

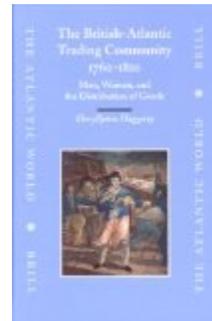


Sheryllyne Haggerty. *The British-Atlantic Trading Community, 1760-1810: Men, Women, and the Distribution of Goods*. The Atlantic World Series. Leiden: Brill, 2006. 304 pp. \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-15018-8.

Reviewed by Serena R. Zabin (Carleton College)

Published on H-Atlantic (August, 2010)

Commissioned by W. Douglas Catterall



Higglers and Merchants: Gender in Transatlantic Trade

Sheryllyne Haggerty's new offering in the Brill series on Atlantic history takes as her starting point the absence of women in most studies of Atlantic traders. By broadening her definition of Atlantic trade to include a wider variety of dealers in commerce, she aims to show how women were essential to the circulation of goods between and within two Atlantic port cities: Philadelphia and Liverpool. For subscribers to H-Atlantic, the interest of Haggerty's book will probably lie in her excavation of a shared business outlook both across the ocean and across the social boundaries dividing elite merchants from smaller-scale shopkeepers and itinerant peddlers. Not surprisingly, female representation in trading networks was clustered in these lower echelons.

Haggerty divides her study into two halves. The first, to create a fresh perspective on the cultural world of trade, redefines the term "trader" through greater focus on those at the lower end of the economic scale. The second half looks at how all these traders—from high-end merchants to marginal hucksters—created local and transatlantic commercial communities.

In the first half, a framing chapter that introduces the reader to Philadelphia and Liverpool, Haggerty grounds her discussion of trade on the labels for different functions (from merchant and factor to shopkeeper and higglers). Unfortunately, Haggerty's discussion of each of these categories remains relatively prescriptive, heavily dependent on definitions found in trade directories and

other eighteenth-century printed sources. This careful parsing of the jobs of traders throughout the commercial community would have been more dynamic with more concrete examples of individual traders and their particular activities. Haggerty finds that all these individuals, regardless of social standing or gender, shared a common "culture of trade" that included a concern for risk, trust, reputation, and politics. At the same time, however, she argues persuasively that women rarely had the resources to allow them to participate in the upper echelons of the trading world as merchants or factors. One wishes that she had further explained the impact of the gendered stratification of the trading community. What difference, for example, did it make to the cultural understandings of credit that Haggerty claims were common to all transatlantic traders?

Haggerty then widens her comparative lens to look at the trading communities of Liverpool and Philadelphia. She offers a thorough statistical analysis of each city's traders based on the trade directories. The directories demonstrate that Philadelphia and Liverpool had quite different mercantile structures; the colonial city had far fewer middlemen and thus more limited access to wealth than its English counterpart. It was this difference, Haggerty argues, that gave Liverpool a higher proportion of women in trading roles than Philadelphia. Here again a greater emphasis on manuscript material might have deepened the analysis. Haggerty certainly understands the limitations of using these directories, and archival

evidence elsewhere in the book hints that still more female traders remain undiscovered in account books and letters. Nevertheless, she intriguingly suggests that local conditions, as much as larger structural limitations of coverture or gender ideologies, explain the smaller numbers of female traders overall in both cities.

Haggerty opens the second section with a welcome discussion of networks of communication, particularly the ways that individual traders used commercial networks to structure their daily commercial activities and choices. She neatly divides modes of garnering transatlantic information into four parts, although the relationship between newspapers, letters, gossip, and personal contacts is not always clear. The most interesting discovery of this chapter is her claim that family networks, often the primary means by which historians have previously defined commercial networks, were sometimes superseded by more impersonal connections. Although the ways in which women communicated are clearly demonstrated in this chapter, an extensive gender analysis would have been helpful. For example, was the “Intelligence Office” opened by Hannah Wigmore in Philadelphia different in either its news or its clients from that run by William Bradford in the same city?

One of the great strengths of this book is its clear exposition of the nuts and bolts of trading: credit and information networks, bankruptcy, and insolvency. In chapter 5, for example, Haggerty succinctly lays out a comprehensive account of the structure of financial credit. These webs of credit encompassed traders up and down the social scale and across the Atlantic. Women and men, regardless of the size of their businesses or on which side of the Atlantic they resided, were all bound together by their common interests in debt. This insight holds real promise for rethinking questions of class formation in this period.

Similarly, by taking seriously the distribution (and

not just the importation) of goods, Haggerty makes the consuming desires even of the British poor central to the story of transatlantic trade. By examining the ways that the exotic consumer goods imported on both sides of the Atlantic were broken into small lots and sold in retail, Haggerty suggests some of the ways that consumer demand made possible the small and occasional trade of marginal sellers. She also proves beyond question that women were a part of the world of trade, although her assertions that they were “vital” to it would have been more definitive with more specific qualitative or quantitative evidence (p. 223). A more extensive analysis of Haggerty’s evidence on these points, for example, might have unpacked their important implications for the cultural meaning of trade.

Given the complexity of the tale Haggerty has to tell, it is also worth noting that Brill has not served its author well. This growing and important series deserves more editorial care, especially in the clarification of awkward phrasing. More important, sections sometimes lack adequate conclusions to draw together the various small and interesting points scattered throughout the chapters.

With that said, in Haggerty’s account of the world of transatlantic trade, cities bustle with the energy of a “vigorous spirit of enterprise” (as Thomas M. Doerflinger so vividly noted nearly twenty-five years ago in his *Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia* [1986]) because so many people, not just elite male merchants, connected Liverpool with Philadelphia. The inclusion of so many more enterprising traders from all strata of society will solidify the place that trade holds in explaining the eighteenth-century British Atlantic. After reading Haggerty’s ambitious account of the networks, gossip, and *mentalité* that bound together these wheelers and dealers, historians will no doubt want to further explore the cultural and political implications of the expansive world of Atlantic commerce.

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

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

Citation: Serena R. Zabin. Review of Haggerty, Sheryllyne, *The British-Atlantic Trading Community, 1760-1810: Men, Women, and the Distribution of Goods*. H-Atlantic, H-Net Reviews. August, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30916>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.