

# Family Firms, Global Networks and Transnational Actors

The Case of Alexander Fraser (1816-1904). Merchant and  
Entrepreneur in the Netherlands Indies, Low Countries and  
London<sup>1</sup>

27

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Alexander Fraser (1816-1904) was a Scots businessman and entrepreneur who operated among international commercial and financial networks in Europe and Southeast Asia (with an excursion into the Antipodes) for virtually half a century between the 1840s and the 1890s. His importance to the historian – and the business historian in particular – stems from a number of factors. Not least, discussion of his career helps fill – in however modest a way – some of the lacunae in business history’s relative neglect (as Cristof Dejung has recently remarked) of ‘economic actors conducting trading operations in everyday business life’. The context in which those operations took place was a rapid expansion of world trade between 1850 and 1914 that has drawn significant attention to macro-economic issues. Its historiography, however, has paid substantially less heed to the individuals without whom it could scarcely have been possible. Alexander Fraser ‘matters’, moreover, in a broadly cognate fashion. His business career, extending over the better part of half a century, throws light on the relatively little studied and kindred history of the ‘social, cultural and political environments’ of the transnational commercial enterprise which critically underpinned ‘the establishment of global economic relations’ in the period under consideration.

Alexander Fraser (1816-1904) was een Schotse zakenman die tussen 1840 en 1890 bijna een halve eeuw internationale commerciële en financiële netwerken in Europa en Zuidoost-Azië onderhield (met een uitstapje naar de Antipodeneilanden). Hij is

om verschillende redenen van belang voor historici en voor economische historici in het bijzonder. Ten eerste kan de discussie over zijn loopbaan bepaalde leemtes in de economische geschiedschrijving vullen, vooral (zoals Christof Dejung onlangs opmerkte) wat betreft de ‘het dagelijkse zakenleven van economische actoren op het gebied van handelstransacties’. De context van dergelijke transacties, die binnen een snelle uitbreiding van de wereldhandel tussen 1850 en 1914 plaatsvonden, heeft ertoe geleid dat er behoorlijk veel aandacht is besteed aan macro-economische kwesties in deze tijd. Voor de individuen, zonder die deze handel niet mogelijk was geweest, is binnen de historiografie tot nu toe echter veel minder belangstelling geweest. Alexander Fraser is ook in een breder opzicht van belang. Zijn loopbaan in het zakenleven biedt inzicht in de relatief weinig bestudeerde geschiedenis van de ‘sociale, culturele en politieke werelden’ van de transnationale, commerciële handel als fundament van het ‘het leggen van globale, economische partnerschappen’ in deze periode.

In July 1904, a retired Scots-born businessman, Alexander Fraser, died at his mansion in the Paddington district, a little to the north of Hyde Park, in London’s West End. A wealthy man – his estate was valued for probate at 46,416 pounds sterling (at least 5,000,000 pounds sterling in today’s values) – he was in his eighty-seventh year. According to the eulogy pronounced by the clergyman at the Presbyterian Church in nearby Marylebone, where Fraser had been a stalwart and generous financial supporter of the congregation for the previous quarter century, ‘his physical and mental alertness was remarkable right up to the end’.<sup>2</sup> His widow was an American woman – thirty years his junior – whom he had first met in ‘the East’, and among his possessions in London was a large picture of a Javanese rural scene, painted some forty or more years earlier by the eminent Indonesian painter Raden Saleh (1814-1880).<sup>3</sup> Both wife and painting hinted at a past that extended far beyond the metropolitan social and business circles in which Fraser had moved during the final decades of his long life. In fact, although that life had begun in the northeast of the United Kingdom in 1816, in the Scottish port

1 I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers for this journal whose comments on an earlier draft greatly clarified my argument. I am also drawing gratefully on Christof Dejung and Niels P. Petersson, ‘Introduction: Power, Institutions and Global Markets; Actors, Mechanisms and Foundations of World-Wide Economic Integration, 1850-1930’, Christof Dejung and Niels Petersson (eds.), *The Foundations of Worldwide Economic Integration*

(Cambridge 2013) 1-14. It is their work that is the source of the quotations here.

2 *London Daily News*, 13 July 1904. For probate, see ac Probate Records.

3 Raden Saleh, *Forest and Native House* (1860), now in the Smithsonian American Art Museum. I am grateful to the Indonesian art historian and curator Amir Sidharta for drawing my attention to this painting and its provenance.

city of Aberdeen, from his late teens onward, Fraser had travelled much of the ‘maritime’ world, and had sojourned overseas for a large part of his adult life, as merchant, financier, shipping company executive, landowner and railway promoter, primarily in Asia and Europe.

Intercontinental mercantile and financial connections between the UK, continental Europe and ‘the East’ have, of course, been analysed in a growing body of literature over the last few decades. Case studies of the social actors who articulated them, however, have been less to the fore.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, despite a small number of important monographs, the field remains slender in comparison with the attention paid by historians to the era’s politicians, military men, legal identities, social reformers and the like<sup>5</sup>: it is hence in a relatively scant historiographical context that the first section of this paper essays a brief outline of the career of one such actor, whose activities in the multiple dimensions of global trade networks extended from London and the Low Countries to the erstwhile Dutch East Indies (present day Indonesia) and even, for a brief time, to the Antipodes.

The second section of the paper concerns the importance of extended family connections in Alexander Fraser’s business career and the interface between family business and the evolving world economy of the mid-to-late nineteenth century. While the role in commerce and finance of the family firm has long been under the spotlight with reference to Chinese (and to a lesser extent Indian) business networks,<sup>6</sup> its central place in Western business history has been insufficiently acknowledged, not least because of a teleological reading of Alfred Chandler’s celebrated hypothesis about the key role played by ‘managerial’ firms in the evolution of industrial capitalism. In fact, as a number of scholars over the last two or three decades have affirmed (some of them directly positioned as critique of the Chandler

4 Dejung and Petersson, ‘Introduction: Power, Institutions and Global Markets’ 1-4; See also: Andrew Perchard et al, ‘Clio in the Business School: Historical Approaches to Strategy, International Business and Entrepreneurship’, *Business History* 59:46 (2017) 904-927.

5 Notable examples include: J. Forbes Munro, *Maritime Enterprise and Empire. Sir William Mackinnon and his Business Network, 1823-1893* (Woodbridge 2003); Christof Dejung, *Die Fäden des globalen Marktes. Eine Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte des Welthandels am Beispiel der Handelsfirma Gebrüder Volkart, 1851-1999* (Cologne 2013); Christof Dejung, *Commodity Trading, Globalization and the Colonial World* (New York and London 2018);

partial summaries in English in Dejung, ‘Bridges to the East: European Merchants and Business Practices in India and China’, in: Robert Lee (ed.), *Commerce and Culture, Nineteenth-Century Business Elites* (Farnham 2011) 93-116 and in Christof Dejung, ‘Worldwide Ties. The Role of Family Businesses in Global Trade in the 19th and 20th Century’, *Business History* 55:6 (2013) 1001-1018; Richard J. Grace, *Opium and Empire: The Lives and Careers of William Jardine and James Matheson* (Montreal 2014); Antony Webster, *The Richest East India Merchant* (Woodbridge 2007).

6 See, e.g. Yen Ching Wang, *Ethnic Chinese Business in Asia: History, Culture and Business Enterprise* (Singapore 2014).

hypothesis) the family firm was a vital and dynamic presence. Inter alia, it played a key role in the reduction of both transaction costs and the commercial/financial risk inherent in global business, while Chandler's depiction of it as 'a childlike stage in the path to a mature managerial enterprise' is open to serious doubt.<sup>7</sup>

Following on from this, and closely related to it, the third section of the paper links family business to an evolving discussion about worldwide convergence and divergence in matters mercantile and financial. Of particular relevance here is an argument, now of some antiquity, about the strength of centripetal forces in the global economy. Purportedly, from the middle of the nineteenth century onward, these forces drew mercantile and entrepreneurial actors and activity away from the colonial 'periphery' toward the metropolitan 'core', resulting in a marked attenuation of the former's autonomy.<sup>8</sup> As we shall see, the story of Alexander Fraser is pertinent to on-going attempts to unsettle this narrative: whilst its persuasiveness and cogency is undeniable, it remains more problematic than it ostensibly appears. Not least this because 'holdouts' in the form of colonial businesses and business people – the historical social actors who managed (as it were) to keep their heads above water while swimming against the tide – formed a more numerous group of 'awkward cases' than has sometimes been allowed. Why they so did remains in need of explanation. One suggestion has been that such people and their businesses occupied niche positions in the global economy, as a result of specialist local knowledge, that made it unprofitable or pointless to evict them.<sup>9</sup> As will be argued, however, that there was another factor at work here, stemming from the fact that the nexus between family business and the continued strength and viability of commercial enterprises based on the colonial 'periphery' was an organic rather than a merely contingent one.

7 Dejung, 'Worldwide Ties'; Geoffrey Jones and Mary B. Rose, 'Family Capitalism', *Business History* 35:4 (1993) 1-16; Keetie E. Sluyterman and H.J.M. Winkelman, 'The Dutch Family Firm Confronted with Chandler's Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism, 1890-1940', *Business History* 35:4 (1993) 152-183; Keetie E. Sluyterman, *Dutch Enterprise in the Twentieth Century* (London & New York 2005) 1-67. For critical appreciation of Chandler's oeuvre, see Mira Wilkins, 'Chandler: A Retrospect' and Geoffrey Jones, 'Alfred Chandler and the Importance of Organization', *Enterprise and Society* 9-3 (2008) 411-414 and 419-421. The quotation in the text comes from Harold

James, *Family Capitalism*, (Cambridge, Mass. 2006) 7.

8 E.g. Charles A. Jones, *International Business in the Nineteenth Century. The Rise and Fall of a Cosmopolitan Bourgeoisie* (Brighton 1987) 140-160; John Darwin, *The Empire Project. The Rise and Fall of the British World System* (Cambridge 2009) 63; Antony Webster, *The Twilight of the East India Company* (Woodbridge UK and Rochester NY 2009) 9-17.

9 E.g., Charles A. Jones, 'British Imperialism and Argentina, 1875-1900: A Theoretical Note', *Journal of Latin American Studies* 12:2 (1980) 440.

Yet there is another, overriding argument covered in the fourth and final section of the paper, one framed by the contention – scarcely novel – that the ‘core’/‘periphery’ scenario<sup>10</sup> should be modified in ways that move it away from dichotomies toward synergies. In particular, the increasingly transnational character of global business was clearly in evidence (from at least the mid-nineteenth century onward) as international communication and movement, by way of the railway telegraph and improved steam navigation, became cheaper, faster, more reliable and altogether more feasible. This meant, in turn, that the identification of interests between ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ was more of a default position than is sometimes assumed – and that we need to pay more attention to the social actors who were its key articulators. Like others of his kind, Alexander Fraser’s business career is important first and foremost for the light it throws on major transnational themes. To adopt the compelling jargon quoted approvingly by a recent writer in *Business History Review*, careers such as his can best be understood with reference to ‘trans-boundary formations [that] are conceptually built on temporal, spatial and topical reconfigurations of three core concepts: connections, circulations and relations.’<sup>11</sup> From this perspective, Alexander Fraser emerges as a prime example of what historian Sandip Hazareesingh has cogently argued was ‘a new type of imperial merchant who, via the communications revolution, could now operate on a genuinely transnational basis [...]’.<sup>12</sup> His story, that is to say, connects the local and the global and is illustrative of the way in which ‘transnational networks [...] mobilized [...] pre-existing local connections on a global scale’, while simultaneously reflecting the agency of individual merchants and entrepreneurs acting in ‘larger social, economic and political contexts’.<sup>13</sup>

### Social actors and networks of global trade: Alexander Fraser in Asia and Europe

Fraser served his ‘apprenticeship’, so it may be presumed, with his elder brother John Mathison Fraser (1805-1884) in a mercantile business in Antwerp, where the latter had relocated from his native Aberdeen at the beginning of the 1830s. Their father, the Inverness-born Alexander Fraser senior (1775-1840) had been

10 I am using the terms ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ here in a simple, global sense. It is not the purpose of the present paper to embark on the high seas of the debates still swirling around Immanuel Wallerstein’s celebrated magnum opus (see Wallerstein’s own succinct summary viz: *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham 2000).

11 Marten Boon, ‘Business Enterprise and Globalization: Towards a Transnational Business

History’, *Business History Review* 91 (Autumn 2017) 517, citing Pierre Yves Saunier, *Transnational History* (Basingstoke 2013) 57-60.

12 Sandip Hazareesingh, ‘Interconnected Synchronicities: The Production of Bombay and Glasgow as Modern Global Ports c.1850-1880’, *Journal of Global History* 4 (2009) 11 [emphasis added].

13 Boon, ‘Transnational Business History’, 524-527.

active in early nineteenth century Aberdeen as a merchant, corn-factor and ship-owner as well as being at one time the city's Provost (a kind of civic head unique to Scotland).<sup>14</sup> What took his sons over to the continent is not entirely clear: most likely, depressed economic conditions in northeast Scotland were the root cause. However, family ties and local connections were the vital corollary to any such move: in the Low Countries, if not in Antwerp itself, a potent link with Aberdeen had been established at least a decade or more before the three Frasers themselves arrived there. In particular, James Young (1777-1834), Alexander Fraser senior's brother-in-law – the two men were married in Aberdeen to sisters from the same elite Dingwall Fordyce family – had relocated from Aberdeen to Rotterdam in 1814, and remained there carrying on a mercantile business till his death twenty years later.<sup>15</sup>

Having arrived in Antwerp sometime early in the 1830s, and still scarcely twenty, Alexander Fraser then quickly 'went out' to the Dutch East Indies and joined another of his older siblings, Arthur Fraser (1811-1881) in a mercantile house, Fraser Eaton, that the latter had recently established in the burgeoning East Java port city of Surabaya. Its proximity to the island's most rapidly expanding sugar producing region in the near-by Oosthoek (East Corner) and adjacent Brantas river delta was to ensure the city's – and to some extent Alexander Fraser's – prosperity in the decades to come.

The firm that he had joined, Fraser Eaton, was itself part of a grouping of three closely linked mercantile businesses, that also included Maclaine Watson in Batavia and MacNeill and Co. in Semarang. It was and remained a quintessentially family affair, in which a small coterie of individuals, of Scots, Dutch and German extraction – frequently closely related to each other – retained effective control.<sup>16</sup> Independent of any metropolitan principals (other than its repatriated partners) and increasingly heavily involved in the purchase and export of sugar, what can most conveniently be called the Maclaine Watson Concern was financed by the partners' own funds and by short-term capital borrowed from the Java Bank (DJB), the Indies' premier financial institution whose funds were mostly locally accumulated. It

14 Except where otherwise indicated, the raw genealogical data on the Fraser family derives from the websites of Ancestry.com and Find My Past.com.

15 'A short memoir of James Young, Burgess...' at [archive.org/stream/.../ashortmemoirjamooyoungoog\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/.../ashortmemoirjamooyoungoog_djvu.txt).

16 Notarial Act (A.M. Meertens) Batavia 29 October 1860, in *Java Bode*, 14 November 1860, identified the partners, in addition to Fraser himself, as the London-born Malcolm Bonhote and his (London domiciled) brother Thomas Bonhote; the

Amsterdam-born Johann Jacobus Blanckenhagen; the Irish-born James Maclachlan; the Scots-born Lachlan McLean; the Hamburg-born Theodore Arnold von Laer and the Bremen-born Gerhard Hermann Miesegaes. Two decades later, the Scots element was rather better represented among the directors, and included the brothers Lachlan and Neil McLean (both by then resident in their native Scotland) but still included four Dutch or German partners (two of whom were by that date domiciled in The Hague). See *De Locomotief*, 4 January 1879.

was, presumably, no accident that Fraser himself joined the DJB board, albeit in 1873, ten years after he had formally ceased to be a partner in the Concern.<sup>17</sup>

The Concern's rise to prominence in Java during the middle decades of the nineteenth century reflected the fact that the colony was the scene of rapidly expanding European and North American – as well as Sino-Indonesian, Arab and Armenian – commercial activity. Fuelled by the importation of cotton goods from the UK and Continental Europe, it was also fed by the export boom created, in part at least, by the Dutch colonial government's System of State Cultivations or *cultuurstelsel*.<sup>18</sup> The 'System' – in fact it was a patchwork of often pragmatically arrived at local accommodations between Dutch colonial officials and Javanese power holders – embodied varying degrees of compulsion on Java's peasant villagers to provide both labour and the requisite access to their land for the production of exportable commodities, with sugar, coffee, indigo and tobacco high on the list.<sup>19</sup>

As initially envisaged, the commodities concerned were to be commandeered by the colonial authorities and sold overseas through the NHM (the *Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij* or Dutch Commercial Society), which at this stage in its history acted as the government's commercial arm. Around the mid-century, however, the Dutch authorities opted to begin 'privatizing' the System. This, in turn, created openings for independent mercantile operators like the Maclaine Watson Concern to buy into the export trade to Europe and North America in a major way, while at the same time providing working (and sometimes investment) capital to the entrepreneurs – especially but not exclusively sugar manufacturers – who processed the raw material output of this rudimentary 'command economy'. More or less simultaneously, independently operating mercantile houses also forged alliances of one kind or another with entrepreneurs who worked outside the parameters of the System, above all in the Principalities or *vorstenlanden* of Central Java and in other parts of the island where the System's writ did not run. At the same time, moreover, the same private mercantile firms were heavily involved, again alongside the NHM, in the importation of cotton goods and may – though there is scarcely any evidence – have participated in the smuggling into the colony of opium, that most lucrative of mid-nineteenth century commodities. Although its importation was officially monopolised

17 *Java Bode*, 7 September 1873.

18 For European mercantile activity in Java specifically, see G. Roger Knight, 'Neglected Orphans and Absent Parents: The European Mercantile Houses of Mid-Nineteenth Century Java', in: Ulbe Bosma and Anthony Webster (eds.), *Commodities, Ports and Asian Maritime Trade since 1750* (Cambridge 2004) 127-143 and the references therein.

19 Among the mass of publications on the System, perhaps the most immediately useful are Cees Fasseur, *The Politics of Colonial Exploitation* (translated from the Dutch by Ary Kraal and edited by R.E. Elson) (Ithaca 1992); R.E. Elson, *Village Java under the Cultivation System 1830-1870* (Sydney 1994); G. Roger Knight, *Sugar Steam and Steel: The Industrial Project in Colonial Java, 1820-1885* (Adelaide 2014).

by the NHM on behalf of the Dutch East Indies government (who sold it to the colony's state-appointed Indies-Chinese Opium wholesalers or *pachters*) the drug actually entered the colony illicitly in quantities considerably greater than that carried by the legally authorised trade.<sup>20</sup>

It was in this mercantile context that Fraser evidently prospered. Even though scarcely thirty years old at the time, by 1845 he had already gained sufficient seniority in Fraser Eaton to be accorded power of attorney in the firm (Dutch: *procuratiehouder*)<sup>21</sup> and, following his elder brother's return to the UK toward the end of the decade, he took over its management. Very shortly, however, he relocated to Batavia, where he rapidly established himself at the heart of the entire Concern's Java operations: indeed, in 1854 a young recent arrival wrote to his father in Scotland (from his desk at Fraser Eaton in Surabaya) that 'Mr Fraser [...] and Mr [James] McLachlan have, I think, the most to say in the management of affairs'.<sup>22</sup> Living in some style in an 'agreeably located' house on the south side of the Koningsplein (present-day Merdeka Square)<sup>23</sup> Fraser quickly became a well-respected figure in the city. In 1853 for example, he joined two leading figures in the Dutch sector in Batavia's colonial community on the organising committee for a charity performance to raise funds for the victims of the recent massive earthquake in the northeast of the Dutch East Indies archipelago.<sup>24</sup> By the close of the decade, moreover, he had come to hold the newly-created position of British Consul at Batavia<sup>25</sup> while his carefully nurtured relations with Dutch colonial officialdom (see below) as well as his prominence in mercantile circles subsequently led to his being accorded the additional accolade of membership of Batavia's government-appointed Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Kamer van Koophandel en Nijverheid).<sup>26</sup>

### The sinews of global trade: railways and matters maritime

Alexander Fraser's successful location as a high profile figure among predominantly mercantile networks engaged in international trade Europe

20 Eric Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders. Smuggling and States along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865-1915* (New Haven and London 2005) 186-196. See also: George Bryan Souza, 'An Anatomy of Commerce and Consumption: Opium and Merchants at Batavia over the Long Eighteenth Century', *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies* 3 (2009) 61-87.

21 *Javaasche Courant*, 9 August 1845.

22 Lachlan McLean to Colin McLean, 18 July 1854, Macpherson Papers (in private possession, Inverness, Scotland). I am deeply grateful to Janet

Macpherson and the late Ian Macpherson (and to Lord and Lady Crickhowell) for allowing and facilitating access to these papers.

23 *Bataviaasch Handelsblad*, 4 October 1869.

24 *Java Bode*, 16 February 1853. Fraser's colleagues were the leading Batavia merchant Willem Rueb, of Ommeren, Rueb & Co., and the Batavia Notary A. F. Lens.

25 National Archives, UK, Foreign Office. General Correspondence before 1906 [...] Holland [...] Consuls at Batavia, FO 37/396.

26 Besluit GG 21 July 1875/ 22. ANMK.

and Asia was only part of his story. Indeed, it was in some ways the lesser part. His simultaneous and subsequent involvement in both railway promotion in the Dutch East Indies and in the development of intra-regional steam shipping in the surrounding waters placed him squarely in the frame of developments which, as has been widely observed, along with the telegraph, were absolutely crucial to the expansion of global commerce per se.<sup>27</sup>

The belated appearance of railways in Java – in this respect, the Dutch colony decades behind Cuba, its New World coeval – reflected both the difficulty of the mountainous terrain and rudimentary state of land surveys as well as a lengthy debate in colonial circles as to whether railways should be a state-run or a ‘private’ venture. At the beginning of the 1860s, however, ‘private’ investors (there were always going to be government subsidies in one form or another) were finally given the green light and a number of schemes were mooted,<sup>28</sup> among them one promoted by Fraser and Maclaine Watson, who had been pushing for some years for a line to be built from the port of Semarang on the north coast of Central Java into the island’s agriculturally rich interior. Knowing the ‘right people’ in official Dutch colonial circles helped to ensure that it was Fraser’s scheme – launched in conjunction with a pair of Netherlands-based Dutch associates – that gained official approval.

The Netherlands Indies Railway Company (Nederlandsch-Indische Spoorweg Maatschappij), was an ambitious enterprise and, in addition to his role as promoter, it appears possible that, via his connections in the City of London (see below), Fraser was also responsible for a large tranche – four million guilders – of the necessary capital being raised by the London merchant bankers, J. Horstman & Co. Prominent among the Dutch sponsors and presumed investors, meanwhile, was the retired Governor-General (a one-time Colonial Minister) Charles Pahud. He was, as we shall see, a relative of Fraser’s through marriage and a long-standing proponent of ‘private’ railway development in the Dutch East Indies, something which he had already backed (albeit to no immediate effect) during his tenure at the Ministry a decade or more earlier. Recently returned to the Netherlands after the completion of his term as Governor-General, he was a ‘name’ that gave added lustre to the whole venture.<sup>29</sup>

As it turned out, that lustre – and the support of the NHM – proved important, because although the Railway Company got the go-ahead, in the form of a government concession in 1863, it took ten years before the

27 Dejung, ‘Bridges to the East’ in: Lee, *Commerce and Culture*, 98-102.

28 S.A. Reitsma, *Korte Geschiedenis der Nederlandsch-Indische Spoor-en Tramwegen* (Batavia 1928) 10-22, and Augustus J. Veenendaal jr., ‘De locomotief van de moderniteit. Aanleg

van het net van spoor- en tramwegen’, in: Wim Ravesteijn and Jan Kop (eds.), *Bouwen in de archipel. Burgerlijke openbare werken in Nederlands-Indië en Indonesië 1800-2000* (Zutphen 2004) 65-67.

29 *Nederlandsche Staatscourant*, 1 oktober 1863.

line was fully operational. Indeed, the company's troubled early financial history – inter alia, it had to be bailed out by the Dutch home government in 1869 – may have meant that Fraser and his associates burnt their fingers rather than made money. Profits were slow to materialize and it was only with the completion of the line in 1873 that the company 'began to climb slowly out of the financial morass'.<sup>30</sup>

Meanwhile, to understand the next phase of Fraser's career, we need to go back a decade, to the first half of the 1860s, when Fraser and his wife had spent some five years in Europe, dividing their time, so it would seem, between London and the Netherlands. Along with promoting the Railway Company, Fraser toyed with the idea of standing for a seat in the British parliament, as did many of his likewise business-oriented contemporaries.<sup>31</sup> The main fruit of the couple's European sojourn, however, related to the matters maritime. One dimension of the latter was provision of the insurance that was a vital and potentially highly profitable adjunct to the international movement of goods. Fraser demonstrated a quick grasp of the possibilities. His period in London coincided with a boom in company promotion, largely contingent on a far-reaching liberalization of the hitherto tight legal provisions surrounding their formation. In this newly de-regulated financial environment, new companies mushroomed, and the one which with Fraser was most associated from its inception in 1864 – initially as its 'deputy governor' – was the London-based Home and Colonial Marine Insurance Co. With offices in the City, an 'authorized capital' of two million pounds sterling, and a formidable roll-call of directors linked to commercial and financial interests in the UK, the East (and Canada), it

30 Veenendaal 'De locomotief van de moderniteit', 67. Even so, Fraser continued to speculate in railways, where his potentially biggest venture was the grand-sounding though eventually largely abortive Java Railway Company (Java Spoorweg Maatschappij). 'English money' – possibly Fraser's since he was in on its inception in 1882 – was said to be involved, but, as things fell out, the company never built more than 25 kilometres of track. Nonetheless, Fraser was still on the Company's board a decade later, together, it must be said, with some rather illustrious figures in Dutch and British business circles: they included J.A. van Gelder, erstwhile member of the Council of the Indies (Raad van Indië) and leading figure in the construction of Batavia's modern port facilities at Tandjung

Priok and James Staats Forbes (1823-1904), the Aberdeen-born railway engineer and widely experienced company executive – and a man with a well-deserved reputation for turning around companies that were in financial difficulties. See Reitsma, *Spoor-en Tramwegen* 40-41; HCHO 5 (1892-1893) 481. The other (Dutch) directors were B. Janse Jr. and N.H.C. baron Tuyll van Serooskerken. The company's capital c.1890 was stated to be a modest 1,440,000 guilders and its head office was in The Hague. For Forbes, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James\\_Staats\\_Forbes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Staats_Forbes). Accessed 21 September 2016.

31 Fraser to Alexander McNeill, 6 June 860. Macpherson Papers (in private possession, UK).

proved an enduring concern, that survived until the final decade of the century.<sup>32</sup> Fraser's key involvement with matters maritime, however, related not to the insurance of ship's cargoes but to the steam-ships in which the cargoes were carried.

A decade or more before Fraser had joined it, Maclaine Watson had pioneered the use of steamers in Java's coastal trade, and it was most likely this long-standing connection that provided the launching-pad for the next phase of his career, based on an alliance with the ambitious shipping magnate Sir William McKinnon (1823-1893), a fellow Scot – albeit a Lowlander – initially based in Glasgow and subsequently in London. In the course of the 1860s, McKinnon built up the core of the international shipping networks that were subsequently to make him famous on the imperial frontier in three continents. In order to extend his interests beyond the Indian Ocean, and evidently in tandem with Fraser, he came up with a scheme to found a London-based company – flying under the Dutch flag – to take over the government subsidized, inter-island steamer routes in the Dutch East Indies that had evolved over the previous decade.<sup>33</sup>

The Netherlands East India Steam Navigation Company (Nederlandsch-Indische Stoomvaart-Maatschappij), invariably known by its Dutch acronym as the NISM, was a 'McKinnon' company that dominated the coastal, inter-island and Singapore trade of the Dutch East Indies for more than two decades. However, it was Alexander Fraser (together with Maclaine Watson, he had money invested in the new enterprise) who became its salaried chief executive and driving force in the Dutch East Indies.<sup>34</sup> Matters got off to a rocky start: the NISM paid no dividends for the first three years of its operations and there were disputes with the London board over

32 See *London Daily News*, 18 April 1864 – where the directors were named (and their business interests identified) as Alexander Fraser (Maclaine Watson & Co., Batavia); Lewis Fraser (Maclaine Fraser Singapore); James Anderson (Messrs Anderson & Thompson, London); William Frederick Baring (Director Bank of Hindustan); Clark Irving, Hyde Park Square; Duncan James Kay (Kay, Finlay & Co.); James Lyall (Lyall, Rennie & Co., Calcutta); T.W.L. Mackean, London; James McMaster (late of William McMaster Brothers, London & Toronto); Brinsley de Courcy Nixon, Queens Gate Gardens; Augustus Henry Novelli (Novelli & Co., London and Manchester); John Paterson (Director Alliance Bank); Felix Prior (of the late firm of

H. & J. Johnson & Co.); John Swindell (Swindell & Mathews, Mincing Lane); William Patrick Adam, MP; Blair Adam, Kinross; Henry Thurburn, 5, Queensborough Terrace; James Wylie, (Gladstone, Wylie & Co., Calcutta).

33 J.N.F.M. à Campo, *Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij. Stoomvaart en staatsvorming in de Indonesische archipel 1888-1914* (Hilversum 1992) 39-73.

34 On Fraser and Maclaine Watson's connections to Mackinnon (though my own interpretation of events accords rather more emphasis to Fraser's role), see J. Forbes Munro, *Maritime Trade and Empire: Sir William Mackinnon and his Business Network* (Woodbridge and Rochester, NY 2003) 75-6, 130-132, 138-139 and 377.

Fraser's remuneration package.<sup>35</sup> Once the new shipping line became fully operational, however, relations were more amicable and Fraser became, for well over a decade, the key figure in the NISM's operations in Southeast Asia and as such, for example, was directly involved in negotiations in The Hague in the early 1870s relating to the extension of the NISM's contact. At the same time, however, he was hard at work trying to expand the NISM's sphere of operations by starting a regular steamer service from the Dutch East Indies to Britain's Australian colonies to the south.

It was not his first venture into the field of Java's Antipodean connections: back in London in the early 1860s, Fraser had promoted a scheme for an extension of the telegraph through the Dutch East Indies to Australia.<sup>36</sup> Now, however, he took the opportunity of his position with the NISM to travel in person to the Antipodean capitals: in Brisbane he was evidently a persuasive enough advocate to get the Queensland parliament to vote a substantial subsidy (some 25,000 pounds annually) should the venture come to fruition, and in Melbourne he appears to have been mistaken (it set alarm bells ringing in The Hague) for an official emissary of the Dutch East Indies' Governor-General.<sup>37</sup>

In the medium term, nothing came of Fraser and the NISM's initiative, but, undeterred, he turned his attention to the needs of his firm's 'coal-hungry steamers' (the phrase is Daniel Headrick's) and set about trying to persuade his friends in the Dutch East Indies government (see below) of the importance of exploiting the apparently extensive reserves of good coal that had recently been discovered at Lebak in the Banten Residency of West Java.<sup>38</sup> It was not Fraser's first foray into the minerals' field – as early as 1858 he had established a company (of which he was managing director) to 'promote the exploitation' of mines and such like in the Dutch East Indies<sup>39</sup> – but it was certainly his most significant. Again, however, he was ahead of his time – since although coal mining did finally eventuate in Banten, it did so well after Fraser had re-located to Europe for a second time. Back in London, he joined the UK board of the NISM, and, often chairing the board's meetings,<sup>40</sup> he was heavily

35 See S. van Hulstijn to Alexander Fraser, 5 June 1868, SOAS McKinnon Papers, box 95, file 7. Fraser's (reduced) salary stood at 1,500 guilders per month in 1868. According to 'Statement of capital and dividend 1866-1890', the NISM's first dividend – of 5 percent – was paid in 1869 and the company's best years – dividends ranged between 10 and 20 percent – were between 1873 and 1883. See Mackinnon Papers Box 6, file 23.

36 *London Evening Mail*, 17 September 1866.

37 Verbaal Kolonien [openbaar] 24 November 1871/13-1621 & 20 August 1872/1041/14. ANMK.

38 Besluit GG, 5 February 1874/59 ANMK.

39 *Java-Bode* 24 March 1858. His co-director (*commissaris*) was Alexander Robert Jacobus Cramerus (1826-1887), partner in the leading Batavia mercantile house of Paine Stricker and destined to become a 'pioneer' Indies director and subsequently head of the Nederlands-Indische Handelsbank. See Knight, 'Neglected Orphans', 129.

40 See various records of NISM board meeting in Mackinnon Papers, Box 6/22 and 23.

involved at the end of the 1880s in ultimately abortive negotiations with the Dutch government to renew the company's contract into the early twentieth century. These extended to a ploy – in which Fraser, along with his Dutch relative and long-time associate Frederick Bogaardt, was one of the main players – to circumvent growing nationalistic hostility in The Hague to the British character of the NISM by establishing a Dutch holding company, to be called the *Stoomvaart (Steam-Shipping) Maatschappij Holland*, designed, in effect, to carry on and extend the NISM's business under a new name.<sup>41</sup> It proved, however, too transparent a device for the Dutch to swallow, and it was subsequently Fraser who played the key role in winding up the NISM, whose key role in interisland shipping in the Dutch East Indies was now taken over by the incontrovertibly Dutch KPM – the *Koninklijke Paketvaart-Maatschappij* (Royal Packet Navigation Company).

### Family ties – and the role of women in the business affairs of men

Having briefly surveyed Alexander Fraser's career as a major import-export trader in the Indies, as a company promoter in both Asia and Europe and as the local CEO of a large colonial steam shipping concern operating in Indonesian waters, we can turn to the role played by extended family connections in the building of his business interests. Those connections, never absent from the narrative, were significant not only because they underscored the extent to which the family was and remained during Fraser's long lifetime the essential key to mercantile success but also for the light they throw on the part played by women in family-based businesses. While discussion so far has focussed on the place of social actors in global networks, it is now appropriate to shift attention to the importance of the extended family structures to which such actors belonged. Much has been made in the past (as was observed earlier in this paper) about the importance of kin ties among (inter alia) Chinese and Indian business elites in maritime Asia. Insufficient attention has been paid, however, to similar ties among their European business contemporaries, a relative neglect that extends to their ties with state officialdom. The case of Alexander Fraser forms a useful corrective on both counts.

Alexander Fraser's immediate family connections, as we have already seen, were what launched him on his mercantile career, first (and very briefly) in Antwerp and subsequently – and crucially – in the family business that his elder brother Arthur Fraser had co-launched in Surabaya in the 1830s. It was through that connection, of course, that Alexander Fraser became a partner and even longer associate of the indubitably family-based Maclaine Watson Concern. But this was by no means the sum total of Fraser's extended

41 à Campo, *Koninklijke Paketvaart-Maatschappij* 70-72, *Nederlandsche Staatscourant*, 5 July 1888, no. 53.

family connections in the mid-to-late nineteenth century business world, connections that ensured that he was linked to internationally-oriented commercial operations in the United Kingdom and Western Europe as well as in the Indies. Of particular importance in Alexander Fraser's case were the mercantile firms in Antwerp, Rotterdam and London conducted by his brother, John Mathison Fraser (1805-1884) and his descendants. The eldest of the three Fraser brothers, he married Gertrude Emily Nottebaum (1814-1887) in Antwerp in 1833, thereby locating himself among the cream of that city's German mercantile elite.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, marriage clearly played the key role in launching his subsequent career, since his newly acquired wife formed the essential connection between a relatively minor newcomer and a leading family in one of the Low Countries' great mercantile and industrial cities; moreover, because the marriage also brought in its wake the inestimable advantage of linking the young Scot to the extensive business network of his wife's relatives elsewhere in north-western Europe, notably in Hamburg and Bremen. Although John Mathison Fraser subsequently moved the centre of his operations to the City of London, where he and his wife arrived at the close of the 1840s (some two decades or more later they retired to a Thames-side mansion in the Home Counties of the southeast of England), there is no evidence that he thereby slewed off his continental links.

Quite the contrary: across the North Sea the couple's eldest son – and Alexander's nephew – the Scots-German Alexander Caspar Fraser (1835-1916) set up a business in Rotterdam, backed by his mother's Nottebaum relatives and his own newly acquired in-laws, the Thaden family. In 1856, while still a very young man, Alexander Caspar Fraser had married the equally young and Rotterdam-born Maria Joanna Thaden (1835-1907). Her father, Bernard Antoine Louis Thaden (1802-1882), a partner in the local branch of the Nottebohm businesses, came from the German town of Emden, whereas her mother, Elisabeth Overgaauw (1814-1887) hailed from Rotterdam, where her father may have been a broker (Dutch: *makelaar*).<sup>43</sup> For the next quarter, until early in the 1880s, Alexander Caspar and his family lived in his wife's hometown,<sup>44</sup> where his firm, A. C. Fraser & Co., was heavily involved in overseas maritime trade, especially with the East Indies.

Indeed, reflecting what appears to have been their long-time involvement in the system of financing the trade in Java sugar, towards the end of Alexander Caspar's time in Rotterdam, A. C. Fraser & Co. were intimately concerned – as *commanditaire vennoot* or silent partner – in the setting up in 1882 of the Batavia based sugar-exporting firm of Wellenstein

42 Hilde Greefs, 'The role of women in the business networks of men. The business elite in Antwerp during the first half of the nineteenth century,' paper given at the XIV International Economic History Congress, Helsinki 2006 (session 54), 7-9.

43 Marriage Certificate Stadsarchief Rotterdam [Open Archief].

44 C.1858-c.1883 *Rotterdam adresboeken*, in Stadsarchief Rotterdam.

Krause.<sup>45</sup> At the same time – and keeping things in the family – the twenty-eight year old Alister Gillian Fraser (1854-1927), son of Arthur Fraser (see above), another of Caspar Alexander’s uncles – took up the position of A.C. Fraser’s London agent.<sup>46</sup> A connection of even longer standing, beginning in the 1860s, linked A.C. Fraser & Co. to the leading Amsterdam mercantile house of Van Eeghen.

Moreover, none of this growing network of mercantile connections across Western Europe signalled the termination of Alexander Fraser’s own association in Java with his old firm of Maclaine Watson. His nephew, William Thompson Fraser (b. 1841) was a partner in Maclaine Watson for a decade before his premature death in London in 1881.<sup>47</sup> His childless uncle had evidently been close to him and his Dutch wife, Anna Onnen (1846-1885): ‘we have been much afflicted here this week by the sudden death from heart disease of my nephew [...]. His widow is very inconsolable as you can imagine. She is left with three children – a girl of 13, a boy of 9 and a baby two months old. He was only 38 years old.’<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, another nephew, Duncan Davidson Fraser (1857-c.1932) went to Java sometime in the 1880s, and was subsequently admitted as a partner in Maclaine Watson 1903 at around the same time that he was appointed British consul in Surabaya, where he was based with Fraser Eaton. Meanwhile, in Batavia back in 1884 he had already married a colonial-born woman, the twenty-year-old Wilhelmina van der Chijs (1864-1921), the daughter of a prominent Dutch colonial public official.<sup>49</sup> In so doing, he not only consolidated his own position in Dutch colonial society, but also perpetuated a family tradition that had been inaugurated by Alexander Fraser more than three decades earlier.

As is becoming apparent, the role of women in the business networks of men (to adopt Hilde Greef’s telling phrase) was a crucial one in a mercantile world, such as that which existed in Europe and the Indies throughout the nineteenth century, in which family connections were of paramount importance. Despite the fact, as Therese Nordlund Edvinsson, has observed, that in business history ‘the wife’s participation has often been regarded as irrelevant to the success of the enterprise’,<sup>50</sup> the true position was quite otherwise. Inter alia, women ‘functioned in the “male” business world as intermediaries of property, knowledge, name or relations [...]’,

45 See Wellenstein Krause’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary volume, *Wellenstein, Krause & Co., Java, 1882-1932* (’s Gravenhage 1932) 7-10.

46 *Wellenstein Krause*, 13.

47 *De locomotief*, 4 January 1879.

48 NA, Den Haag, archief James Loudon 2.21.183.50/30. Fraser to James Loudon, 3 June 1880.

49 [www.geni.com/people/Maria-Paulina-van-Kooten/600000024448184268](http://www.geni.com/people/Maria-Paulina-van-Kooten/600000024448184268); 1827-1927 One Hundred Years, 5-6.

50 Therese Nordlund Edvinsson, ‘Standing in the Shadow of the Corporation: Women’s Contribution to Swedish Family Business in the Early Twentieth Century’, *Business History*, 58:4 (2016) 532.

integral to which was a woman's role as 'important informal partner for business through her work, capital, knowledge and relations with relatives or friends'.<sup>51</sup>

In the specific case of Alexander Fraser, this held true from very early on in his history. Indeed, his family's ties with the commercial world of the nineteenth century Dutch East Indies had, in effect, been pioneered by a woman rather than by a man. The person in question, Jean Stewart Fraser (1804-1870) was the elder sister of Arthur and Alexander Fraser, and following her marriage to the twenty-year old John Robert Turing (1792-1828) in London January 1822,<sup>52</sup> she had accompanied him to the Dutch East Indies, where he became a partner in the newly established firm of Stewart Turing & Co. The enterprise, despite enjoying the backing ('patronage and support' to quote the notice that appeared in the colony's only newspaper) of the leading Bombay Agency House of Forbes & Co. and their London correspondents, the East India House of Smith Inglis & Co. (subsequently Inglis Forbes & Co.),<sup>53</sup> met with little long-term success and Turing died in 1828 while still in Batavia, following the collapse of his business ventures<sup>54</sup> – leaving his widow to make her way back home.

As a Scot resident in Batavia for much of the 1820s, Jean Fraser would undoubtedly have known Gillian Maclaine, co-founder of Maclaine Watson, and it was most likely through her intercession that Maclaine took her young sibling, Arthur Fraser, back to Java with him on board of the Dutch ship *Antonij* in 1832 – the older man declaring in a diary written en route how much the young man reminded him of his sister<sup>55</sup> – and helped set him up in business. Placed in a mercantile house in the East Java port of Surabaya at Maclaine's behest, Arthur Fraser went on to co-found there (c. 1835) the firm of Fraser Eaton and Co. and to act as Maclaine's agent in the port.<sup>56</sup> The business evidently flourished: 'Young Fraser who came out with me [Maclaine reported home] has turned out a fine clever fellow and has done well for himself and us in Sourabaya.'<sup>57</sup> As we have already seen, it was in the East Java

51 Greefs, 'The role of women', 3-9. See also: Leonora Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes. Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-185*. Revised ed., 2002, particularly chapter 6 'The Hidden Investment: Women and the Enterprise'.

52 22 January 1822 in St Michael's, Cornhill, London, according to Rootsweb/Ancestry.com 'Laidlaw-Hastings-Kerr-Laidlaw Family Tree'.

53 *Bataviasche Courant*, 24 August 1822/34. Partners at that time were Ludowick/Lewis Stewart, as well as Turing himself.

54 *Javaasche Courant*, 6 September 1828/107; *Bataviasche Courant*, 25 November 1826/47 and 10 March 1827/10; Besluiten Gouverneur-General Nederlands Indië [hereafter Besluit GC], 21 November 1828/24, NA, Den Haag, Archief Ministerie van Kolonien, 2.20.01 and 2.20.02 [hereafter ANMK].

55 As related in Maclaine's 'weekly journal' kept onboard the *Anthony*, entry for Saturday 3 March 1832, Greenfield MSS (in private hands, UK).

56 GM to MM 30 October 1833; GM to MM 24 August 1835. Greenfield MSS.

57 GM to MM 16 December 1836. Greenfield MSS.

port that Alexander Fraser joined his brother in the Fraser Eaton business c.1835, thereby inaugurating a long and successful career in the Indies.

The role played by women in underpinning Fraser's career, moreover, continued to be a formidable one. For in the late 1840s, the chief protagonist in this story had married a woman who, whatever her direct economic consequence, was vastly to strengthen her husband's business credentials by virtue of the access she brought to the highest levels of Dutch officialdom both in the colony and back in the Netherlands. Alexander Fraser's choice of bride reflected perhaps a degree of emotional entanglement: Julia Hermina van Citters (1819-1879) was, after all, a widow of no more than thirty, and her new spouse was scarcely three years her senior. Her first husband had been the Antwerp-born Eugene Paul Charles Cenie (1813-1845), a scion of a family prominent in Dutch metropolitan mercantile circles, who had died in Batavia some four years earlier.<sup>58</sup> Van Citters herself, though part of an extended family of business-people and state functionaries based in Zeeland in the southwest of the Netherlands, came from Chinsura, one of a nest of Dutch 'factories' or trading posts – prior to their transfer to the British in 1824 – located in the Indian subcontinent. Her father was Jan Willem Frederik van Citters (1785-1836), an individual who had both been born and spent much of his career in the sub-continent before relocating to Batavia in the mid-1820s, subsequent to which he relocated to Japan as the head of the Dutch trading mission at Decima (Dejima).<sup>59</sup>

The critical point about Julia van Citter's life history, however, stemmed from the maternal rather than the paternal side of her family: Louise Isabella Bogaardt (1798-1871) – like her husband she came from one of the leading families in the erstwhile Dutch mercantile community in the Indian sub-continent – appears simply to have swelled the ranks of financially desirable Asian-born widows who were already well represented in Batavia and the other 'Dutch' towns of the Dutch East Indies. Her sister Catharina Johanna Wilhelmina Bogaardt (1807-1839), however, was a very different matter. Soon after his arrival in the colony in the late 1820s she had wed the Dutch-Swiss Charles Ferdinand Pahud (1803-1873).<sup>60</sup> Clearly marked out for a brilliant career even before he returned to the Netherlands some two decades later in 1849, Pahud first became Minister of Colonies – and then returned to the Indies to serve a term as Governor-General between 1856 and 1861. Julia van Citters, in consequence, was the niece of a figure of some importance in mid-nineteenth century Dutch colonial circles.

58 His father [uncle?], the Antwerp-born Rochus Johannes Paulus Cenie, had been Directeur NHM 1824-1831 and was subsequently Dutch Consul-General in Antwerp 1842-1854. See Baud, *Briefwisseling*, 1:141. See additional genealogy in <https://www.genealogieonline.nl/en/stamboom-roskam-van-rouveroy-van-nieuwaal/11812.php>.

59 See for genealogical data, Ancestry.com.: Netherlands, GenealogieOnline Trees Index, 1000-2015.

60 For the information about Pahud and his family in this and the following paragraph, see *Nederlands Patriciaat*, 2 (1911) 388-389 and 39, (1953) 222-224.

The Pahud-Bogaardt marriage had ended with Catharine's death at sea in May 1839 on her way to the Netherlands, but not before the couple had established a Java born family of four children. Pahud never remarried, and it is fair to assume that he remained close to his late wife's family, and that the Bogaardt connection remained a potent one – and with it the link to Alexander Fraser. The Pahud connection also meant that the old Governor-General's two sons, both of whom rose through the hierarchy of the colonial bureaucracy to become residenten (the highest-ranking provincial officials in Java), were also 'family': as Fraser expressed it years later in respect to one of the pair, the man was 'a near connection of mine by marriage'.<sup>61</sup>

It was the connection with Charles Pahud himself, however, which remained the most important one for Fraser. As Cees Fasseur noted some years ago, the fact that Fraser was married to a niece of Pahud mattered in a variety of contexts: one of them – minor in itself perhaps, but indicative of the closeness of their relationship – being that the latter shared with Fraser some 'confidential' details relating to Dutch East Indies government finance, something that (when it accidentally became public knowledge) was subsequently used against Pahud by his political opponents in the Netherlands.<sup>62</sup> From Fraser's point of view, however, an altogether more substantial context concerned the scheme for building Java's first railway, where, as we have already seen, he was able to rely on Pahud's strong support, to the extent that the latter's name appeared on the company prospectus. Pahud's death in 1873, moreover, far from signalling the end of Alexander Fraser's 'influence at court' proved, in effect, no more than the prelude to a renewal of even closer relations between the – by now Dutch East Indies entrepreneur and landowner – and the highest levels of the Dutch administration in Java: relations that further demonstrate the extent to which locally operating social actors on the colonial 'periphery' could dig themselves – courtesy of family connection and long-standing familial associations – into the very fabric of the regime there in ways that undermine the hegemony of centripetal narratives.

### **Centripetal narratives and 'hold outs' on the periphery: the embedding of business in a colonial setting**

A key element in cementing his position as a colonial businessman whom metropolitan interests had perforce to accommodate rather than undermine

61 See 'List of applicants for the post of Resident Director [of the NISM] at The Hague prepared by Mr. A. Fraser'. Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Mackinnon Papers, Box 6, File 21.

62 Cees Fasseur, 'Gemengd onthaal. De weerklank op Money's "Java" in Nederland', *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 105:3 (1990) 369-371 and 375-376.

was not only Fraser's long-standing connections in the Dutch East Indies business world but also the access he continued to enjoy to the highest official circles in the Indies as the regional CEO of the NISM, Mackinnon's Southeast Asia steamship company (see above). In particular, he evidently remained very welcome at Government House during the tenure of Governor General James Loudon between 1872 and 1875. Loudon (1824-1900) was the Java-born son of a Scots turned-Dutch associate of Maclaine Watson's founder – the two older men had been close friends during the 1830s.<sup>63</sup> Equally to the point, however, Fraser, together with his deputy CEO Sam van Hulstijn (1830-1879), was on excellent terms with Loudon's highly influential executive officer, the Chief Secretary (*algemeen secretaris*) H. D. Levyssohn Norman (1838-1892).<sup>64</sup> One revealing incident in this respect was Fraser and Van Hulstijn's spirited – and very public – defense in 1873 of the Chief Secretary against the charge that he (and by implication, the Governor-General) was seeking to muzzle the colonial press in the Dutch East Indies. Van Hulstijn, as was revealed to the paper's readers, went not once but twice to the office of the colony's leading newspaper, the *Java Bode*, to remonstrate with its editor over what Van Hulstijn regarded as the inaccuracy of its reportage on this score, while Fraser forwarded for publication in the *Bode* a letter that he had received from Levyssohn Norman refuting the charges.<sup>65</sup>

A decade later, when Levyssohn Norman himself had relocated permanently to Holland, he was a prime applicant for the position of NISM representative in The Hague, and spoken of by Fraser, who was by then the key figure on the NISM's board, in the most glowing – and revealing – terms. Levyssohn Norman, he reported to his fellow directors, was a man 'intimately connected with the Company's business on Java and a warm and steady friend'. Indeed, wrote Fraser, 'it was he who *with me* [emphasis added by me, RK] prepared the terms under which the [NISM's] original contract for the mail service was to be renewed for fifteen years' – something that was only frustrated by the arrival of a new and less sympathetic Colonial Minister in The Hague. It was Levyssohn Norman, moreover, who had also facilitated the awarding to the NISM of a highly lucrative contract – 'a source of much profit for the company' – to carry materials and men to the war zone that had opened up in Aceh in the north of Sumatra during the course of 1873.<sup>66</sup>

63 Alexander Loudon, James' father (1789-1839) had prospered mightily in Java in the 1830s under the patronage of Governor-General and subsequently Minister of Colonies J.C. Baud, who wrote that the naturalized Scot had 'a Dutch heart'. See: Baud to J. van den Bosch, 8 November 1831 in J. Westendorp Boerma (ed.), *Briefwisseling tussen J. van den Bosch en J.C. Baud* (Utrecht 1956) 1-76. For the family tree, see *Nederlands Patriciaat*, 21 (1933/4) 240-250.

64 For Levyssohn Norman's influence over Loudon, see Fasseur, *Indischgasten*, 140-141.

65 *Java Bode*, 27 August 1873.

66 See under 'Levyssohn Norman' in 'List of applicants for the post of Resident Director [of the NISM] at The Hague prepared by Mr. A. Fraser'. Mackinnon Papers, Box 6, File 21.

Indeed, it was the war in Aceh, launched by Loudon and Levyssohn Norman and initially disastrous for the Dutch (its ‘shock and awe’ phase turned into a bitter thirty-year conflict only finally ‘resolved’ early in the following century) that did much to cement Fraser’s and Van Hulstijn’s – and the NSIM’s – position in both the Dutch East Indies and metropolitan Netherlands. Early in the piece, Van Hulstijn had been inducted into the prestigious Orde van de Nederlandsche Leeuw [Order of the Netherlands Lion] quite explicitly because of his readiness – no doubt backed by his boss who was overseas at the time – to deploy the NISM’s steamers in support of the war effort.<sup>67</sup> Fraser’s turn came a year later: on Loudon’s and Levyssohn Norman’s recommendation he was similarly inducted – among other things, he was lauded as ‘not only a naturalised Dutchman but also Dutch in sympathy’ and as a ‘*moderne industriele baanbreker* [trail-blazer]’.<sup>68</sup>

Further illustrative of the way in which ‘peripheral’ businesspeople might embed themselves in the colonial communities to which they belonged – an embeddedness that underpinned their indispensability in the expanding global economy in which they were key social actors – was Fraser’s position in Java. Not only was he an associate of one of the colony’s leading mercantile concerns and the key figure in the local management of the NISM, but he was also a major colonial landowner in the fertile agricultural districts to the west of the colonial capital. He appears to have taken control of the estate (*particuliere landerijen*) called Tjikandi Oedek – it covered an area of some 18,000 hectares and by the 1890s had an Indonesian population of around 30,000, most of them rice-growing peasants – back in the 1860s. It had previously been in the hands of an old Indies-Dutch family, the Van Mottmans, who owned a string of other estates in the hill country to the south of the colonial capital and were clients of Maclaine Watson, to whom they were no doubt heavily indebted.

The estate may not have been particularly directly profitable for Fraser: available returns from the 1890s show dividends on capital (it had by that date been converted into a limited company or *naamloze vennootschap*) to have varied between 2,5 to 5 percent.<sup>69</sup> It did, however, confer a degree of status, albeit perhaps of an increasingly old-fashioned kind, in Dutch colonial society, and it was no accident that by the 1870s Fraser had taken to designating himself

67 Verbaal 9 June 1873/015 Kabinet ANMK.

68 Verbaal 8 May 1874/814 Kabinet Geheim ANMK. I am also grateful (as in many other matters relating to colonial people in the Indies) for information on the score of Fraser’s membership of the Orde kindly supplied from the expert resources of the late Peter Christiaans, formerly of the CBG, Den Haag.

69 In the late 1890s, the estate was formally owned by the Amsterdam-based Cultuurmij. Tjikandi Oedek, formed at the beginning of the decade, and operated with a stated capital of 600,000 guilders. See: *Handboek voor Cultuur- en Handelondernemingen in Nederlandsch Indië* (Amsterdam 1893-1940) 10 (1898) 418 and 632. For the Van Motman family, see *Nederlands Patriciaat*, 40 (1954) 314-324.

as a ‘landowner’ (*landeigenaar*) rather than as a merchant. Equally to the point, it may be safely assumed, his position as a substantial landed proprietor in the colony provided him with collateral superior to the liquid commercial assets of a purely mercantile enterprise. Moreover, Tjikandi’s country house (*landhuis*) provided the Fraser couple with some respite from the heat and stench of Batavia. Indeed, it was at this property that Julia van Citters, Alexander Fraser’s wife of some thirty years, died in February 1879.<sup>70</sup>

### Alexander Fraser: a cosmopolitan, transnational actor

In the preceding section of this paper, I sought to relate the vitality of family business to an evolving discussion about global convergence and divergence, and argued that the case of Alexander Fraser demonstrates how such businesses might ‘dig themselves in’ on the colonial ‘periphery’ to an extent that effectively insulated them from pressures from the metropolitan core. The final section of the paper, however, takes this discussion a step further, by suggesting (not for the first time) that a transnational perspective, as exemplified by Fraser’s business career, significantly complicates any narrative of ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ that sees the two as potentially in competition or conflict. Rather, it suggests that the impact of transnational social actors in the mercantile and entrepreneurial fields worked to harmonize the two. Alexander Fraser, as we have seen, was born in Aberdeen in 1816 and died in London some eighty-five years later. The intervening trajectory of his career, however, was essentially a transnational one that bound him to no particular state and no particular empire. He himself – and his business dealings over almost five decades – crossed both national and imperial boundaries, and for all that his Scots cultural background appears to have meant much to him personally (as evidenced, for example, by his keen adherence into old age to the Presbyterian Calvinism of his youth), he was an essentially cosmopolitan figure who associated closely with people of a variety of national and ethnic backgrounds. As such, he counted among his close associates not only fellow Scots, Dutchmen and other Western Europeans but also Sino-Indonesians from the key business communities of the Netherlands East Indies. This was true on a social as well as a business level. While some of his Scots contemporaries in the Maclaine Watson cohort regularly returned to their homeland to find their brides, he was among those who did not. His first marriage (as we have seen) took place in Java in 1849, and his partner, Julia van Citters, was a Dutch woman – almost certainly

70 Julia Fraser-van Citter’s [unidentified] death notice of 1879 is in the files of the Centraal Bureau voor Genealogie, Den Haag.

part Eurasian – who had been brought up in the Indian sub-continent. His second marriage took place in the United States, to an American woman, Emma Augusta Blackman-Nickerson (1847-1924) whom he would have known in Java prior to the death there of her Boston-born husband – Pliny Marshall Nickerson (1845-1879), the American consul in Batavia – that left her a widow with two young children to provide for. Moreover, although the newly-weds then settled permanently in London, the North American connection continued, with one of his wife’s nieces (a woman of almost her own age) living with them, in effect, as her companion. In the decade that followed their marriage, the three of them took an extended trip to India,<sup>71</sup> part vacation it would appear, but also part business, since Fraser was by this date on the board of the Chartered Mercantile Bank of India, London and China. This was a major transnational financial institution, founded in 1850s with a chain of branches and agencies throughout the ‘the East’<sup>72</sup>; his election to its board was explicitly on the grounds that he was ‘formerly of the firm of Maclaine Watson & Co of Batavia [...]. Their Java business [is] a large one, and Mr Fraser’s experience of business would be very valuable [...].’<sup>73</sup> He was in good company: inter alia, he was joined on the board during the course of the decade by people from Jardine Matheson and Jardine Skinner, two of the biggest European firms operating respectively on the ‘China Coast’ and in British India.<sup>74</sup>

In summary, the global business networks in which Fraser was embedded ranged across Western Europe to Asia and Australia. Fraser’s cosmopolitan persona and transnational connections were perhaps most interestingly in evidence, however, in relation to his connections to the upper echelons of the important Sino-Indonesian business communities in his main Asian base on Java itself. Long settled and often deeply acculturated, Sino-Indonesians (in colonial parlance ‘Indies-Chinese’) were an integral part of the economic life of late colonial Java, where leading Sino-Indonesian businesspeople played a major role in most mercantile transactions.

Fraser’s historically important – albeit tantalizingly slimly documented – ties with such people throws light not only on a highly

71 See *Homeward Mail from India, China and the East*, 7 March 1883. Under the heading ‘English Travellers in India’ and citing/quoting the *Times of India* of 16 February, the article remarked that India had replaced the continent as the place for the Grand Tour – and lists the eminent people presently there as tourists: ‘distinguished visitors bent on nothing more than pleasure, sport and sight-seeing’. They included ‘Mr Alexander Fraser, director of the Chartered Bank and the

Netherlands India Steam Navigation Company, Mrs Fraser and Miss Burbank’.

72 Stuart Muirhead, *Crisis Banking in the East: The History of the Chartered Mercantile Bank of India, London and China, 1853-93* (Aldershot 1996).

73 *London Daily News*, 21 April 1880.

74 Geoffrey Jones, *Merchants to Multinationals. British Trading Companies in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Oxford 2000) 233.

significant yet little studied dimension of the developing Dutch East Indies economy,<sup>75</sup> but also on Fraser's cosmopolitan credentials. In particular he and his wife, Julia van Citters, were evidently good friends with the Chinese *majoor* (Dutch-appointed community head) of Semarang, Be Biauw Tjoan (1824-1904).<sup>76</sup> Be was one of the colony's wealthiest Sino-Indonesian business people and held the Indies Government's concession (*pacht* or Farm) to retail throughout Central Java the opium that it imported in bulk from India and the Levant (and which was a major source of state revenue). Be's position as *majoor* conferred considerable power and prestige, but in the late 1860s he been suspended as such because of a strong suspicion on the part of the Dutch authorities that he was involved in the smuggling into the colony of 'illicit' opium, thereby cutting into the government's very considerable profits. It was a situation in which Be needed friends in the right places – and evidently he found them, for in 1872 Alexander Fraser – in Netherlands at the time, and in conjunction with the ex-Dutch East Indies high official Otto van Rees, himself a man of considerable influence in colonial circles<sup>77</sup> – lobbied James Loudon, the Governor-General designate who was about to leave for the Indies, on Be's behalf. Fraser's and Van Rees' effort was evidently successful: Be was restored as *majoor* in 1873, some twelve months into Loudon's term of office, ostensibly because of his charitable endeavours in famine relief on the north coast of Central Java in the preceding months.

How far the evident closeness of the personal ties between the Fraser and Be families reflected in this incident carried over from business dealings is something for which there is no surviving record.<sup>78</sup> It would be strange

75 Important recent findings are reported in Alexander Claver, *Dutch Commerce and Chinese Merchants in Java: Colonial Relationships in Trade and Finance 1800-1942* (Leiden 2014); for primarily twentieth century developments, see also the on-going work of the Dutch scholar Peter Post.

76 For information in this and the following paragraph, see Henk Boets, Jenny de Jong and C.A. Tamse (eds.), *Eer en Fortuin. Leven in Nederland en Indie, 1824-1900. Autobiografie van gouverneur-generaal James Loudon* (Amsterdam 2003) 308-309. For Be Biauw Tjoan, see James R. Rush, *Opium to Java. Revenue Farming and Chinese Enterprise in Colonial Indonesia, 1860-1910* (Ithaca and London 1990) 77-78 and 93-96.

77 See Fasseur, *Indisch-Gasten*, 113-151. Van Rees was subsequently to return twice to the Indies, first

as Vice-President of the Raad van Indië and then (1884-1888) as Governor-General.

78 Something of the closeness of the relationship between the Fraser couple and Be Biauw Tjoan – as well as the degree of their intimacy with the Governor-General – can be gauged from the postscript to this episode. Grateful for what Loudon had done for him, Be attempted to give the retiring Governor-General a valuable gift for his wife, Louise de Steurs, on the occasion of the couple's departure from Java in 1875 – a gift that Loudon, in his memoirs, tells us that he felt constrained to return. From the perspective of the present narrative, however, the significant part of the story was that Be himself, obviously well aware of the delicacy of the situation, had arranged for the gift to be delivered through the agency of Alexander Fraser's own wife, Julia van Citters. See Boets et al., *Eer en Fortuin*: 308-309.

indeed, however, if, as two of the colony's leading businessmen, Be Biauw Tjoan and Alexander Fraser simply 'knew each other socially'. Indeed, given the importance of the Maclaine Watson Concern's trade through Semarang, the centre of Sino-Indonesian mercantile and financial activity on the island, matters could hardly have been otherwise. Indeed in 1884 rumours circulated in Batavia, at the height of the sugar crisis of that year, that Maclaine Watson had drawn on a credit of a million guilders from Be, a rumour strongly (and successfully) refuted by then head of the firm in an interview with their chief – and as they claimed sole – financiers, the Java Bank.<sup>79</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper has sought to address a number of issues related to the development of a global trading economy in the second half of the nineteenth century. Its focus has been to emphasize the agency therein of individuals and family firms, and to outline, in however summary a fashion, something of the historical context which alone makes sense of the doings of social actors. In so going, it has identified the location of the paper's protagonist, Alexander Fraser, among a group of tightknit family mercantile concerns doing business in and between Southeast Asia and Western Europe in a period extending from the 1840s to the 1880s. It has also located Fraser in financial circles in London and the Low Countries and as an entrepreneur in steam-shipping and railway construction in and around the Netherlands East Indies. At the same time, the paper has argued that Fraser's extensive social and political connections, as well as simply economic standing, in the Indies adds an important dimension to our understanding of how family firms based on the colonial 'periphery' were able to successfully 'withstand' the centripetal pressure from the metropolitan 'core'. Yet, as is suggested in the paper's final section, the synergies between colony and metropole are arguably underrated in any such scenario, and social actors like Fraser are best seen as operating in a cosmopolitan and transnational context that significantly overrode 'core' and 'periphery' dichotomies.

79 See Archief Bank Indonesia/De Javasche Bank, Notatie: DJB 52; nr. 57 (26 November 1884) volgnummer 256-257. Notulen van de Vergadering der Directie van de Javasche Bank, 26 November 1884.

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