

Gender and Business: Recent Literature on Women and Entrepreneurship

ASTON, Jennifer – *Female Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century England: Engagement in the Urban Economy*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016. Pp. 257.

BISHOP, Catherine – *Minding Her Own Business: Colonial Businesswomen in Sydney*. Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2015. Pp. 302.

CRAIG, Béatrice – *Behind the Discursive Veil in Nineteenth-Century Northern France*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2017. Pp. 303.

MORING, Beatrice, and Richard WALL, eds. – *Widows in European Economy and Society, 1600-1920*. Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2017. Pp. 327.

All of the books under review here prove conclusively that in nineteenth-century France, England, and Australia (and in northern Europe more broadly from 1600 to 1920), businesswomen were everywhere. They ran small businesses, including bars, stores, schools, and hotels—in some cases in their own names when the law allowed it. When the law did not allow it (for example, when they married) they worked out of their homes, as seamstresses and boarding-house keepers, in businesses that were not necessarily registered in their own names or documented legally, or they helped run family firms, large and small, in partnerships where they had varying degrees of legal or public acknowledgement. Some women appeared as business owners in their own right, advertising in newspapers as milliners, store owners, and the like. More often, they ran businesses with husbands (who could sometimes be helpful partners who acknowledged their contribution) or for husbands (who could sometimes be unstable, untrustworthy, absent or deceased). Despite their presence, all the authors acknowledge that it took painstaking research to tease the stories of entrepreneurial women out of the records. As Jennifer Aston notes, the lack of official sources available to historians trying to study women's enterprises is problematic across all periods and countries; she argues that a wider range of alternative sources needs to be utilized "to create a patchwork effect and try to fill the gaps left by official source material" (p. 7). These authors report meticulous, detailed combing through court records, tax rolls, trade directories, census data, bank account ledgers, probate and insolvency records, diaries, and family records to find and document women's involvement

in the world of business. The picture that emerges upon reading these studies is not that women were not involved and engaged in the world of business, but that historians forgot to look for them. And the more they were forgotten, the more historians assumed that they had played minimal roles.

Furthermore, the books discussed in the following pages demonstrate that the separate spheres ideology that has dominated our understanding of men's and women's lives in the nineteenth century limits how we have viewed businesswomen. These scholars point out that businesswomen were engaged and active inside and outside the home: their spheres were more segmented than separate, as Moring and Wall discuss (p. 254). Béatrice Craig suggests that in nineteenth-century France, spheres of family, work, and business were joined rather than separate or segmented (p. 9). And Aston points out that nineteenth-century British women were engaged in the public sphere in a variety of businesses, some in feminine trades that cleverly capitalized on separate domestic spheres but others in quite masculine trades in industrial and urban economies (p. 28). Catherine Bishop also finds little value in identifying separate worlds of work and home. She acknowledges that the boundaries between spheres were blurred, particularly when businesses could also be domestic: "[W]omen did not necessarily have to pursue interests outside the home in order to be part of the commercial life of Sydney, but brought their outside interests inside," (p. 11) by running home-based businesses.

Why have we been convinced that women, limited by laws around property ownership and hampered by having supposedly retreated to their homes, did not operate in a public sphere when these historians have compellingly shown they were everywhere? Bishop tells us that she, too, had "accepted the view that women had disappeared from economic public life in the middle of the nineteenth century" but discovered that "the more I looked the more businesswomen kept leaping inconveniently out of the records" (p. 15). She notes that diaries and other sources seem to hardly mention women in business, despite their prominence in trade directories and their engagement in the commercial life of the city of Sydney. There are a few reasons we may have been convinced that they were minor players or barely noticeable. One clear issue: women's businesses were much smaller than men's and less lauded, and thus, as a result, less memorialized. Although each author highlights some successful entrepreneurs running large businesses, they were rare examples. An interesting idea that Bishop raises is that it may have been so common to see women running small shops and engaged in family businesses or working as dressmakers or boarding house keepers that they did not merit much mention: perhaps this represents "not an actual absence but instead a familiarity" (p. 13). Craig argues quite compellingly that over the past one hundred years, the language we have used to talk about business has also been part of the problem. The language of dynasticism, the emphasis on passing on firms to male heirs, and the very masculine language which dominated these ideas of lineage tended to obscure women's roles in business (p. 241). It probably also obscured historians from going back to reevaluate what business might have meant to different people and how women engaged with the public world of commerce in earlier centuries.

What Craig describes as “highly gendered archetypes in the twentieth century” (p. 242) may have led to an erasure of women from the historiography of business history, as the discourse of business itself became more masculine.

Other common themes present themselves across the four books under review. As mentioned, all four authors demonstrate that it takes a lot of work and cross-referencing of sources to tease out the types and sizes of businesses run by women, or to even figure out if proprietors were women. All describe difficulties tracking women around the names of their husbands and business partners and following them through widowhood and remarriage as they took on new surnames. Sometimes it seems as though they have literally been erased. And despite all the wonderful new evidence that these authors find, businesswomen were still a minority amongst entrepreneurs. The four books talk of up to 20% of businesses in some towns or on some streets being run by women, with others demonstrating 8 to 12% of businesses in trade directories as female owned. Lastly, all four volumes recognize the importance of marital status, in varying degrees. We find examples of women working with their husbands but unable to own their businesses due to their marital status. Laws of coverture and legal restrictions on married women’s rights to own property affected women’s independence and businesses. Yet, Moring and Wall convincingly demonstrate that despite constraints, women who were widowed had a bit more agency than previously thought: men usually favoured their wives in their wills, leaving property and businesses to them.

Of the four books discussed here, *Widows in European Society and Economy, 1600-1920* by Beatrice Moring and Richard Wall covers the longest time period, and its focus is on marital status rather than female entrepreneurship. However, as they correct the stereotype that widows represented poverty, frailty, old age, and dependency, they demonstrate that widows were engaged in family businesses, pooled resources and worked to support other family members, inherited property and sometimes wealth from their spouses that allowed for more economic agency, and played a public and active role in the economy and in business worlds. Marriage contracts and wills could, in some cases, provide more economic autonomy for widows than for married women, although that was variable. Overall, they argue that “while we might find that widows in general were not the holders of large property portfolios, it would seem that many husbands trusted the ability of their wives to hold on to their houses, holdings, and small businesses” (p. 81). The picture that emerges in their study is one of enterprising widows who played active roles in public worlds of business and economic activity. They also suggest, as the other three authors do, that while the nineteenth century in particular has been “viewed as a time of female withdrawal from the public sphere,” widows ran large and small business, worked in textiles, kept lodgers, and collaborated with (often) male family members to continue to run farms, shops, and other businesses (pp. 258-259).

Moring and Wall devote two chapters to legislation around property rights and how that might help us assess widows’ assets, and these are most relevant to those studying female entrepreneurship. They also address the options for

wealthy widows compared to those who were much less likely to have access to property or money. Covering three centuries and multiple European countries and using a huge array of sources, the book is almost too much information. Moring and Wall successfully demonstrate that “widows were not, on the one hand, a handful of relicts of rich noblemen or, on the other, a seething mass of starving poor relief recipients, but more often something in between” (p. 9). But readers may find the combination of different data sets across massive numbers of people and countries (and time periods) overwhelming. The vast number of sources and countries studied perhaps makes it easier to generalize and identify patterns. But property laws changed across centuries and were different in different countries (p. 11); urban widows had different options than did women in rural settings; and Sweden in the 1750s is quite different from 1880s Britain or Germany, for instance. Patterns appear but the authors often indicate variances from the patterns, based on region, customs, property laws, or types of industry in a given location. Sources include tax registers, census data, poor relief records and parish registers, and they are carefully used to illuminate the lives, business interests, assets, and activity of widows across Europe. These rich sources ultimately show that widows engaged in multiple kinds of work and used survival strategies that did not always involve remarriage, a retreat to domesticity, or an overwhelming reliance on the benevolence of the state or family members.

Jennifer Aston’s *Female Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century England: Engagement in the Urban Economy* takes on a smaller time period and one country: she compares two English towns, Birmingham and Leeds, in the mid to late nineteenth century. Aston demonstrates that female business owners held “a central place” in the English urban economy and that women were not “restrained” in separate domestic spheres (p. 19). And she does more than just show that women owned property and ran businesses, examining their familial relationships, friendships, charity works, and their identities as wives and mothers to flesh out their contributions to urban economies (p. 139). Aston also demonstrates that married women’s property laws (and legal restrictions on women) did not alter women’s engagement in business ownership as much as had been thought: pre- and post-passage of married women’s property laws, women remained actively involved in trade (pp. 88-89).

By combining quantitative data with one hundred case studies of individual women, Aston shows patterns and trends while also livening the text with individual examples. Comparing two towns with different industrial bases helps her to illustrate that businesswomen in a particular context or region were not anomalies. They operated different business types based on the economic structure of each town, but Aston compares common patterns amongst businesswomen as well as differences in their business behaviours (p. 12). She also examines whether or not women were engaged in feminine-typed businesses in both towns. They were, but they also ran businesses in manufacturing industries related to the industrial profile of their communities. The result is a compelling study that conclusively demonstrates that women were not retreating to domesticity in the

nineteenth century, and nicely illustrates women using similar economic strategies and behaviours as those used by businessmen.

Of the four books examined here, Catherine Bishop's *Minding Her Own Business: Colonial Businesswomen in Sydney* is the most entertaining and the most accessible for a popular audience. She uses newspaper advertisements, trade directories, bank ledgers, and court and insolvency records to trace businesswomen across decades and through widowhood and remarriage in nineteenth-century Sydney. She acknowledges that women made up about 10% of names in trade directories in the mid-nineteenth century, but argues that the figure does not represent the numbers of women-owned businesses. Some women were clearly running businesses that were listed in directories by their husband's name, others were unnamed partners, while still others ran small businesses out of their homes that were not recorded in directories. Her estimate is that 15 to 20% of all businesses were run by women in the mid-nineteenth century (p. 19).

Bishop organizes her study by type of business rather than by marital status, wealth, or other factors. In some cases, she seems to be adding women into the landscape of Sydney's business history primarily for what she acknowledges is the "thrill of reading their stories with all their serendipity, coincidence and scandal" (pp. 20-21). She shows they were there, and, like our other authors, demonstrates that "they were not hidden away in domestic spaces" (p. 21). Tracing and describing the contributions of women is important, and Bishop accomplishes her aim of showing the contribution of women to the colonial business world. When read as a companion to the other books under review, her work does as she hopes, adding flesh, life, gossip, and "deliciously indulgent colour" (p. 22) to the sometimes dry details that we find in the more comprehensive analysis of widowhood and marriage, property ownership, language of entrepreneurship, and industrial occupational data in the volumes by Aston, Craig, and Moring and Wall. And overall, the hypothesis that perhaps spheres were not so separate is confirmed by Bishop: women "did not only produce children and keep house ... and they were not hidden away in domestic spaces, confined to the private world of the home" (p. 21).

Bishop wants to find these women and shows their involvement, but she, like Craig and others, points out that the law of coverture limited married women's ability to own property. That could occasionally be a good thing, as husbands were responsible for their wives' debts, and Bishop shows some women using the law creatively to avoid creditors. The laws could also, as she shows with many fine examples, be irrelevant, as some men supported their wives' enterprises while other women ran businesses that were nominally in the names of husbands who had long since left them. However, for women living with "perennially insolvent or intemperate husbands," marriage was a hindrance (p. 31). The Deserted Wives and Children's Act of 1858 helped women to apply to be treated as *femes sole* (single women) if their husbands had left, and by 1878 the passage of the Married Women's Property Act gave women the right to retain property after marriage (p. 32). But women were still not equal to men. Thus, Bishop acknowledges that the nineteenth century represented limits and opportunities—a theme also raised

by Béatrice Craig, who notes that “the sphere of business was open to women, but legal constraints and gender norms defined the nature of their agency” (p. 10).

In *Behind the Discursive Veil in Nineteenth-Century Northern France*, Craig provides a more detailed analysis of the language of spheres, addressing what it means to be in public in a literal way by engaging in business (which lots of women did, completely dismantling any idea that they stayed in their homes) versus what public might mean legally or politically. She suggests historians of women and of business have mistakenly equated “public” with the nondomestic, including “all that took place outside one’s front door” instead of thinking about public spheres more as political or magisterial, or in terms of relations between individuals and the state (p. 171). If businesses are part of families and running them is about providing for families, maybe they have been wrongly categorized as public. And if the line between public and private is not about the front door of one’s home, but more about interactions that are nonfamilial, then we have a different way of thinking about spheres and about women’s roles in business worlds. Even if some separate spheres ideology was informing nineteenth-century discourses, it may not have applied to the business world because business represented family practices and necessity, not some sort of bounded public world.

Craig argues that language about masculine enterprises has also made women invisible, and economic and business historians have also contributed to this invisibility by using stereotypically masculine terms for entrepreneurship (p. 13). Craig goes further than the others under study here in her analysis of the fading utility of a separate spheres argument: she suggests that instead of being just ignored when they actually were in business, or marginalized by the type, sizes, or locations of their businesses, “women were discursively obliterated without disappearing from the scene” (p. 15). She finds evidence that 13 to 21% of Lille retailers were women in the mid to late nineteenth century, and she also demonstrates that the retail sector was “only moderately segregated: women ran every kind of store, and almost no retail sector was dominated by a majority of women” (p. 15). Her research is extremely valuable for going beyond just finding women in the records. She examines why they seemed invisible and why their existence seems to have been denied in the literature and by twentieth-century business and economic historians. One possibility that she and Bishop both raise is that women were always there and were, as Craig puts it, persistent and necessary in all types of family-owned business. Perhaps little comment was made in the sources of the period about the exceptionality of women-owned businesses because they were not thought of as exceptional. She also argues that the sources are part of the reason women seem invisible. Government agents had difficulties conceiving of women as economic agents; historians writing about family firms reinforced this, using masculine business language; industrialists defined themselves in “relentlessly dynastic, masculinist and paternalistic terms” (p. 208). And historians took some discourses at face value and further contributed to the invisibility problem (p. 207). Craig also suggests that women themselves may have internalized the “discourse that valorized piety and devotion to family,

even when their duties or interests led them to depart from this model” (p. 208; and see chap. 9 overall).

I particularly like Craig’s discussion of class and enterprise. She argues that discussing a middle-class or bourgeois identity is not really possible when we study businesswomen, as it “presumes homogeneity ... that never existed. What did a butcher have in common with a judge, a high-school teacher and a foundry owner?” (p. 17). Craig uses a broad definition to include “everyone above wage-earner who was not an aristocrat”—the middling classes (p. 17). Craig’s book is densely packed with a mix of quantitative data, individual women’s stories, and close analysis of family firms, family-owned businesses, and what she terms Husband & Wife Firms. The book is difficult to read, with small type, lots of sources, and a lot of ideas packed into each chapter, which can make her analysis hard to follow. But she raises fascinating ideas that can inform our reading of all business history and push us to question how we use spheres language and how we write the history of women in business.

Reading these four volumes together is highly recommended. The level of scholarship is impressive, and readers will find much to digest. Some final thoughts? Laws restricted women but within families decisions were sometimes more flexible, and the authors show this engagement and flexibility regarding business and property ownership, and inheritance practices. Within families, and between husbands and wives, women ran their own enterprises, engaged in the more public sphere of business if not politics, and found ways to buy and sell property and businesses, advertise their trade, and make their economic way in the world. These volumes are fine reminders that women officially and unofficially ran businesses while avoiding the penalties that the law may have imposed on their gender. Married women did this in particularly creative ways in the years before property laws provided more freedom to do so in their own names. Many women capitalized on their gender by selling wares or services that were marketed as feminine or domestic, thereby exploiting domestic and feminine skills for financial profit, but others operated all kinds of businesses in both urban and rural sectors. They were an impressive and persistent minority in nineteenth-century public spaces. Perhaps these books will convince you that the old adage may be true: behind every successful (and unsuccessful!) man there is a woman, actively working in the world of business in practice if not in name.

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