

*A Nation of Shopkeepers: Five Centuries of British Retailing. Edited by John Benson and Laura Ugolini.* London: I. B. Tauris, 2003. x + 270 pp. Index, notes, illustrations, tables. Cloth, \$65.00; paper, \$24.50. ISBN: cloth 1-860-64709-X; paper 1-860-64708-1.

Reviewed by Christine M. Clark

Recent years have seen a growing interest in the history of retailing. Yet the emphasis has remained upon a relatively narrow range of issues: large-scale enterprises, the achievements of outstanding entrepreneurs, and, notably, the rise from the mid-nineteenth century of department and multiple stores. This collection of essays, including the work of retail geographers and scholars of management studies, breaks the mold. An excellent introduction by the two editors reviews the existing literature and current state of research and fits the contributions into historical context. Thereafter the essays are divided into three sections.

The first section, "Representations," takes a largely cultural approach, focusing upon the importance of cultural identities in explaining patterns of retail change and development. This is clearly illustrated in the opening chapter, where Nancy Cox examines the negative attitudes toward commerce and retailing during the early modern period; most arose from fears about the detrimental impact on the balance of trade of importing luxuries. The second and third chapters describe commercial discourse and retailers' efforts to attract customers. Claire Walsh considers the shopping galleries of early modern London. While retailers and managers sought to use the galleries' exclusivity and sophistication to increase their commercial viability, visitors to these grandiose buildings were as much concerned with socializing as with shopping. Indeed, for the elite, the galleries were places where it was necessary to be seen. Moving to the end of the nineteenth century, Laura Ugolini investigates how retailers' newspaper advertisements exploited widely held images of desirable male lifestyles to endorse their products. The more hedonistic pleasures of consumption, she reckons, were important components of late Victorian and Edwardian masculinity, besides the better-known qualities of moral, athletic, religious, and imperial manliness.

The chapters in the second section, “Patterns and Processes,” adopt a more quantitative approach to examine trends that challenge conventional models of retail development. Sheryllynne Haggerty uses trade directories, parish registers, and newspapers to chart the rise of female-run, small-scale retailers—grocers, victuallers, and general shopkeepers—in late-eighteenth-century Liverpool. The acknowledged weaknesses of the sources mean any conclusions almost certainly understate women’s participation. Nevertheless, the survey demonstrates that, at a time when changing attitudes threatened women’s role in business, they were able to maintain a foothold in the developing consumer society. Andrew Alexander, Gareth Shaw, and Deborah Hodson draw on research from a wider project to explore locational strategies of British multiple retailers between 1850 and 1939. Focusing on the grocery and provisions and variety-store trades in three regions, their findings diverge from those of earlier studies, as they argue that regional variations in the pace and nature of retail change became more marked over time. At the firm level, the research stressed the link between locational and other corporate strategies, as well as institutional and environmental change. John Stobart similarly emphasizes the importance of local circumstances in his study of retail provision in the North Staffordshire Potteries Conurbation. Also using data from trade directories, he analyzes the role of multiple retailers and department stores in structuring the city center between 1872 and 1932. He concludes, not surprisingly, given what he describes as the “peculiar—even unique—geography” of the region, that large-scale retailers were of less significance than has been generally believed. In this case, the presence of strong shopping centers within the conurbation contributed to Hanley’s persistent weakness as a regional retail center.

The final section of the volume, “Property, Politics and Communities,” provides some of the most pathbreaking research, not least because it emphasizes the importance of placing the development of retailing in the wider social, economic, and political context. Michael Winstanley sets out to answer the question, who owned shops? Based on a little-used Inland Revenue Valuation of c.1909–14, his survey of three Lancashire towns reveals that, contrary to the accepted doctrine, most shopkeepers were not part of a propertied petite bourgeoisie, but were, in fact, tenants, renting their premises from small-scale landlords or, increasingly, from large-scale organizations, such as local authorities

and cooperative societies. Focusing on the development of Manchester's leading department store, Kendal Milne & Company, Helle Bertramsen examines the link between municipal politics and the wider process of urban improvement. Acquired in 1836, Kendal Milne grew steadily by absorbing adjacent properties, but by the late 1860s it was threatened with demolition by municipal street-improvement schemes. After fighting the case all the way to the House of Lords, the owners nevertheless used their substantial compensation to create a modern, multipurpose emporium, comparable to the best London "houses." Far from being the result of innovative commercial ideas, modernity had been forced upon the business by local government.

Finally, an outstanding chapter by Richard Coopey and Dilwyn Porter examines the role of the agency system in the post-World War II success of the "Big Five" mail-order firms. Against a background of rising working-class incomes, neighborhood-based spare-time agents were used to exploit the enormous commercial potential of the preexisting social networks to which the agents themselves belonged. By the mid-1970s, it was estimated that over 70 percent of U.K. households looked at mail-order catalogs.

The editors claim that this collection of essays represents some of the most innovative research currently being undertaken in the field of retailing history. In many respects, this claim is justified. The book brings together scholars from interrelated fields, who offer a refreshingly broad approach to the subject; several exploit little-used sources and provide useful pointers for future research. The choice of the book's title is, however, somewhat less appropriate, for it is predominantly concerned with the modern period. Of the nine essays in the volume, six take as their subject the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries; another reports on the late eighteenth: the book scarcely portrays *five centuries* of British retailing. Nonetheless, the volume is otherwise well organized and will be appreciated by those interested in the development of retailing and in the broader history of consumption.

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