

## BOOK REVIEWS

BARKER, HANNAH. *The Business of Women. Female Enterprise and Urban Development in Northern England 1760–1830*. Oxford University Press, Oxford [etc.] 2006. vii, 189 pp. € 45.00.

PHILLIPS, NICOLA. *Women in Business 1700–1850*. The Boydell Press, Woodbridge 2006. 312 pp. £50.00; \$95.00. DOI: 10.1017/S0020859008013461

The history of women and work in early modern Europe is becoming an increasingly popular topic. In recent years, various case studies on the economic participation of women in the pre-industrial period have appeared, and these monographs by Hannah Barker and Nicola Phillips provide a welcome contribution to this field. Both studies focus on the role of women in business in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, but the authors each study a different geographical area and address different, albeit sometimes slightly overlapping, issues. As such, the books complement each other very well, and reading them (perhaps even simultaneously) is recommended to anyone interested in the experiences of women in early modern business life.

Barker's study, *The Business of Women*, focuses on the role of women in business in the three northern towns of Leeds, Sheffield, and Manchester. In the period Barker describes, 1760–1830, these towns underwent a radical transformation: rapid population growth, economic development, and, related to these, growing cultural diversity. It is Barker's assumption that it was precisely in these booming towns that women's involvement in business was most prominent. Based on a thorough analysis of trade directories, newspaper advertisements, and court records, Barker not only succeeds in showing in what businesses women were involved, but also how female entrepreneurs operated, and how they presented themselves in the public arena.

In *Women in Business* Phillips approaches the issue of female entrepreneurship from a slightly different angle. Central to Phillips's study is the question of how changing perceptions of gender influenced the role of women in business. Geographically, this study is less clearly focused than Barker's because the areas Phillips studies are determined mainly by her choice of sources. To study women's participation in business over a longer period she has chosen to focus on an analysis of the insurance policies of the Sun Fire Insurance Company, whose customers came predominantly from London, and to complement this with evidence from advertisements in a London newspaper. A case study of business networks of women in Durham serves as a counterbalance to the information on London. Like Barker, Phillips tries to find out more about these businesswomen than the trades they worked in, and she does a very good job in uncovering important aspects of female entrepreneurship, such as the legal context and how public opinion shaped women's involvement in business.

The strength of both studies is that they succeed in revealing the activities of lower-middle-class women in business. In debates on women and commercial enterprise, these women have hitherto largely been ignored. This is partly because of the difficulty of finding information on women from this social stratum for the pre-industrial period. However, as both Barker and Phillips convincingly show, long-term and comparative

analyses of female activities in small businesses is possible and, indeed, fruitful. Their results show that women were active mostly in the “feminine” segments of the economy, such as clothing, food and drink, and retailing, but also that differences existed according to the structure of the local economy and that, as time proceeded, the number of different individual trades in which women were involved expanded. Furthermore, as Barker points out, even though women were clustered in certain trades, they were nevertheless active in male-dominated occupations.

In this, their results reflect recent findings on female activity in early modern business on the European continent, but it is interesting that whereas some trades in pre-modern England might have been feminine, such as butchering, baking, and the grocers’ trade, in another European country that was very important in economic terms, the Dutch republic, these were strongly male-dominated trades. This striking difference might well be explained by the guild structure that characterized these occupations in the Dutch republic; in northern England male-dominated guilds were absent, a factor that Barker also acknowledges might have stimulated women’s economic opportunities.

Of great importance in determining the economic opportunities of women was their legal status. Historians have long relied on legal treatises to determine what leeway women had in the pre-industrial period, but until recently hardly anyone had analysed the actual impact of these treatises and the daily legal practice of women in business. It is precisely this issue that is tackled in both works, but predominantly by Phillips, who devotes three chapters of her book to the impact of the law on women in business. Phillips confronts the prescriptive literature with a broad range of evidence from court cases and Chancery bills and comes to very interesting conclusions that further some of the observations recently put forward by others working on related fields, such as Amy Erickson and Marjorie McIntosh.<sup>1</sup> Phillips unravels the mystery of the legal status of *femme sole trader* – a status that enabled married women to conduct a trade independent of their husbands – and illustrates that its purpose was more to enable couples to avoid financial liability than to encourage the economic activity of married women. Another important finding by Phillips is that, despite formal legal restrictions on the economic involvement of women, exceptions to and reinterpretations of the law created a flexibility that left plenty of room for women to engage in business, and that women were well aware of their scope for manipulating the legal system. The extensive evidence put forward by Phillips to show how women used this in securing their economic rights is complemented by Barker’s findings, which illustrate that women often used the legal system to their own financial advantage and that of their children.

A third central issue in both books concerns the actual operation of business, and both authors ask how women operated in business and whether they were restricted by cultural norms regarding their domestic role. Even though Phillips and Barker study these features in different ways and using different sources, they both conclude that lower-middle-class women were less constricted by the rising cult of domesticity than has long been assumed. Marriage did not mean the end of an independent business career, and women of all marital statuses engaged in commercial enterprise, either alone or in collaboration with others. Interestingly, in choosing business partners, women did not automatically prefer men to women, which illustrates even more clearly the ease with which women, even up until the

1. Amy Louise Erickson, “Coverture and Capitalism”, *History Workshop Journal*, 59 (2005), pp. 1–16; M.K. McIntosh, “The Benefits and Drawbacks of the *Femme Sole* Status in England, 1300–1630”, *Journal of British Studies*, 44 (2005), pp. 410–438.

mid-nineteenth century, could engage in business. Moreover, as Barker argues, an analysis of newspaper advertisements shows that, for women from the lower middle class, work was also crucial in defining their identity and social status.

Based on the above, one might almost conclude that the position of English women in small businesses in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was largely comparable to that of men. Women were present not only in various sectors of commercial enterprise, but also in various roles, and as proactive entrepreneurs. Because in both books a systematic comparison with the experiences of men in business is lacking, it is not always clear to what extent these differed from those of women. It is true that here and there the authors contrast their findings on women with those on men, but this is done only incidentally and hence does not really shed any light on the possible similarities or differences between businessmen and businesswomen. It also results in difficulties in interpreting and explaining why women worked more in the so-called feminine trades. The questions Barker poses in the conclusion to her chapter “Women’s Work and Urban Development” on the reasons why women did not often engage in manufacturing might have been easier to answer had her focus been not only on women but also on men, and if in analysing the activities of businesswomen she had made a more systematic distinction between women of different marital statuses and social backgrounds, assuming that differences existed according to wealth even within the social group of the lower middle class.

Setting up a business requires not just skills, as Barker acknowledges, but also financial capital, and there might have been significant differences in this between the various trades. Unfortunately, Phillips’s study does not help us much here either. Finally, as both studies focus primarily on economically expanding areas, the question of how economic development influenced female entrepreneurship is not answered in a very satisfying way; comparing three towns each with a different economic structure (as Barker does) or comparing London with a rather limited analysis of female business networks in Durham (as Phillips does) is not enough to provide a full understanding of the relationship between economic trends and the involvement of women in business.

Nevertheless, despite these reservations, it must be said that both Phillips and Barker have done pioneering work and have succeeded in significantly revising the persistent image of the limited role of lower-middle-class women in business, an image based largely on Davidoff and Hall’s influential study *Family Fortunes*.<sup>2</sup> As Phillips and Barker show, far from being a “hidden investment” in business women from the English lower middle classes formed a substantial and prominent element within the business world. The fact that both authors arrive at this conclusion despite taking a different route in their investigations makes it even more compelling.

Danielle van den Heuvel

Mining Women. Gender in the Development of a Global Industry, 1670 to 2005. Ed. by Jaclyn J. Gier and Laurie Mercier. Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke [etc.] 2006. x, 355 pp. £42.00. DOI: 10.1017/S0020859008023468

Academic discourse and popular culture have engrained images, albeit scattered and sometimes simplistic, of mining women. From Mother Mary Jones, who marched mine

2. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (Chicago, IL, 1987).