, still exists today as a trading house, and because the well-preserved and well-organised company archive offers unusually vast holdings of Jebsen’s private correspondence, this tremendously fortunate existence of primary sources made it possible to write such a voluminous study.

The result looks quite respectable. Whether it be shipping, shipyards, the conditions in wide-ranging world regions such as Latin America (to where Jebsen sailed), East Asia, or Rotterdam (such an important port for Germany), the highly complex political mixture on Reich, regional, and local level including the local history of Apenrade – the author convincingly masters all thematic fields and when thus confronted with the many facets of the topic shows no weakness of competence at all. His description of contemporary conditions such as the “… confusing and futile contrary positions in Germany’s domestic politics – a result of the fast transition of Germany from agrarian to industrial state with all its painful side-effects – and the cacophony of interests and opinion …” (p. 539) is so good, it should be set as a classic text for history textbooks in schools. His objectivity when dealing with the German-Danish rivalry in nationalistic politics sine ira et studio [without anger and fondness] is also pleasing, without the earlier but since long outdated pro-German nationalistic attitudes, and also without purposely anti-Prussian resentments and other one-sided stances of the academic left-liberal orthodoxy in the 1970s and 1980s.

The voluminous maritime section also looks quite respectable. Without exaggeration this part can be described as a gold mine for future researchers in maritime history. One can speak of a representative profile of maritime Imperial Germany. With great interest I took note of a number of additions and also amendments of my own research on the Howaldtswerke [Howaldt Shipyards] at Kiel where Jebsen was (by the way a notoriously unhappy) regular customer.

These little hints must suffice: All that is very pleasant to read, and namely without the current overly widespread structuralistic, affected, pompous, and pseudo-academic Pidgin German. Voluminous notes and a seemingly cast-iron bibliography of primary and secondary sources speak volumes about the value of this book and the theme-rich but well-balanced illustrations (although some are very small but still acceptable) add to this overall attractively designed book. That the author, in all his scholarliness, remained grounded in real history is demonstrated by the fact that he was not too proud to photograph gravestones, and that his personal collection of historical postcards was added to the book. The list of archives in which he conducted research is long and goes from the Jebsen company archive, public archives in Apenrade, Schleswig, and Flensburg, the Krupp Historical Archives in Essen, the big archives in Berlin, to China (Hong Kong and Tsingtao). I have been reviewing books for 33 years but I hardly ever had such a futile hunt for finding mistakes, which certainly exist but are seemingly very rare.

In order to remain credible the following criticisms should be permitted: In two parts (p. 364-370, 755-758) the author pays tribute to the nowadays so trite and kooky network theories, whereas he could have left it with the question (always fascinating and informative for historians) of ‘who with who’. But perhaps he had to howl with some academic wolves (…) His academic career had the book’s author (born 1960) pass through a number of German universities where he was a teaching fellow, to a professorship in far-away Hong Kong. It remains an exciting question if any German university will succeed in future to win this highly talented historian, from his diaspora, for a permanent position at home. (…)