Maritime history and the history of shipping companies is a special field in German economic and social history. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have a role in respective academic studies when German shipping with their regular lines and spheres-of-interest expanded into all parts of the world and became an aspect of global economic and political activities. In this development shipping and trading were inseparably linked with political goals and interests. In the framework of such maritime and shipping company histories, besides technical questions, the active participants naturally had a role: sailors, technical personnel, shipmasters, and last but not least shipowners – be it single shipowners with their own shipping companies or directors of big shipping companies in the form of joint-stock companies.

Innumerable accounts on individual shipping companies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries exist but strikingly few biographies on individual shipowners. Only Albert Ballin, director-general of the Hamburg-Amerika Line, to whom several biographies are devoted, is the exception. The other important shipowners are only dealt with in longer or shorter paragraphs of shipping company histories or in articles of varying lengths in biographical handbooks.

The biography on Michael Jebsen (1835-1899) by Bert Becker is a remarkable exception. Becker, professor for modern European history at the University of Hong Kong since 2009, and from his education and his position, proved himself to be the suitable person to write a biography on Michael Jebsen whose main shipping business stretched into the Asiatic-Pacific region. Although it is never mentioned in the voluminous book, the work seems to be produced on behalf of the M. Jebsen Shipping Company, headquartered in Aabenraa/Apenrade, with the obvious intention of being a literary monument to its founder. The book is divided into three parts: the first part deals with Michael Jebsen as a sailor and shipowner (348 pages), the second part is divided into two smaller chapters on Jebsen as a politician and parliamentarian (186 pages) and as North Schleswiger – as a representative of the nationally and culturally engaged German people in North Schleswig (193 pages). A prologue which serves as an introduction and an epilogue as a conclusion are at the beginning and at the end of the book. This division proves to be a very clever structure. Different aspects of Jebsen’s life are lucidly presented; any confusing shuttling back and forth between various fields of life and activities is avoided. The parallel contents of the three parts are skillfully arranged without causing annoying repetitions. (…)

At first the M. Jebsen Shipping Company was active in European coastal shipping, namely in the North and Baltic Seas, later expanding its activities to East Asia, and was from 1885 onwards exclusively engaged in the Asiatic-Pacific region (China, Japan, Eastern Siberia, and Indonesia). It was great cabotage on time charter and on trip charter – something that is nowadays probably called tramp shipping. The author very impressively describes the way Jebsen – drawing from his extensive shipping knowledge – was able to give instructions to his masters about the management and the navigation of ships but also gave them the freedom to make independent business decisions.

The second chapter deals with the politician and parliamentarian Michael Jebsen. Initially being active in local politics, Jebsen – actually against his own will – was made candidate for the Reichstag election of 1890. Following voting regulations of the time, the middle-class political parties were required to agree on only one candidate. Becker very illustratively describes the negotiations of political parties before the election of 1890, and also before the following elections, and which compromises, commitments and limitations such candidacies
entailed. Regional aspects and the larger history of political parties are carefully combined with each other. Any ‘North Schleswig navel gazing’ is avoided as generally in the book: micro and macro levels are equally considered. (...) In the prologue as well as in the epilogue Becker points to the larger framework in which he sees Michael Jebsen. Becker regards his own book as contribution to historical research on entrepreneurs, the framework of which goes beyond the economic aspects combines political, social, family, and cultural living patterns of a human being. Becker calls it a “culturally-oriented structural biography”.

A word about sources: while many biographies on entrepreneurs were never written due to the lack of documents, or suffer from the reservation of families or companies to open up archive materials, the M. Jebsen Shipping Company at first collected all documents on Michael Jebsen in the Jebsen and Jessen Historical Archives in Apenrade, and then placed them at the author’s disposal without any limitation. In particular, Jebsen’s letter copy books are an invaluable source which however had to be first transcribed. Becker does not become immersed in the abundance of sources but knows how to use them skilfully and merges them with holdings of other archives and with the voluminous general literature for each time period. Becker’s book focuses on the life of Michael Jebsen and the North Schleswig region but like Jebsen’s activities which were directed far across the world, Becker also concurrently looks at events both in Germany and across the globe. (...) All in all, the book is an excellent biography of an entrepreneur, presenting the life of Michael Jebsen in an appropriate and colourful way; it is pleasant to read and combines regional, national, and global aspects of the entrepreneur’s activities in an ideal way.