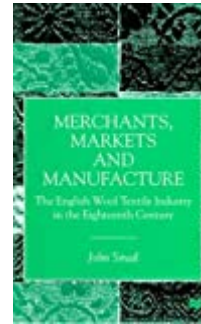




John Smail. *Merchants, Markets and Manufacture: The English Wool Textile Industry in the Eighteenth Century.* Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1999. x + 198 pp. (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-72077-6; \$110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-22162-1.



Reviewed by Perry Gauci (Lincoln College, University of Oxford)

Published on H-Albion (August, 2000)

Marketing a Revolution

Fresh from a stimulating volume on the development of middle-class culture in eighteenth-century Halifax, John Smail returns with another important contribution to Hanoverian studies. On this occasion, he explores the impact of merchants and markets on Britain's much-debated Industrial Revolution. Arguing against excessive concentration on the production process for signs of industrial "take-off," Smail analyses the ways in which entrepreneurs both created and responded to the opportunities for economic expansion throughout the eighteenth century. Although other historians have highlighted the importance of the market for British industrialization, this study offers new insights into the character and chronology of eighteenth-century economic change.

Smail's work centres on the English woollens industry, which, although experiencing relative decline from its once-unassailable position as the nation's dominant market, provides an excellent case-study for entrepreneurial innovation. A great strength of this book is that Smail embarks on a comparative study of the principal regions of woollen manufacture, and analyses the ways in which Yorkshire, the West Country

(Wiltshire/Gloucestershire), Devon and East Anglia responded to the economic winds of technological and market change. The period covered here is essentially from the 1730s to 1790s, a chronological span which is designed to highlight the fact that concentration on the post-1780 production process fails to acknowledge the key changes in entrepreneurial outlook which occurred in certain regions some decades before. Through a succession of case-studies of individual firms, he argues convincingly that we must understand how the economic environment or "culture" promoted innovation in the specific branches of the industry. Most importantly, he argues that from the mid-eighteenth century onwards the increasing significance of product innovations and the expanding export market "created an economic context which both led entrepreneurs to look for innovations in the production process and allowed them to reap the benefits of those innovations" (p. 10) To substantiate this thesis he studies both the successes and failures of a variety of merchants and manufacturers, and draws attention to the less radical ways in which individuals gradually laid the foundations for the more dramatic changes of the early nineteenth century.

Smail is at his most convincing when focusing on the individual strategies of producers and middlemen to expand their markets. In particular, he demonstrates how Yorkshire producers manage to free themselves from dependence on London factors and merchants in order to seize the opportunities presented by the rapidly-expanding American market, especially after the War of Independence. Wisely, the significance of technological innovation is not ignored, but it has to be linked to the workings of the market, which was influenced by innovations from merchants as well as producers. Smail lays great stress on the success of entrepreneurs who could supply ever-wider arrays of woollen cloth to satisfy consumer demand, especially in an increasingly volatile fashion-conscious age. He also espies marketing novelties such as the use of “travellers” and pattern-books to tempt retailers into dealing direct with the suppliers. The commercial sophistication of several of the firms depicted here is indeed striking, and by the 1790s they were well-placed to exploit the potential of continuing technological innovation.

Smail’s insights undoubtedly rank as a significant contribution to the debate on the Industrial Revolution, and suggest that we have yet to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic forces at work within the late-eighteenth century economy. However, as the author frequently acknowledges, much of the material here is suggestive rather than conclusive. The comparative, long-termist approach deployed here is salutary in its ambition, but readers may well question the representativeness of his case-studies. All business historians would concur with the author when he comments on the “patchy” survival of illuminating materials (p. 13), and, although commendably eager to set his case-studies within their regional and national context, there is still much work to be completed on the organization of the woollens industry. To this end, I would have liked to have seen more discussion of the business backgrounds of the successful entrepreneurs, and of the potential diffi-

culties of switching from manufacturing to marketing (or vice versa). Contemporary attitudes towards the innovating marketeers would also be a fruitful line of inquiry, and it would be interesting to know whether neighbours and social commentators were alive to their dynamic role within the regional and national economy.

Readers may also wish that Smail had endeavoured to be even more comprehensive in his approach. Having demonstrated the subtle and significant interplay between supply and demand, he might have said more about the importance of economic agencies at either end of the industry. He provides illuminating passages detailing the ways in which producers sought to control their supplies of raw materials, but there is little discussion of agricultural innovations, which presumably had an important effect on the manufacturing process. At the other end of the scale, the demand side tends to end with the retailer, rather than the consumer. There may well be very good reasons for this, but some very interesting asides, such as the clothier’s need to watch the fashions at horse-races (p. 73), suggest that the merchant-manufacturer did not solely rely on the shopkeeper for an assessment of public tastes. A wonderful exchange (p. 119) indicates that entrepreneurs might find fashion an impossible weapon to master, and hopefully the author will in due course shine further light on the constant battle between supply and demand.

These comments merely reflect the stimulating nature of this book, and it should serve to encourage similar approaches to other industries (from primary to tertiary). Of all its merits, it brings a satisfyingly realism to the pace and character of economic change in the eighteenth century, and presents a human perspective on a phenomenon of colossal import.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Perry Gauci. Review of Smail, John, *Merchants, Markets and Manufacture: The English Wool Textile Industry in the Eighteenth Century*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. August, 2000.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4435>

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for

nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.