

The Business of Women: Female Enterprise and Urban Development in Northern England, 1760–1830. By *Hannah Barker*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. xi + 189 pp. Tables, illustrations, appendix, notes, index. Cloth, \$85.00. ISBN: 0-19-929971-4.

Reviewed by Jane Humphries

In 1833, Betty Bohanna, who for many years had run a circulating library in Manchester, England, married a bookseller called Daniel Heywood. The marriage was unhappy, and the couple separated. Thereafter, Daniel became lackadaisical in his business habits and often neglected his shop, leaving it unattended while he strolled around Manchester or rode on one of the new omnibuses. During one of his absences, his estranged wife raided the shop and carried away many books, which she used to stock a rival establishment of which she was proprietor. Daniel retired from business soon thereafter, while Betty went on to become a successful bookseller.

This is one of the many dramas that unfold in Hannah Barker's excellent book, dramas that display the tensions between people's business interests, economic well-being, family relations, and even sexual attractions. But the colorful anecdotes rest on a firm foundation of detailed archival work, which Barker uses to construct a picture of lower-middle-class women's involvement in businesses in Manchester, Leeds, and Sheffield in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.

Barker's research occupies the intersection of three important historical topics: women and business; the growth of the urban economy; and the role of small-scale firms in British industrialization. Although her work is relevant to students of all three topics, Barker's main concern is with the extent and importance of women's role in small-scale, usually family-owned, businesses. Her study stands alongside other recent accounts of women as property owners, employees, and entrepreneurs that have queried the extent to which the law limited women's economic activities and forced their dependence on men; in the process, these studies have refined the now classic depiction of women's nineteenth-century retreat from the public to the private sphere. The "separate-spheres" hypothesis associated with Leonore Davidoff and

Catherine Hall's *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850*, first published in 1987, profoundly influenced historical research on women's role in family firms. While the argument that the development of capitalism was associated with women's retreat from business to a more exclusively domestic role has been qualified by many recent studies, it retains its status as the dominant historical paradigm that must be addressed by any new research. Barker's work provides another (respectful) check to the separate-spheres argument.

Hitherto, most business historians (following Davidoff and Hall) have focused on the comparatively wealthy middle class. Barker considers a fresh constituency: modest property owners. Her contribution is to show that women of this social and economic milieu were not in retreat from the world of business. They were active in the management and functioning of firms, and often sought to retain their power and authority even in the face of apparent opposition and in contradistinction to the gender stereotypes imagined from an unqualified reading of "separate spheres."

As Barker herself notes, one obstacle to research on women's economic activities is the absence of reliable statistical sources. Yet much innovative research has been done by making the most of the evidence available. The census has its uses, though Barker takes the view, common in this literature, that it underestimates women's participation. More relevant to Barker's focus on women's business activities are the various studies based on fire-insurance records, particularly Leonard Schwarz's and Peter Earle's classic work on London, subsequently extended geographically by Margaret Hunt and over time by Nicola Pullin. Relevant too, though not mentioned by Barker, is Alison Kay's study of women business proprietors, which drew on insurance records, trade cards, and census enumeration. But although fire-insurance records constitute a rich source, they remain geographically limited, as most policies covered properties in London and the south. Barker's welcome geographic switch to the cities of the industrializing north has required the identification of an alternative source: trade directories for Manchester, Sheffield, and Leeds. Although others have used directories to document women's economic activities, Barker's work is exceptional for its systematic evaluation of several different years. Since trade directories constitute her major source, she probes their strengths and weaknesses, in this way providing useful direction for other potential users. While they did not represent

complete censuses, directories did attempt to record the urban business community and thus to provide the best coverage of the middling sort available to historians.

Evidence from the directories is summarized in tables showing the relative frequency with which women appeared by occupation and by product provided. Barker concludes that although women were more likely to engage in feminine trades, they were not barred from other areas of middling economic life in the growing cities. Nor was there evidence of a decline in women's involvement as the nineteenth century progressed. While supporting Barker's conclusions, these descriptive statistics would have become more interest had the material been used to construct indices of segregation, which could then have been tested to see whether they varied by time and place. The intriguing suggestion that the northern cities may have differed from older market towns such as Oxford, where guild control of the apprenticeship system was stronger, deserves further comparative research.

The directories are not Barker's only source. She also uses court records from the superior courts of Exchequer and the Chancery court of the Palatine of Lancaster in her chapter on family, property, and power. But, as she acknowledges, court records capture relations within family businesses at their most bitter. Diaries, autobiographies, and letters provide a picture of more tranquil times but are rare for members of this class. Credit then to Barker for tracking down two unusual sources: the correspondence of the Wilson family, snuffmakers of Sheffield; and the memoirs and diary of George Heywood, a Manchester grocer. These underpin two fascinating case studies of the potential problems that arise when business partnerships and line management overlap emotional and affective relations. Both cases involved passionate entanglements, which disrupted working relations. In this sense, they corroborate the turmoil suggested by court records, rather than painting a more concordant picture. Yet surely the resilience of the family firm implies that kin ties facilitated, rather than disrupted, working relations in the more general case. Interesting as they are, these case studies must be judged atypical.

*The Business of Women* contains much interesting material on women's involvement in small-scale family businesses and is essential reading for gender historians of the period. But the book's focus on northern cities and the middling sort is also relevant to interpretations of British industrialization that emphasize regional distinctions and the persistence of small-scale business units. These themes should ensure a wider readership among business and economic historians.

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