

The European Linen Industry in Historical Perspective. *Edited by Brenda Collins and Philip Ollerenshaw*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. Illustrations, figures, glossary, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$95.00. ISBN: 0-199-25565-2.

Reviewed by Katrina Honeyman

The significance of the role played by linen in early European manufacturing was such that, to paraphrase Hobsbawm, “Whoever says protoindustrialization says linen.” The production of linen cloth, a heterogeneous textile, predated cotton, and then complemented and happily coexisted with it, for example, in the making of fustians, launching the newer product into global industrial and trading significance. Though overshadowed by the expanding cotton industry through the nineteenth century, linen production continued in much of Europe, with pockets still present to this day, demonstrating a flexibility and diversity evident from the outset. For such an important industry, and despite being center stage in the various theoretical discussions of protoindustrialization, its history has been subjected to surprisingly little empirical investigation.

This collection therefore constitutes a particularly welcome addition to the literature. Expertly framed by a thoughtful and highly informative editors’ introduction, aspects of the European industry and its colonial American trading partners are explored. There is no unifying thematic or structural approach, yet each contribution provides a piece to an as yet incomplete jigsaw, and together they indicate that the history of linen is a fruitful area of research. The chapters are organized chronologically, beginning with a speculative account of the industry’s very early history demonstrated through the retrieval of ancient textile artifacts and revealing, for example, the existence of flax processing and weaving in the Viking Age. Many of the remaining contributions explore the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, conventionally seen as the golden age of linen. David Mitchell’s fascinating and beautifully illustrated discussion of design in the context of the European-wide diffusion of damask weaving, to satisfy the top end of the market, indicates the necessity not only for expert designers and skilled weavers but also for fine, evenly spun yarn, which was not available everywhere. The heterogeneity of

linen production, satisfying a range of market segments, is suggested not only by Mitchell's contribution but also by Robert duPlessis's engaging analysis of the colonial American market for British textiles, which was shaped by age, income, and position; by Adrienne Hood's demonstration that the variegated market of Pennsylvania was satisfied by a combination of domestically produced and imported linen goods—the latter financed by the export of flaxseed to Ireland; and in Beverly Lemire's analysis of consumer choice in the eighteenth century, which also shows the complementary paths of linen and cotton, before the latter surged ahead at the turn of the century. At least two of the contributions offer explicit historiographical revisions: Brian Mackey's attempt to ascertain the precise nature of Louis Crommelin's influence—supportive and enthusiastic but not fundamental—generally confirms W. H. Crawford's pioneering work of the 1960s; and Jane Gray's explanation for the distinct perceptions of the value of Irish, Scottish, and Flemish linen industries by numerous theories of protoindustrialization. In this respect, Gray's work interacts neatly with that of Inger Jonsson, whose study of early-nineteenth-century Sweden suggests that rural linen production took a variety of forms, which fail to fit neatly into established theoretical constructs. Both authors argue, but, sadly, without much illustrative material, that the root of production differences within and between regions may lie in variations in the division of labor between genders and the degree to which interaction between household and market was affected by gender issues. Filling particular gaps are Karl Ditt's exploration of German linen—once the economy's most important sector—up to its eventual demise and Peter Solar's close examination of Irish and Belgian linen firms, which displayed a longevity superior to that found in other contemporary textile enterprises. Adopting a robust economist's approach and focusing on business structure, Solar's chapter is more typical of British business history than others in this collection. Institutional arrangements are considered by Alastair Durie in the context of early-nineteenth-century debate over government interference in the Scottish linen industry, and by Philip Ollerenshaw, whose argument that early-twentieth-century attempts to confront the weaknesses in the Irish industry, which included coordination of activity by trade associations, were inadequate and belated.

Wide ranging as this collection is, it may seem churlish to identify omissions. But it contains disappointingly little discussion of the industry in eastern Europe, for example, where linen production formed the basis of many livelihoods. Equally, detailed attention to the nature of the work it entailed is only rarely evident. This collection is neither comprehensive nor analytically coherent, nor was it intended to be. It offers pieces of original research, based on imaginative use of source material, and adopts perspectives informed by a variety of disciplines. Business history in the United Kingdom, traditionally underpinned by economic theory, has been informed less by the sociological and anthropological approaches followed more commonly in the United States. This work marks progress toward a convergence of disciplines that can only enrich industrial and business history. Approaches from the fields of art and design history, archaeology, and, in an understated way, gender history, which are employed in this collection, are clearly valuable in deepening our understanding of the nature and evolution of business structures. This work offers business and textile historians both new knowledge and stimulating prospects for future research.

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