

Les Entrepreneurs du Second Empire [The entrepreneurs of the Second Empire]. By *Dominique Barjot, et al.* Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris–Sorbonne, 2003. 224 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, figures, appendix, notes, Paper, €25.00. ISBN: 2-8405-0293-3.

Reviewed by Michael S. Smith

Large collaborative projects have long been a hallmark of the French historical profession. One of the largest and longest-running of such projects in the area of business history was launched some twenty-five years ago to produce a multivolume biographical dictionary of French entrepreneurs in the mid-nineteenth century modeled on the *Dictionary of British Business Biography*. Early on, the project editors, led by Dominique Barjot, decided to organize the dictionary by regions rather than by sectors of the economy. The first volume, on the entrepreneurs of the Nord, edited by Frédéric Barbier, appeared in 1988. Volumes covering Normandy, Maine, Anjou, Burgundy, and the Franche-Comté followed in 1991. By 2003 nine of the sixteen projected volumes had appeared with 675 of the anticipated 1,500 entries.

It is hard to overestimate the value of these volumes for research in French business history. As recently as the 1970s there was no easy way to find reliable biographical information on even the most prominent French merchants, bankers, and industrialists of the nineteenth century. Worse, it was hard to determine who the most important businessmen in a given region or industry were. Today all that has changed, thanks largely to this biographical dictionary. Yet providing a useful tool to researchers was never the sole aim of Barjot and his collaborators. They also hoped to create a database to support quantitative analysis that would eventually yield a new “typology of patronal behavior, going beyond the traditional Marxist, Weberian, and Schumpeterian analyses, [and would] provide a better appreciation of regional development and the diversity of French capitalism” (pp. 12–13). This volume—a collection of papers and reports presented at a one-day conference in 1999—represents a first attempt to make good on these lofty ambitions. It also takes

stock of the entire project at midcourse and includes a list of the 777 businessmen profiled in the eleven volumes of the dictionary that had been published, or were about to be published, in 2003.

At the heart of the book are efforts by the editors of the completed volumes to draw composite portraits of the business elites of their respective regions or cities. Reflecting the kind of data collected for the individual biographies, which emphasized family background, education, religion, and civic activities, these contributions tend to address questions about social dynamics rather than business management: were the regional business communities dominated by newcomers or established families in the years between 1850 and 1870 (that is, were the elites open or closed)? Were the leading businessmen homegrown or of “foreign” origin? Most important, how similar or different in social composition and behavior were the various local and regional business elites?

For most regions and most issues, the biographical data confirm what we already knew from previous studies. The Alsatian business elite, for example, once again appears to have been unique on virtually every score (heavily Protestant and “dynastic,” technologically innovative and paternalistic, with a much higher level of formal education and much greater involvement in civic and cultural affairs than businessmen in other parts of France). The data also seem to confirm what Claude Fohlen and Jean-Pierre Chaline said long ago about a “Norman model” of entrepreneurial behavior. (In contrast to the Alsatians, the Normans eschewed higher education and technical innovation, and there were few long-lived family firms in Normandy, because successful businessmen there invested their money in landed estates and in living the life of country gentlemen, rather than in setting their sons up in business.) Similarly confirmed are the familiar images of the business elite of Marseille and Lyon (the former ethnically and religiously eclectic, featuring a large contingent of newly arrived foreigners, highly enterprising and open to new ideas; the latter more conservative, devoutly Catholic, and dominated by established families by the mid-nineteenth century).

In addition to supporting the conventional wisdom on some points, these regional studies also contain surprises. Some businessmen are shown to have been

more dynamic and innovative than previously thought, notably the metallurgists of the Franche-Comté and the merchants and shipowners of Bordeaux. (In one of the most interesting contributions, Hubert Bonin rehabilitates the image of the supposedly lethargic Bordelais by favorably comparing their achievements to those of the Marseillais.) Another surprise concerns the presence of foreigners and outsiders in various regions. Nicolas Stoskopf shows that among the ninety-three leading bankers and financiers in Paris, 54 percent had origins east of the Meuse and 38 percent came from outside France. Alsace similarly experienced an infusion of foreign talent: one-third of the leading figures under the Second Empire belonged to families that had arrived from Switzerland or Germany since 1800. By contrast, virtually all the leading businessmen in the department of the Nord were locally bred, in spite of the department's border location.

In summing up the results of the regional analyses, François Crouzet seconds Michel Hau's conclusion that France played host to not one but many capitalisms during the Second Empire, and he goes on to assert (p. 190) that the collective biography project has served to rehabilitate "at least in part" the image of the nineteenth-century French *patronat*. While the claim seems justified by the evidence presented in this volume, one should resist reading too much into the data collected on what remains a rather idiosyncratic sample of the upper echelons of the French business community during one twenty-year span of the nineteenth century. In the end, it will be the high-quality company histories now appearing in profusion and industrial studies spanning the entire century, rather than the biographical dictionary of the Second Empire, that will play the crucial role in providing a full understanding of the performance of French entrepreneurs in the nineteenth century.

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