

The Mercery of London: Trade, Goods and People, 1130–1578. *By Anne F. Sutton.* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005. xvii + 670 pp. Tables, figures, appendix, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$144.95. ISBN: 0-754-65331-5.

Reviewed by Richard Goddard

Anne Sutton's clear and detailed history of the mercery trade in London succeeds in charting the development of one of the most influential trades of the medieval period. Through an exhaustive study of a wide range of surviving records, the book very effectively analyzes this trade, the mercers' rise to a dominant position, and their ultimate demise in the late sixteenth century. The book is well structured with particularly helpful early chapters on the definition of mercery, which came to refer to those who dealt in luxury textiles, and the variety of mercery goods available to customers. For example, the sources and production of all the various mercery goods are traced throughout the period covered. The comparative discussions of mercers' shops in London and Paris in the thirteenth century and of the trade from the perspective of popular literature are contrasted with the more prosaic evidence of taxation records. This is all effectively achieved and gives a cogent impression of the manufacturing side of the business in the thirteenth century. Particular, and welcome, attention is given to women's contribution to the manufacturing side of the craft in the thirteenth century.

Sutton discusses craft guilds, immigration to London, and the development of the mercers' company in the fourteenth century, particularly the significant changes that occurred in the trade during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Contemporary distinctions between the manufacturing side of the craft and the distributive branch of the trade, which emerges at this key period, are identified and discussed in some detail. Sutton identifies the fifteenth century, when the mercers become dominant players in English overseas trade to the Low Countries, as the company's golden age. As the century progressed, the mercers' company took an increasing share of London's valuable cloth export business and became dominant players in English overseas trade to the Low Countries. The mercers' foreign-trade exploits during the expansive period of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries are

described in detail, including the techniques they used, the markets they sold in, and the wealth they often individually amassed. Sutton expertly describes the nature of the trade, its policies of protectionism, and its role in the luxury end of the market. The nature of the surviving medieval documents, composed largely of company accounts of the period, dictates the necessity of paying considerable attention to the administration of the mercers' company in the fifteenth century and of devoting space to the responsibilities of the company's wardens.

Sutton does not simply discuss the commercial aspects of medieval mercery in London but, quite appropriately, explores the important links between business and politics in effective sections on mercers as diplomats, their role in national politics, and the impact of fifteenth-century warfare upon the mercers' business. Also discussed is the mercers' rise to prominence among the merchant adventurers in the Low Countries and their various conflicts with other mercantile textile craftsmen, such as the Shearmen and Fullers—crafts guilds of artisans engaged in two of the stages of the cloth manufacturing process—in order to maintain their dominant market position. But perhaps most important is the analysis of the company's relationship with the monarchy. Sutton makes it clear that both commercial adroitness and nimble political maneuvering were necessary in the commercial milieu of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Venturing beyond politics, in another demonstration of the breadth of her research, she examines religion and religious change in the mid-sixteenth century, particularly the charitable responsibilities undertaken by the mercers in the 1560s and 1570s. In one chapter compressed into twenty pages, Sutton takes up the topic of the mercers' reaction to the religious upheaval of the Reformation. The Reformation is important in this context, because all medieval craft guilds, including the mercers, possessed religious functions. Her handling of this subject demonstrates, first, her ability to engage with wider social issues of the period and, second, her refusal to be constrained by traditional chronological demarcations of “medieval” or “early modern.”

The final chapters deal with the sixteenth century. In this section, the author looks in detail at overseas trade, the mercers' staple business, their changing relations with a more meddlesome monarchy, and ultimately the contraction of the business in the 1570s, not least because of increasing competition in the linen import trade and its changing

direction and emphasis. The company's contraction was reflected in the falling numbers of new members and its declining wealth, which increasingly limited its political effectiveness as fewer mercers became mayors or aldermen of London in the later sixteenth century. The conclusion neatly sums up this long and convoluted history and suggests that this one company, and the trade it undertook, had a disproportionately large impact upon England's economy. By the end of the fifteenth century, the mercers were the richest and most powerful of the companies and had the highest proportion of members holding important civic offices. Sutton goes further and suggests that mercers "made a considerable contribution to the commercialisation of England" (p. 511) and that their attempts to bar low-born villeins, peddlers, and craftsmen from their ranks in the mid-fourteenth century in order to establish themselves as a mercantile, landed elite of good birth were ultimately successful in the sixteenth century. The appendices supplement the study with transcripts of ordinances and prosopographical entries on benefactors, company wardens (and documents relating to the election of those wardens), and mercer mayors.

This is Anne Sutton's magnum opus. The book wholly succeeds in its task of clarifying in detail the long and complex history of the medieval mercers and their company and clearly demonstrates Sutton's extensive knowledge of the trade as previously demonstrated in her other work on this topic. As such it sits well within the tradition of Sylvia Thurpp's *Merchant Class of Medieval London* (1948), or, more recently, Pamela Nightingale's similarly extensive survey, *A Medieval Mercantile Community: The Grocers' Company and the Politics and Trade of London, 1000–1485* (1995), while at the same time linking effortlessly with John Munroe's work on the cloth trade in England and northwestern Europe. The extensive use of sources from the Low Countries and France is impressive and helps to place the London mercery trade in a broader European context. The book might have benefited from a discussion of the wider economic or commercial context of the mercers' development. For example, the mercers' fifteenth-century golden age took place during a period of widespread economic decline, yet this wider commercial backdrop and its effect on their trade are not discussed. Nonetheless, this is an important study that will stand as the core text on

London's mercers for some considerable time. It will be of interest, and is highly recommended, to all those interested in medieval business, particularly the cloth trade.

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