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Béatrice Craig, *Female Enterprise Behind the Discursive Veil in Nineteenth-Century Northern France*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 307 pp. Tables, notes, appendices, bibliography. \$99.99 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781137574121; \$79.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781574138.

Review by Michael S. Smith, University of South Carolina.

Béatrice Craig, professor emerita at the University of Ottawa, has worked in two distinct subject areas, the social and economic history of eastern Canada and Maine and women in business, especially in northern France. This book is the culmination of many years of research on the latter. One of its purposes is to call into question “the separate spheres ideology”—the notion that middle-class women retreated from the public sphere into a private sphere of domesticity and child rearing in the late nineteenth century. More specifically, she questions whether the presence of women in business traced a U-shaped curve, from involvement in the business world in the eighteenth century to withdrawal in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, followed by a return to business in the late twentieth century.^[1] While conceding that this pattern may apply to the experience of women in Great Britain and the United States, Craig disputes its applicability to France. To support this, she focuses in this book on the middle-class women of the department of the Nord, particularly those in Lille, Roubaix and Tourcoing, all centers for the French textile industry. This is a significant choice because it was the upper-class women of these cities who were the subject of Bonnie Smith’s influential book, *Ladies of the Leisure Class*, which first popularized the idea of French women retreating from business to lives of domesticity in the late nineteenth century.^[2] Indeed, Craig believes that, after the publication of Smith’s book in 1981, historians largely stopped looking for women in business in France in that era. The main goal of this book is to correct this error and to explain why it arose in the first place.

In pursuit of this goal, Craig has consulted the family histories, memoirs, and genealogies previously utilized by Smith and other historians of the Nord, but she has also undertaken extensive and innovative research in various local libraries and archives. In an informative appendix, she describes in detail what she found there and how she has used it. For example, registers of business licenses (*patentes*) in the municipal archives of Tourcoing have enabled her to estimate the proportion of businesses being run by women over the course of the nineteenth century in that city while town directories have enabled her to do the same for Lille. Records of the tribunal de commerce of Lille have allowed her to quantify the participation of women in business partnerships in both cities; they have also been an important source for her reconstruction of the business careers of many upper class women once thought to have had none. All told, Craig’s archival research has yielded a large cache of previously unavailable information and statistical data about the women of the Nord that informs virtually every chapter of her book.

In the first, introductory chapter, Craig presents a summary of her entire argument along with some of the supporting evidence that is laid out in greater detail in the subsequent chapters. She also provides a cogent review of the scholarly literature on the separate spheres question. To provide necessary background and historical context, chapter two briefly describes the economic and social evolution of the Lille-Roubaix-Tourcoing area, from the age of handicraft production in the late eighteenth century to the time of fully mechanized production of cottons and woollens that undergirded the rapid demographic and economic growth of all three cities after 1850.

In chapter three, Craig draws on the full array of her archival sources and statistical evidence to assess the degree of female ownership and participation in business, mainly in the textile industries of Lille and Tourcoing, in the first half of the nineteenth century. She finds that women were playing several roles in business in this period including as “deputy husbands,” running the family firms in their husband’s absence, as members of formal partnerships with their husbands, their siblings, or even with people outside their families, and as widows assuming control of the family firm after their spouse’s death. She provides specific examples of women acting in all these capacities. From trade directories and *patente* registers, she estimates that women owned and directed 10-14 percent of all businesses in Lille between 1831 and 1850, mostly in retail, and 7-11 percent of all textile firms in Tourcoing between 1840 and 1860. For Craig, all this evidence proves that, despite some legal restrictions on the participation of married women in business, women as a whole were not yet being relegated to a sphere separate from the world of business in the first half of the nineteenth century. Whether that changed after 1850 is addressed in the next chapter, which presents a similar analysis of women’s participation in business in the period up to 1900. Here she finds that, after a mid-century decline, the proportion of businesses run by women in trade and manufacturing in the Nord rose and “reached the early nineteenth century level by the turn of the twentieth century” (87). In Tourcoing, women continued to play the same roles in the textile industries in the same numbers as earlier, and she again provides numerous specific examples. Overall, Craig makes a strong case in chapter four that, especially in Tourcoing, there was no significant decline in the participation of upper class women in the management of business firms in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In chapter five, entitled “Separate Spheres?,” Craig seems to backtrack somewhat and concedes that some women were being excluded from running their family firms at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century due to various changes in how firms were being organized and managed and in how wealthy families were conducting their lives. She points out, for example, that after 1860 short-term partnerships were increasingly being replaced in the Nord by ninety-nine-year partnerships in which most partners became *commanditaires* (silent partners) who played no role in management, a trend that disproportionately affected women partners. In the case of sole proprietorships (which was how 140 of the 174 textile firms in Tourcoing were organized in the 1890s), notaries were more and more drawing up plans of succession and articles of association that encouraged widows to become silent partners of their children even as they legally retained 50 percent ownership of the firm. In addition, Craig acknowledges that, as textile families became wealthier and more “gentrified,” many of the wives and widows within them chose the life of “ladies of leisure,” as described by Bonnie Smith. Even so, Craig maintains that “femininity and business had not [yet] become incompatible” in the Nord (130), and she points out that in Tourcoing in 1911 twenty-eight industrial or wholesale trading firms were listed on the tax rolls under a woman’s name,

six of which were in the hands of widows in “ancient families” bearing names such as Flipo, Dewavrin, Lorthiois, Pollet, and Desurmont.

In chapter six, Craig shifts the focus from the social elite to lower middle class women engaged in business. Here she relies mostly on quantitative rather than biographical evidence to determine what kinds of enterprises these women were running, and in what numbers, at various points in the nineteenth century. She finds, inter alia, that married women of this class more and more turned to operating small retail businesses, especially the iconic corner store in working-class neighborhoods, to supplement the income of their factory worker husbands, while “lower middle-class widows and unmarried women were most often free agents working toward their own goals...as entrepreneurs in their own right” (153). As in the case of the elite women of Lille, Tourcoing, and Roubaix, Craig concludes that these women faced few social barriers to their business activities and that their involvement in business remained “unproblematic” at the end of the nineteenth century.

Whereas chapter five explored the factors working to exclude women from business by 1900, chapter seven offers reasons why the middle-class women of the Nord were not withdrawing from business roles as much as women elsewhere apparently were. Craig first cites the considerable freedom women enjoyed under French law throughout the nineteenth century. Unmarried women were free to manage their own affairs at age twenty-one. Married women were obliged to obey their husbands but, as shown in earlier chapters, this was not an insurmountable barrier to their participation in businesses inside or outside the family. Indeed, the laws governing *commerçants* (shopkeepers and craftspeople) explicitly allowed married women to run small retail businesses without the supervision of their husbands. Widows, of course, automatically inherited at least one-half of the family property; if that included their husbands’ business, they were then free to manage it. Craig then points out that family law in northern France tends to favor the rights of widows over those of their children, following the principle that “generation trumps sex,” in contrast to Anglo-Saxon law that favors the rights of the eldest son. She also argues that in France the private sphere is thought to include the family business (in contrast to countries where all business is considered part of the public sphere), so that excluding women from the public sphere in the nineteenth century did not necessarily exclude them from the world of business.

Chapter eight departs from analyzing the place of women in business to make the point that, even when not actively engaged in the management of a business firm, many women of the Nord managed their own financial affairs. By the end of the nineteenth century, this increasingly meant investing in stocks, bonds, and real estate, and Craig presents a number of examples of this drawn from notarial records. Although women of the industrial elite tended to keep their money in the family firm, middle-class women were more and more investing in real estate, particularly in Lille where urban growth was raising land values. “Landlordship,” she writes, “was the dream of the lower middle class [for whom] [p]roperty was a source of income, unemployment and disability insurance and pension fund rolled into one” (202).

The last chapter, chapter nine, finally reveals what Craig means by the “discursive veil” of the title. Having by this point clearly shown that women in the Nord remained active in business throughout the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, she now asks why this fact was “forgotten” by those who wrote the family and business histories of the region later in the twentieth century. Her answer is that “the erasure was largely intentional” (207), and she

lays blame on the “industrialists” discourse” that she finds in the writings of Eugène Mathon, Eugène Motte and others who employed a “normative masculinist vocabulary to bolster... [the male industrialists’] social and economic power and position” and to “sideline women” (211). She also ties this discourse to the right-wing, even proto-fascist political agenda of some members of the Nord *patronat* (especially Mathon) and to the conservative agenda of the Catholic hierarchy in the Nord. This discourse, she argues, was later taken up by writers of memoirs and family histories who reduced the women in these families to stock figures—passive helpmates of their husbands dedicated to domestic matters and raising sons to be the next generation of industrial leaders. Craig says the women themselves accepted this distorted image out of loyalty to their families and their social class, and they or their daughters and granddaughters then passed it on in interviews to historians such as Bonnie Smith. Only in the 1980s and 1990s, when the great textile firms of the Nord were in decline or were being absorbed into larger corporations, were the defense of the male-dominated dynastic firm and the associated discursive veil over the role of women in business finally discarded as obsolete, clearing the way for historians like Craig to rediscover the true place of women in business in the Nord.

In presenting her theory that a “discursive veil” accounts for the previous lack of recognition of the role of women in the economic and business history of northern France, Craig makes some valid points, but there is also an element of overkill in her argument. Indeed, it at times comes close to alleging that some vast male chauvinist conspiracy was at work. At first glance, it seems somewhat improbable, or at least quite ironic, that male industrialists in the Nord in the early twentieth century would have become so hostile to the thought of women participating in business when, as Craig documents, their forebears in the late nineteenth had been quite tolerant of women in business (compared to businessmen elsewhere). So it is at least worth considering more benign explanations for the absence of women in business histories. For one thing, it is possible that the histories of some firms fail to mention women in management because they were absent in those firms (the history of the renowned Roubaix knitwear company La Redoute, founded by a branch of the Pollet family in the 1920s, comes to mind).^[3] For another thing, as this book makes clear, much of the business activity of women in the Nord occurred behind the scenes (in the case of deputy-husbands and silent partners) or was of short duration (in the case of many widows). It was only through Craig’s diligent efforts in the archives that this activity finally came to light. That previous historians overlooked this activity does not necessarily mean that they intended to hide it. In any case, whatever the reason is for women long being omitted from the history of business in northern France, the important thing is that Béatrice Craig has done much to correct that omission in this fine book. At the same time, she has made an important contribution to the ongoing debate over separate spheres by showing that, even as women were being excluded from politics and other areas of the public sphere in nineteenth-century France, they were not being excluded from participation in business, at least in one very important region of the country. However, perhaps the book’s most lasting contribution is that it makes available a large body of new evidence on the role of women in business that will be indispensable for anyone studying the history of northern France or the history of French business in the future.

NOTES

[1] Béatrice Craig, *Women in Business since 1500: Invisible Presences in Europe and North America?* (London: Palgrave, 2016), p. 1. See also Robert Beachy, Béatrice Craig, and Alastair Owens, eds., *Women, Business, and Finance in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Rethinking Separate Spheres* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006).

[2] Bonnie G. Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class: The Bourgeoises of Northern France in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[3] Francis Petit, Jacqueline Grislain, and Martine Le Blan, *Aux fils du temps: La Redoute* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1985).

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