



Victorian Businesswomen: A Reassessment

[*Female Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century England: Engagement in the Urban Economy.*](#)

Jennifer Aston. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 257 pp.

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<1>Jennifer Aston's book is a welcome addition to a growing body of scholarship that, in recent years, has consistently questioned the narrative of women's marginalization from the public sphere of trade and business over the course of the nineteenth century. In their highly influential work, *Family Fortunes* (1987),⁽¹⁾ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall argued that middle-class women were increasingly sidelined from the world of trade during the early nineteenth century, as the ideology of the separate spheres gained currency. *Female Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century England* tells a different story, one in which not only did women continue to own business enterprises well beyond 1850, but they also operated in a wide variety of trades and used their business status as a platform to exert their influence on the philanthropic and political public spheres.

<2>Aston's analyses expand and complement the work of scholars such as Hannah Barker, Nicola Phillips and Alison Kay, who have already established an evidence base of female business activity in the eighteenth to mid nineteenth centuries.⁽²⁾ Aston takes into consideration a later time period – 1849 to 1901 – comparing two urban centers, Birmingham and Leeds, each with its different set of economic circumstances. Her findings reveal that women's engagement in business did not decline as the century progressed: 'Businesswomen were a standard feature of every town or city's economy in the early nineteenth century and continued to play an active role in the urban economy throughout industrialization' (28). In

addition to providing a substantial body of evidence that enables Victorian businesswomen 'to be rescued from the fringes of nineteenth-century economic life' (15), Aston engages in fruitful critical discussions of the literature on gender, class and entrepreneurship. As she argues in Chapter Two, 'Locating Female Business Owners in the Historiography', the separate spheres theory, 'the most dominant analytical framework in nineteenth-century women's history', has led scholars to focus on the restricted economic and social options available to middle-class women, whilst the presence of female entrepreneurs has gone largely unexamined. Aston's research redresses this imbalance, by highlighting the achievements of Victorian businesswomen, in terms of both economic and social success.

<3>Who was the Victorian businesswoman? How did she come to be in trade? What types of business did women operate and for how long? What networks did they belong to? What were the implications of women's engagement in business for their broader identities? What position did they hold in the wider society? In answering these and other related questions, Aston adopts a twofold approach: the analysis of trade directories provides important quantitative data about female business owners active in the urban economy and the specific trades they opted for; this body of evidence is then supplemented with more detailed qualitative data, drawn from one hundred case studies, which add biographical substance to the statistics. The case studies vividly reconstruct how businesswomen experienced and interpreted their role, but the statistics are not less interesting. The data shows that over thirty thousand female-owned businesses were registered in the twenty-two trade directories taken into consideration, comprising approximately six per cent of the total trade directory entries. Female-owned firms represented 'a significant minority of the urban economy' (67), as Aston concludes.

<4>While it is essential to acknowledge the significance of these numbers, even more important is to gain a clearer sense of what types of businesses women owned and how they have been categorized. To this purpose, Aston adopts a system of classification that departs slightly from the habitual categories used in the historiography. Central to her analyses is women's involvement in the 'manufacturing' of items, regardless of what the final product might be. As Aston explains, classifying businesses according to the production methods rather than the gender identity of the product made and sold 'allows the similarities between businesswomen who produced traditionally "feminine" items – such as dresses, confectionery, bonnets and bread – and businesswomen producing "masculine" items – such as screws, lamps or paper – to be recognized' (92). This re-reading of trade directory data intends to correct the gender bias implicit in the categorization of some trades as inherently 'feminine' and to question the notion that opportunities for women in manufacturing diminished in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, Aston's analyses show that an average of thirty-three per cent of female business owners were active in the manufacturing sector in both towns throughout the late nineteenth century.

<5>Specific examples of female business owners are then investigated (in Chapters Four, Five and Six) using a variety of sources, from probate records to advertisements, newspapers, census returns and photographs. Aston's findings shed new light on the private lives of

Victorian businesswomen and their position in society. More specifically, the chapters examine how these women came to be in trade, the relationship between their personal and professional lives, the familial and friendship networks they were part of, and their probate behavior. Reconstructing the private lives of women 'who left behind so little documentary evidence' (173) is not an easy task, but Aston's patient piecing together of scattered fragments of evidence makes for fascinating reading.

<6>As one would expect, the majority of women (sixty-nine per cent) in both Birmingham and Leeds, inherited their business upon the death of their husbands. However, contrary to what is generally assumed, women did not just oversee the business until such time when a son could take over; rather they tended to remain in trade for long periods of time, assuming economic control of their widowhood, and in some cases were able to expand their concern significantly: 'for women such as cap manufacturer Ann Buckley, the death of her husband was just the beginning of a career as a business owner that would span decades' (215).

<7>Likewise, the notion that for preference women would trade in a semi-private manner, unlike their male counterparts, is contradicted by the evidence drawn from trade directories, advertisements and newspapers, which show businesswomen employing the same marketing strategies as male traders. As regards the social status of Victorian businesswomen, the case studies illustrate captivating examples of female entrepreneurs who were able to move fluidly between their private and professional roles, taking part in the civic and public life of their home town. Warehousewoman and linen draper Sarah Hotham, for example, 'used her business identity in both local and national newspapers to promote philanthropic activities and charitable appeals that interested her personally' (163). The final chapter, 'Life after Death,' examines probate records in order to assess how women disposed of their assets, how they secured their financial future and whether their decisions differed substantially from the patterns of middle-class male behavior. Aston's analyses suggest that, on the whole, women acted in the same way as middle-class men: businesswomen were fully aware of the importance of the probate process and of writing a thorough testament; they were able to access legal advice, when needed, and were inclined to create trusts as the best way to ensure the security of their beneficiaries. Though feminist historians have claimed that the use of trusts in nineteenth-century society restricted the economic agency of women, the evidence gathered in *Female Entrepreneurship* shows that this was not necessarily the case.

<8>An insightful contribution to a broader historiographical trend, Aston's book is sure to be of interest not just to business historians but also to Victorianists more broadly. Problematizing any simple concept of gendered spheres, *Female Entrepreneurship* encourages us to reconsider our understanding of the role women played in the economic life of the nation and how their middle-class identity was shaped by their participation in the public sphere. Nor is England the only country where businesswomen were a 'commonplace occurrence' (1); as the works by Béatrice Craig and Galina Ulianova demonstrate,⁽³⁾ in France and Russia too women were ready to seize the opportunities offered by the nineteenth-century market economy. The businesswoman is not a twentieth-century invention, after all.

Endnotes

(1) Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall. *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850*. London: Routledge, 1987. [\(↗\)](#)

(2) See Hannah Barker, *The Business of Women: Female Enterprise and Urban Development in Northern England 1760–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Nicola Phillips, *Women in Business, 1700-1850* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2005); Alison Kay, *The Foundations of Female Entrepreneurship: Enterprise, Home and Household in London c. 1800–1870* (London: Routledge, 2009). [\(↗\)](#)

(3) See Béatrice Craig, *Female Enterprise Behind the Discursive Veil in Nineteenth-Century Northern France* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) and Galina Ulianova, *Female Entrepreneurs in Nineteenth-Century Russia* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009). [\(↗\)](#)