

*Japan's Motorcycle Wars: An Industry History.* By Jeffrey W. Alexander. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008. xii + 276 p., ill., tab., notes, bibl., index. ISBN 978-0-7748-1453-9 85 \$ hc. ISBN 978-0-7748-1454-6 29.95\$ pb.)

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fishers overfished and inflicted long term damage on the fish populations and lake environments. These sections of the book also provide valuable descriptions of gold and uranium mining at Lake Athabasca and the two large lakes in the Northwest Territories. Piper details how, at least in comparison with today's situation, a relative free for all existed in the mining industry prior to 1960. A friendly and encouraging regulatory environment allowed mining companies to operate with few restrictions. Although operations altered and damaged local environments, both above and below the earth's surface, corporations moved on once they depleted ore bodies. The reader will also gain an understanding of how transportation networks continued to expand, facilitating extraction of resources.

Piper's work does not strongly or consistently condemn subarctic industrial development. The author acknowledges that unnecessary and even severe environmental damage accompanied industrialization. She also mentions how industrial activity created "disorder" in a formerly ordered environment. Yet, at times, the reader may wonder if Piper does not admire the relatively unregulated nature of the early mining and commercial fishing operations. After all, the harshest effects of industrialization damaged relatively small areas. And even in those locations, once the newcomers departed, scars faded. Piper refers to industrial development in organic terms, as if the mining and fishery companies found, consumed, and eliminated northern resources in much the same way that animals do. The author's approach allows—or possibly encourages—readers to form their own judgment about the various industrial developments.

By scouring numerous archives, collections of papers, and the general literature, Piper has assembled a substantial body of information about past industrial development in four local areas of the subarctic. The author performs a useful and valuable service to students of history and those charged with planning and implementing future northern industrial projects. Readers may learn lessons about the resiliency of the planet and its systems, and they may make wiser decisions than did those who went before.

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## Technology / Technologie

*Japan's Motorcycle Wars: An Industry History.* By Jeffrey W. Alexander. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008. xii + 276 p., ill., tab., notes, bibl., index. ISBN 978-0-7748-1453-9 85 \$ hc. ISBN 978-0-7748-1454-6 29.95\$ pb.).

Jeffrey Alexander has done something anyone interested in Japan, industrial development, business history, and yes, motorcycles, should

welcome enthusiastically. By revealing the complex, fascinating and important story of the development of the Japanese motorcycle industry, Alexander has provided readers with a unique look at a sector that is often overlooked by historians in this field, who mainly focus on automotive. As postwar rebuilding Europe and Japan, and more recently emerging China and India, have shown, the motorcycle (and scooter) industry is often the cornerstone and gateway to automotive, and provides an essential stepping stone to industrial “maturity.” Japan, arguably the world’s best and most famous example of this evolution, finally has a book in English which helps to explain its own transformation. *Japan’s Motorcycle Wars* is useful, interesting, and an very important contribution to economic, business, and technology history, and the benefits of this book far outweigh any of its very, very minor shortcomings.

Among the most important contributions that *Japan’s Motorcycle Wars* makes is the treasure trove of primary sources that Alexander has unearthed and utilized. Having lived and studied in Japan, and learned the language to a highly proficient degree, Alexander has translated dozens of interviews with industry pioneers and executives, along with *shashi* (company histories) to provide fresh material heretofore unavailable to English-speaking scholars. To his credit, Alexander has not cast an uncritical eye on these sources: He has engaged them effectively as he sprinkles the testimonials throughout the book to provide fascinating miniature case studies of motorcycle entrepreneurs, innovators, and managers and their insights.

A good example is the story of Shimazu Narazō. Born in 1888, Shimazu had the vision of Billy Durant and the engineering skills and salesmanship of Henry Ford, though none of the latter’s success. The builder of Japan’s first working (two-stroke) motorcycle, Shimazu helped to create the nascent bike market through his innovative products and barnstorming motorcycle jaunts across Japan. Though he produced and sold over 700 of his bikes in the early 1920s, by 1926 he was bankrupt, a victim of poor materials, bad roads, and a market that was still too small to support large scale manufacturing. Alexander uses the story to help explain the challenges the early industry, and its pioneers such as Shimazu faced, and the legacy they left behind.

Just as important as these insightful testimonials, Alexander provides a new departure for business historians. Most business histories, especially ones related to Japan, focus on the successes of Japan’s largest firms, a necessary and not unexpected approach taken by most scholars, especially in case model-driven business school foci. Thus, most attention is paid to the Big Four motorcycle firms (Honda, Kawasaki, Suzuki, and Yamaha), which have dominated the industry for decades. While Alexander has ably told that story, he has also focused on the dozens of failed motorcycle

firms, especially in the postwar period, which can often tell much more important and useful lessons about the evolution of the industry. By looking in detail (at least as much as the historical record can provide) at start-ups, stillborns and small firms, the book broadens our understanding of the industry, providing a much more balanced, and nuanced, assessment of how and why Japanese firms succeeded—and just as importantly—failed, in this highly competitive sector.

In doing so, the book also provides a very different perspective on Japanese industry and how it functions. Even casual observers of Japan are familiar with the cozy relations amongst manufacturers and their suppliers (the famous *keiretsu* arrangement) and between government and industry (the infamous Ministry of International Trade and Industry), which characterize how Japan's auto industry functioned in the postwar period. But Alexander paints a far different portrait in the motorcycle sector. Here, firms competed viciously amongst each other and their suppliers and supply networks, before the dirigisme which characterized autos was instituted. This was no polite Japanese tea ritual, but a full-blown war, as Alexander has aptly titled his book. In some instances, suppliers betrayed their own manufacturers; in others, longstanding loyalty ties forced some firms to give up lucrative opportunities. In revealing this brutal shakedown period in the 1950s and 1960s, Alexander has given a much more nuanced view of Japanese industry and business practices, one that shatters the prevailing narrative of cooperation and close bureaucratic-business relations.

If anything, the reader is left looking for more of Alexander's thoughtful approach, wonderful figures and illustrations, and economical prose. Chapters examine the early industry, the motorcycle-military complex that emerged during Japan's imperial/wartime phase from the 1930s to the 1940s, the desperate postwar years when the industry re-emerged to provide cheap mobility for a shattered country, the 1950s and 1960s bike firm battles in business and racing, the emergence of the Big Four, the failure of the rest, and a final chapter on export markets and safety. But the reader is left wanting more on motorcycle culture in Japan, on Japanese *use* of bikes during the Second World War (given the strong links between these companies and military), and more contextualization of the Japanese industry within the global context, which is only briefly considered. The section on safety in the final chapter seems added on, as well. But these are very minor concerns: This is a very important, well-written and worthwhile contribution, and will be helpful to specialists and non-specialists alike.

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