

## 'A Brief History of the Inconspicuous'

Since most business history—the best as well as the worst—relies on the patronage of long-established firms with well-known names, relatively little is known of other kinds of firms. Most simply fail after an ephemeral existence. But there is an intermediary category: those that succeed moderately for a generation or two before being absorbed, unsung, by more successful competitors, or else wound up or allowed to stagnate as their controllers diversity into other activities. Where the records of such firms survive they often offer a different perspective than those of the market leaders (and sometimes a new perspective on the market leaders!). All the firms examined in this paper are inconspicuous in this sense. Most are British manufacturing firms founded in the nineteenth century, each of which set up at least one overseas subsidiary in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, and none of which went on to form a fully-fledged multinational corporation. Almost all are, in addition, inconspicuous in a second sense, as producers of intermediate goods (metal window frames, weighing equipment, woven and printed textiles, labels for clothing, metal springs, etc.), and this second kind of obscurity partly explains the first, since their position in the middle of value-added chains exposed such firms to pressures from suppliers of raw materials and components as well as wildly varying effective rates of protection, while depriving them of the gains to be had from twentieth century advances in advertising. After considering the general predicament of such firms through a small group of cases, the paper goes on to develop the best-documented case, that of an East-Anglian manufacturer of broad silks for the fashion trade, which operated a factory in Ontario for over thirty years in the mid-twentieth century.

Charles Jones, Reader in International Relations, University of Cambridge.  
Centre of International Studies, 17 Mill Lane.  
Tel: 01223 335390 (c/o Centre of Latin American Studies, or 07801 428 023  
[caj26@cam.ac.uk](mailto:caj26@cam.ac.uk)

Jones is author of *International Business in the Nineteenth Century* (Harvester 1987) and of two articles in *Business History*: 'Great capitalists and the Direction of British Overseas Investment in the Late Nineteenth Century', XXII:2 (July 1980) and 'Institutional Forms of British Direct Investment in South America', XXXIX:2 (April 1997).