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978-1-107-58698-7 - The Eastland Trade and the Common Weal in the Seventeenth Century

R. W. K. Hinton

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BY

R. W. K. HINTON

Fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge



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* *Pull-out figure**This map is available for download from www.cambridge.org/9781107586987

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PREFACE

In the seventeenth century Englishmen had a lively idea of common weal and national interest. This book is a study of the application of that idea in a single sphere, namely, in the trade of English merchants with the Eastland.

The word 'Eastland' here stands for the area of the Baltic Sea and Scandinavia, which was the area reserved for the Eastland company by their charter of 1579. It was not a very exact word in contemporary usage. A more precise term was 'East country', which, however, denoted only the ports or lands on the eastern side of the Baltic Sea about Danzig, Elbing and Königsberg, perhaps as far as Riga. These countries were the 'eastern parts'. Scandinavia was more correctly 'northern'. A seventeenth-century man speaking about the 'Eastland' trade always meant the 'East country' trade but did not necessarily mean to include the Eastland company's other trades. When the Eastland company was founded there were only two branches of the Eastland trade, the East-country trade and the Norway trade. During the seventeenth century a Stockholm trade developed. These are the trades discussed in this book.

Common weal and national interest was a less nebulous idea than it sounds and gave rise to precise questions of policy. Was it for the common good to favour the Eastland merchants at the expense of the clothiers? Was it in the national interest during the Thirty Years War to encourage Gustavus Adolphus at the expense of the Eastland merchants? An important question for this study recurs in instructions to councils of trade through the century—'Whether it be necessary to give way to a more open and free trade than that of companies and societies?' History is commonly more familiar with the answers to questions like this than with the questions themselves. It is possible sometimes to forget that the questions were ever asked, so easily do the answers fall into patterns and cloak themselves with an air of inevitability. Familiar landmarks in the history of the Eastland company are:

- 1579, a charter of privileges for the Eastland company;
- 1622, a proclamation giving a further privilege;
- 1630, a proclamation giving yet another privilege;
- 1673, an Act of Parliament taking some privileges away.

But on what grounds were these answers arrived at?

We begin with an introductory chapter on the Eastland trade up to 1620. Detailed examination starts in Chapter II with a study of the great

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depression of 1620 from which emerged the proclamation of 1622. The book ends about 1700, which is roughly the date of the end of the Eastland company.

Even in a purely economic study the Eastland company would remain the principal character. A fictitious person, it is the author of documents and cannot escape prominence. The people who matter, its members, have not, so far as is known, left records that survive. One feels the lack of them. The acts and ordinances of the company between 1618 and 1688, as they were copied into a book belonging to the residence at York, were edited, together with extracts from the York court book from 1650 to 1697, by Miss Maud Sellers in 1906. Some studies of the formation of the Eastland company and of the trade before 1620, which make it possible to move rapidly over the early years, will be cited in Chapter I, but the only general accounts either of the trade or of the company appear to be Miss Sellers's introduction and a few pages in the economic histories of Cunningham and Lipson.¹

A source of great value (which was not available to Cunningham or Miss Sellers) is the six-volume Danish Sound Tables, the *Tabeller over Skibsfart og Varetransport gennem Øresund* by Miss Nina Bang and Knud Korst, the first volume of which was published in 1906. These are tables of ships and goods compiled from the Sound toll registers, which were kept to assist the collection of the King of Denmark's duties on trade through the Danish Sound. These records are unique. They are supposed to be more accurate after 1618 than before. The Eastland trade cannot usefully be studied without them, and with them we may have of the Eastland trade probably a more exact knowledge than of any other English trade of the seventeenth century.

The reasons for beginning this study in 1620 are, then, that work has already been done on the earlier period and that the Sound Tables are of doubtful reliability before 1618; but it is hoped that the introductory chapter will be found useful. The depression of 1620, which has long deserved a study in its own right, is the subject of Chapter II. It introduces, with its proclamation of 1622, a period of high privilege. This period is examined in Chapters III–VI. The suggestion is sometimes found that privileges of monopoly in the Elizabethan and early Stuart period owed their origin to a 'spirit of monopoly' or 'principle of restriction'. If this implies that the privileges were useless, the history of the Eastland trade

¹ *The Acts and Ordinances of the Eastland Company*, ed. M. Sellers (Royal Historical Society, London, 1906); W. Cunningham, *Growth of English Industry and Commerce in Modern Times* (Cambridge, 5th ed. 1912), 234 ff.; E. Lipson, *The Economic History of England* (London, 3rd ed. 1934), II, 315 ff.

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does not support it. The privileges of the Eastland company were *ad hoc* solutions to particular problems. They were a form of government. It cannot be said that they were an entirely satisfactory form of government, but they were granted for the general good of the common weal. In this respect the study of the Eastland trade seems to throw a reflected light on other trades and to tell us something about the mercantile system as a whole. In the chapter on the crucial depression of 1620 it therefore seemed justifiable to range more widely than a study of the Eastland trade would strictly require. Again, where the history of the Eastland trade involves the Navigation Act of 1651 the Sound Tables with their precise evidence about the Eastland trade in particular invite one to reconsider the position of English foreign trade in general. The treatment of the Navigation Act (Chapter VII) is new in some points and two contemporary pamphlets are printed in the appendix to support it. The Navigation Act was a turning-point. It did what privileges had done, and so made privileges less useful. From that date the Eastland company begins to decline. The history of the decline of the Eastland company is the history of the growth of the state (from Chapters VIII to the end), and on this theme the book finishes. The second part of the book is therefore a study in what Cunningham called 'parliamentary Colbertism'; the first part is about unparliamentary Colbertism: the difference appears to be that parliamentary Colbertism employs a higher degree of direct state control.

The Eastland trade has become generally known as a trade that was important in the scheme of English commerce by virtue of its imports of naval stores. This proposition is only partly true and may lead to mistaken inferences. The question of the importance of the Eastland trade is discussed in Chapters IV and VIII, for the periods respectively before and after about 1650.

The chief movements and landmarks in the Eastland trade are: in the sixteenth century, expansion; in 1597, a peak year followed by contraction; in 1620 and 1649, crises; and in 1675, a boom, largely sustained. These can be seen in the tables at Appendix D and the figure at the end of the book. Chapter III is an account of the trade between the crises of 1620 and 1649, based on the Sound Tables and the English port books. Chapter XI is an account of the trade from the crisis of 1649 to the end of the century, for which the main sources are the Sound Tables and the ledgers of the Inspector-General of Imports and Exports. But a complete description of the Eastland trade would require a better knowledge than we now possess of the economic history of western Europe and especially of Holland, which was the centre of European commerce. From the economic point of view the Eastland was a primary producer. Its economy was intimately linked,

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through Amsterdam, with the economies of France and Spain. The link with England was subordinate. Many questions that suggest themselves in the history of Anglo-Eastland trade therefore remain unanswered.

One of the minor uses of the Sound Tables is as a check on the literary forms of evidence, petitions and so forth, which would otherwise be the major part of the evidence. The result is interesting. Petitions generally contain some numerical statements; rare and conspicuous, these are much used by historians; they turn out to be literally correct but sometimes highly misleading; for example, when the Eastland company give a figure for their 'former' cloth exports, it may be a true figure for the exports of one highly exceptional year. Yet this does not mean that the tenor of the petition is unjustified. Figures in documents of those days were intended more as illustrations than as numerical proof, and the proposition that they illustrate may be true even when the illustration appears to be exceptional. In this sense all the Eastland company's petitions state the position correctly. Literary evidence is in such disrepute that it is pleasant to say this word in its defence.

An illuminating new source has been the treasurer's book of the Eastland company from 1661. Mr N. C. Hunt drew my attention to it and the Russia Company have kindly allowed me to consult it. It contains among other things the names of persons taking their freedom, which I have thought worth collecting in an appendix. One hopes that other books will come to light.

The bulk of the manuscript material is in the Public Record Office, but I have also used by permission manuscripts in the Bodleian Library and in the Pepys Library of Magdalene College, Cambridge.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge my gratitude to the late Professor Eli Heckscher for an invigorating conversation when this work was in its first stages; to Professor Astrid Friis and to Professor Aksel Christensen for advice about the Sound toll registers; to Dr H. S. K. Kent for some help with the Norway trade. The list should be longer. I must acknowledge with special gratitude, however, the criticism and constructive suggestions of Mr C. H. Wilson. Mr E. A. Wrigley was kind enough to comment on some of the chapters to my advantage. Mrs A. M. Millard and Mr B. E. Supple have allowed me to use some of their material.

A version of the present book was awarded a Prince Consort Prize in 1950 and this book could not be published without the help of the Prince Consort Prize Fund.

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>A.P.C.</i>	<i>Acts of the Privy Council of England</i> (has reached 1628)
B.M.	British Museum
<i>Cal.S.P.Dom.</i>	<i>Calendar of State Papers Domestic</i>
<i>D.N.B.</i>	<i>Dictionary of National Biography</i>
<i>E.H.R.</i>	<i>English Historical Review</i>
<i>Ec.H.R.</i>	<i>Economic History Review</i>
H.M.C.	Historical Manuscripts Commission
<i>Trans.R.Hist.Soc.</i>	<i>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</i>

In the Public Record Office:

E 190	Exchequer, King's Remembrancer, Port Books
PC2	Privy Council Register (in course of publication as <i>A.P.C.</i>)
SP 14*	State Papers Domestic, James I
SP 16*	State Papers Domestic, Charles I
SP 18*	State Papers Domestic, Interregnum
SP 29*	State Papers Domestic, Charles II
SP 75	State Papers Foreign, Denmark
SP 88	State Papers Foreign, Poland
SP 95	State Papers Foreign, Sweden
SP 105	State Papers Foreign, Archives of British Legations (including books and papers of the Levant Company)

* These series have been calendared in *Cal.S.P.Dom.*