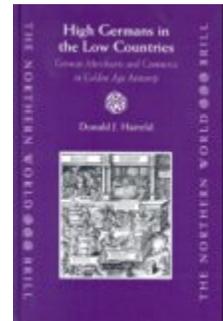




Donald J. Harreld. *High Germans in the Low Countries: German Merchants and Commerce in Golden Age Antwerp*. Leiden: Brill, 2004. x + 214 pp. \$112.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-14104-9.

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German Merchants Misperceived

All of the circumstances surrounding this reworking of a University of Minnesota Ph.D. thesis raise high expectations and promise an interesting reading experience. The topic as reflected in the title *High Germans in the Low Countries: German Merchants and Commerce in Golden Age Antwerp* is intriguing. The mention of the doctoral advisor J. D. Tracy, who has done important work on international trade in the early modern period, and the book's publication by Brill, which is well known for solid, though rather expensive, scholarly works, are equally promising. Moreover, the two-part structure that the author chooses for the study—part 1 on commercial institutions and part 2 on commercial networks—seems to provide adequate support for the topic of this slim book of 214 pages.

In the time-honored fashion of the best historians, the author starts by establishing a basis for his study. He consults the literature he knows and concludes “that scholars have neglected the German merchants (particularly the South Germans) who made up the vast majority of the foreigners operating in Antwerp during the sixteenth century” (p. 4). This verdict is repeated in different forms throughout the book, and Harreld is right about the importance of German merchants for Antwerp's economy in the sixteenth century. He has underestimated, however, the extent of the secondary literature on this important topic. Although he has clearly spent much time in Belgium and Germany and made use of the relevant archives and libraries, his knowledge of the secondary literature does not reflect the state of the art. He knows the traditional literature of German origin, like the late-

nineteenth-century work of Richard Ehrenberg or English translations of German literature from the 1970s and 1980s, but his bibliographical reach did not extend to German literature that deals with several important aspects of the trade histories of Antwerp, western Europe, and Germany (Winfried Schulze, Heinz Schilling, Mark Häberlein, and Susanna Gramulla, to name but a few). In failing to engage with this body of work, Harreld evokes the impression that hardly anything has been done on this topic since 1896 (p. 4), which is not the case. That said, it speaks well of the author that he is clearly undaunted by linguistic obstacles in his efforts to mine archival materials.

Having discussed the *status quaestionis*, Harreld moves on to sources and methods and the goals of his study. He identifies two focal points. First, he wants to examine “the role of [sic] the German merchants played in the commercial life of Golden Age Antwerp, and the place of Antwerp in the commercial networks that the German merchants constructed” (p. 7). Secondly, he notes that, “another goal of this book is to reconstruct the character of trade between Antwerp and Germany ... in order to trace the flow of products throughout the continent.” (p. 8). After the short introduction, the author starts by describing the Antwerp market before 1500 (pp. 17-39). While interesting, this material chiefly leaves the reader wondering about the relevance of these explanations to an understanding of sixteenth-century developments.

Chapter 3 addresses Antwerp's foreign merchant

communities. Here Harreld describes the existence of different groups within Antwerp, like merchants from England, Portugal, Italy, and the Hanseatic League. One problem soon becomes evident in this section: Harreld needed to pay closer attention to the legal status of the Low Countries/Antwerp to understand the differences between contemporary and twenty-first-century meanings of terms like “foreign,” “foreign nation,” and “foreigner” in the context of Antwerp. Antwerp belonged to the Burgundy circle of the Holy Roman Empire—therefore Germans, Hansards, as well as merchants from Bavaria, Franconia, or the Palatinate, did not form a foreign nation in Brabant. They were foreigners in so far as they had left their patria the moment they left their home cities or home territories, but they were not a foreign nation because they were still within the Empire. The territories in question only drifted away from the Empire when, in 1555, Emperor Charles V divided his empire between his son Philip II, king of Spain, and his brother Ferdinand, who was to be Charles’s successor as Roman king and German Emperor.

Chapter 4 deals with the main actors of the book: Germans in Antwerp. Given its centrality, it is unfortunate that this section of the book contains some misunderstandings of key terms, the geographical perceptions of the historical actors, and the legal status of the Hanseatic League. In describing the origins of his German merchants, for example, Harreld notes that merchants came from Cologne as well as “from a variety of smaller North German towns such as Münster, Julich and Cleves” (p 71). But inhabitants of *Jülich* and *Kleve* in particular did not feel like they were living in the North of Germany; their orientations went westward, and along the River Rhine. Indeed, it seems reasonable to ask why the publishers chose this book on Antwerp and German merchants from Nuremberg and Augsburg for a series entitled “The Northern World: North Europe and the Baltic.” Also problematic are Harreld’s interpretations of the relations between Cologne, the Hanseatic League, and the Holy Roman Empire (p. 70).

With chapter 5 the reader enters the second part of the study, which focuses on the mercantile activities of Harreld’s chief protagonists and their development of commercial networks. After some thoughts on twentieth-century theories on networks, the author finally reaches his main task, the description of the economic infrastructure and commercial doings. Here it becomes obvious that some consideration of recent studies would have helped. The author’s observations on European trade flows, important entrepôts in the sixteenth century, and the role of German merchants within

and outside of the Hanseatic League, do not dig deeply enough and do not display a sufficiently in-depth knowledge of the mechanics of early modern European trade, or of Antwerp’s position within Europe’s trading networks. Aachen, for example, did not, as Harreld suggests, belong to the Hanse, and Cologne (as its merchants would have noted) was much more than one of the “important sites for overland through traffic to southern German towns” (p. 105). With regard to the author’s effort to reconstruct Antwerp’s role in European trade, it has to be said that he simply underestimates the role of London, the conflict between English and Hanseatic merchants in the cloth trade, and their combined influence on Antwerp’s position as a staple port in Western Europe (pp. 2, 98). Chapters 6-8 analyze commercial matters, with chapter 8 paying particular attention to the fiscal and financial aspects of trade, before chapter 9 delivers a short summary. Lists of money flows and export numbers, a bibliography and an index conclude the book.

How should one judge this effort to analyze an important chapter in early modern European economic history? It is well written, makes adept use of some of the wonderful available archival riches to describe the textile trade in the years 1543-45, and displays an appropriate awareness of the touchstones in current academic discourse on the topics engaged. Had this book been written much earlier, it would have represented an important contribution. In light of current research, however, it merely collects, recombines, and proves anew what are now well-established facts and ideas. Then too, as noted above, important analytical categories are not always clear, a tendency that extends to the book’s putative time frame. Its catchy title, which makes reference to the Low Countries and the Golden Age, stands in contrast to its coverage of some few years and a modest number of merchants. The book’s comparatively narrow scope is defensible, of course, but it should have been reflected in the book’s title. A debatable understanding of early modern mentalities and legal structures also leave this study’s conclusions open to question. In addition, the editors of the book did not do a good job in proofreading—the references to the few German books used by the author are especially full of misspellings (pp. 198-200, 202-203, 205-208).

To conclude, although *High Germans in the Low Countries* results from a project with much promise, the author does not fully realize that project’s potential here. He synthesizes a collection of well-known facts effectively enough. Unfortunately, though, he does not add substantially to our understanding of them.

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