

Hosiery and Knitwear: Four Centuries of Small-Scale Industry in Britain, c.1589–2000. By Stanley L. Chapman. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2003. xiv + 328 pp. Index, notes, photographs, illustrations, tables. Cloth, £55.00. ISBN 0-199-25567-9.

Reviewed by Giorgio Riello

The history of hosiery and knitwear has not received the same degree of attention as other textiles, notably cotton or wool. This is surely a major gap in the history of British textile production, particularly if we consider that in 1975 more than two-thirds of all fabrics were knitted. Stanley L. Chapman has written a thorough, detailed study of the subject, beginning with the invention of the stocking frame by William Lee in 1589 and continuing up to the present day. *Hosiery and Knitwear* is based on more than thirty years of dedicated research and covers, with an amazing degree of precision, the productive, financial, technological, and marketing changes in the sector over the course of more than four centuries.

As Chapman observes in his introduction, the history of hosiery and knitwear “is a distinct story of its own: more small-scale, more evolutionary, more craft based, more fashion conscious, and (culturally speaking) more parochial” than the course followed by other textiles (p. xxi). He develops this theme over the space of eight chapters, following a straightforward chronology of the developmental stages in the first six and dedicating the final two, respectively, to Marks and Spencer and the impact of globalization on knitwear. The narrative traces an industry that, during the eighteenth century, was dominated by banks and merchant-entrepreneurs and, during the nineteenth, was largely ruled by wholesalers. It concludes with an overview of the rise, in the twentieth century, of influential retailers and chain shops, such as Marks and Spencer, C&A, and British Home Stores.

Chapman shows how Lee’s early technological breakthrough generated a thriving cottage industry coordinated by an emerging merchant elite. These early entrepreneurial dynasties spearheaded the development of the new fabrics, especially in Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire, during the eighteenth century. The period from the 1730s to the 1820s was not short of technical inventions, but the industry operated mainly in the domestic

arena well into the nineteenth century. The author demonstrates how technological determinism was superseded by market conditions, including fashion changes, family strategies, and established equilibrium in the sector. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, production and distribution were transformed, and the industry's structure shifted from "full fashion" to "cut and sew," impelled largely by the arrival of "populuxe" products. As new fashions contributed to the success of knitted goods, such as hose and stockings, London, with its enormous warehousing system, provided the means for expansion of the sector's distributive and financial networks.

Chapman convincingly explains the peculiar link between technology, fashion, and product innovation during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The uniqueness of knitwear stems not only from the enormous variety of goods produced through this process but also from the fact that its fabrics and garments are produced simultaneously. Technological innovation is thus strictly tied to fashion, and vice versa. The "fall of the hose" and the "rise of . . . underwear" in the nineteenth century, and the introduction of synthetic fibers, such as rayon and nylon, in the twentieth century, had a profound impact on the direction taken by knitwear. Continuous technological innovation and fashion changes explain the survival of smaller units of production well into the twentieth century. Although the expansion of the knitwear market in the interwar period was led by major manufacturers and retail chains, it allowed smaller producers to prosper as well.

Chapman devotes the two final chapters to recent changes in the sector. Marks and Spencer was the single most important player in its post-World War II story. In the late 1990s, the store sold more than half of the United Kingdom's output of knitted underwear. This achievement was the result of the firm's long-established leadership in mass retailing of clothes, which it accomplished through the in-house brand, "St Michael." The "special relationship" that had grown up between some major U.K. producers and Marks and Spencer became risky in the 1980s, as competition intensified and consumer taste diversified. By then it was clear that British firms had excelled in the production of long runs at low costs and were narrowly concentrated on chain stores. New High Street shops, such as the Italian Benetton and the U.K. Next (clothing), or chains, such as Sock Shop, Tie Rack, or Sweater Shop, had begun to respond successfully to new consumer preferences.

Chapman's book tells a complex tale that concentrates on peaks and troughs, with a heavy accent on decline. The story of the last fifty years reflects a growing paralysis of entrepreneurial and technological vigor. The downsizing of Marks and Spencer's in 1998 revealed the weaknesses of the United Kingdom's knitting industry in a globalized environment.

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