The shipowner and politician Michael Jebsen, from the little North Schleswig town of Apenrade, was a fascinating German entrepreneur of the nineteenth century, about whom the author, who teaches modern European history in Hong Kong, has written a brilliant biography. The book surpasses not only the works of Jebsen’s daughter Emma von Hassel and Ernst Hieke from the 1950s but it sets a new standard for historical research on entrepreneurs. On the one hand, Becker presents the shipowner “as a central figure of economic development”, and on the other hand, goes beyond economic matters: “the political, social, family, and cultural living conditions are to be investigated” (p. 11). The life of this global shipowner turns one’s gaze towards German shipping history in Europe and in East Asia, while his political activities allow insights into the concrete work of a deputy in the Prussian Diet and the German Reichstag in Imperial Germany, who made a name for himself as a shipping expert. Finally, the question of minorities in South Jutland and in North Schleswig plays an important role for the entrepreneur who stood up for the German minority in a pro-Danish environment.

Until 1873, Jebsen, who came from a long established ship-owning family, went through a meteoric rise from a sail maker’s apprentice to a spell as ship boy and shipmaster and later steam captain. He first became acquainted with shipping in Peru and Chile, and coastal shipping in Mexico and the Asia-Pacific. It was followed by sea voyages to South America and Southeast Asia, and on the Pacific during the Franco-German War. From 1874 to 1882 he was manager of Krupp’s fleet which guaranteed the supply of Essen steel manufacturers with Spanish ore from Bilbao via Flushing and later Rotterdam. Dissatisfied with the directives of his superiors in Essen, he made the first step into self-employment by purchasing a cargo steamer at the end of 1878. Formally he transferred the managing ownership of the ship to his brother-in-law. In mid-1882, Jebsen left Krupp.

It was the time of technological change, the transfer from sail-ships to steamships. In detail the book presents problems Jebsen had with steamers built by Howaldt in Kiel, while he had nothing but good experiences with those made by Blohm & Voss in Hamburg. Nevertheless he generally remained loyal to the Kiel shipyard as the Howaldt brothers – Georg, Bernhard, and Hermann – were shipbuilders who belonged to a network in which the “key figure” was Jacob H. P. Diederichsen. His sister Emma, mother of Georg, Bernhard, and Hermann, had married August Ferdinand Howaldt, co-founder of the Kiel engineering works Schweffel & Howaldt. Jacob Diederichsen acquired detailed knowledge of the new steam technology, and “finally became Howaldt’s right hand” (p. 193). As machine minder and inspector of Hapag he learned to know chief inspector H. Ehlers who was Michael’s uncle. Until the end of his life Jacob Diederichsen remained Jebsen’s most important adviser in all technical questions. Jacob’s nephews, Carl and Gustav Diederichsen, remained Jebsen’s main providers of capital, always purchasing shares of new ships. Becker speaks of a well-functioning triangle network between Apenrade, Hamburg, and Kiel which to a large extent contributed to the success of Jebsen’s shipping company. The second important network of Jebsen was his worldwide connections which he had built up in his decade spent in South America and Southeast Asia. While shipping in European waters was hardly profitable in the early 1880s, China and the Asia-Pacific region offered very promising prospects since the opening of the treaty ports in 1840 and the opening of the Suez Canal. Jebsen transferred his activities to Hong Kong where his son Jacob and his cousin Heinrich Jessen founded the company Jebsen & Co. which is still active today. Jebsen profited from his experiences and personal
relationships from the 1860s in Asiatic coastal shipping when he called at Hong Kong on several occasions aboard the NOTOS of the Hamburg firm, Hastedt & Co. In these years he had become acquainted with all the important trading places in India and East Asia. Despite his many business activities, Jebsen also found time to be very involved in politics: as a local politician in Apenrade (First Senator and Deputy Mayor) and as national-liberal deputy in the Prussian Diet and the German Reichstag.

Becker knows how to contextualise all of Jebsen’s personal experiences and to embed them into the larger context, regardless of family, entrepreneurial, or political matters. His analysis in each case is convincing and there is hardly anything left to wish for. The biography is based mainly on a big company archive which has probably been organised in the meantime, and on several German and Danish archives. The book is clearly structured, avoids unpleasant technical jargon, and excitingly written. It also fills a gap in maritime literature as there are – with the exception of Albert Ballin and R. C. Rickmers – only a few substantial academic biographies of German shipowners. The book is excellently designed and richly furnished with colour pictures. With his goal being to comprehend Jebsen “as a typical representative of his time” and as “a symbolic figure of many general tendencies and developments of the nineteenth century” (p. 17), the author has achieved this impressively.