

Urban Achievement in Early Modern Europe: Golden Ages in Antwerp, Amsterdam and London. *Edited by Patrick O'Brien, Derek Keene, Marjolein 't Hart, and Herman Van Der Wee.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 376 pp. Photographs, tables, graphs. Cloth, \$64.95. ISBN 0-521-59408-1.

Reviewed by Wim Klooster

This collection attempts to clarify the concept of “a golden age” or of a “rise and decline” for three cities in early modern Europe: Antwerp, Amsterdam, and London. The main question it raises is why achievements tended to cluster in these cities when they did. The authors agree that the three golden ages they examine formed a chain: Antwerp’s heyday was roughly from 1490 to 1585 (although there was a brief economic revival in the seventeenth century), and Amsterdam’s lasted until 1672. The subsequent era of London’s efflorescence is apparently more difficult to pinpoint, as the city experienced several periods of rise and decline.

The book consists of five sections, each containing three essays that deal with achievements in various fields: economics, architecture, art, science, and publishing. It is clear that economic growth was invariably the key to success, but how exactly did commercial and industrial growth enable achievements in the other fields? The rising incomes of middle groups in society were obviously critical. They were instrumental, for instance, in the creation of mass markets for paintings in Amsterdam and London. In this context, Maarten Jan Bok cites the theory of American economist William N. Goetzmann that prices paid for rare works of art tend to correlate with those for stocks and shares. Bok agrees but finds that Goetzmann fails to explain why there was a sudden dramatic increase in the number of artists active in the Dutch Republic. Bok suggests conspicuous consumption may have been important in the early stages.

The middle class was not the only big spender. Boom times also facilitated municipal patronage. “Cities,” as Marjolein ‘t Hart reminds us in the opening line of her essay (p. 128), “are concentrations of wealth and power,” and the governments of both Antwerp and Amsterdam used one to display the other, as the city-states of Renaissance Italy had done before them. London’s city fathers aspired to even more than expression of status through built form. It was their intention, Judy Loach writes, “that by physically imposing order upon the City the national economy would prosper” (p. 152).

The heydays not only succeeded each other but were linked as well: Antwerp's demise helped produce Amsterdam's rise, as large-scale immigration from Antwerp and Dutch blockades of the city benefited Holland's entrepôt. The effects were felt in several sectors: in the publishing industry, as the main booksellers in Amsterdam around 1600 came from the southern Netherlands; in art, as the arriving Antwerpers helped Amsterdam gain artistic excellence by introducing new genres; and architecture. Similarly, the rapid improvement of painting and drawing in late-seventeenth-century London was largely brought about by the scores of Dutch painters who had crossed the English Channel after a stock market crisis hit their home country in the 1670s. At the same time, the artistic development of Antwerp and Amsterdam shows that imported innovations cannot explain everything. The essays by Hans Vlieghe and Maarten Jan Bok indicate that domestic religious conditions have to be taken into account as well in answering the question of why, artistically, these towns were going in opposite directions by the late sixteenth century. While art sales in Antwerp declined as church decoration was brought in line with the principles of the Catholic Reformation, the Reformation led to a shift in Amsterdam (and other Dutch towns) from church patronage to a market system, thus increasing potential demand.

In his useful introductory essay, editor Patrick O'Brien sums up the conditions for prosperity: golden ages

came to cities well endowed by location; prepared by histories of physical and human capital accumulation; actively engaged in regional, international and intercontinental trade; and enjoying some degree of autonomy from potentially coercive and predatory states. Upswings in achievement were sustained by cultures forged in adversity, which fostered cooperation among their citizens and a vigorously competitive and mercantilist stance towards rival cities (p. 17).

While this ensemble of essays convincingly demonstrates the genesis of greatness, it is less clear about the reasons for, and modes of, decline. How come the momentum was lost? Was decline relative or absolute? Amsterdam's case seems most clear cut: after the 1672 crash of the stock market, the prices for luxury products, including paintings, dropped so much that masters could no longer produce profitably at the current price level. Architecture had reached its ceiling by the 1680s, when population stagnation could no longer permit excessive spending, and around the same time compulsory cutbacks in expenditure reduced the number of Amsterdam professorships dramatically. Warfare exacerbated economic problems, as it had done for Antwerp almost a century earlier. However, the reasons leading to Antwerp's eclipse are hardly discussed in the book. There are only brief references to a financial collapse in the wake of Spain's bankruptcy in 1557 and the exodus of 1585, which followed the Habsburg conquest of the city.

The decline in London is not investigated at all, presumably because it falls outside the scope of the book. But that is a minor shortcoming. This highly informative, well prepared, and coherent collection is recommended to all students of early modern business history. May it open up a new field of comparative golden-age studies.

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