



The Business of Women: Female Enterprise and Urban Development in Northern England 1760-1830

Hannah Barker

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This study argues that businesswomen were central to urban society and to the operation and development of commerce in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It presents a rich and complicated picture of lower-middling life and female enterprise in three northern English towns: Manchester, Leeds, and Sheffield. The stories told by a wide range of sources - including trade directories, newspaper advertisements, court records, correspondence, and diaries - demonstrate the very differing fortunes and levels of independence that individual businesswomen enjoyed. Yet, as a group, their involvement in the economic life of towns and, in particular, the manner in which they exploited and facilitated commercial development, force us to reassess our understanding of both gender relations and urban culture in late Georgian England. In contrast to the traditional historical consensus that the independent woman of business during this period - particularly those engaged in occupations deemed 'unfeminine' - was insignificant and no more than an oddity, businesswomen are presented here not as footnotes to the main narrative, but as central characters in a story of unprecedented social and economic transformation.

The book reveals a complex picture of female participation in business. It shows that factors traditionally thought to discriminate against women's commercial activity - particularly property laws and ideas about gender and respectability - did have significant impacts upon female enterprise. Yet it is also evident that women were not automatically economically or socially marginalized as a result. The woman of business might be subject to various constraints, but at the same time, she could be blessed with a number of freedoms, and a degree of independence that set her apart from most other women - and many men - in late Georgian society.

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