During the second half of the twentieth century, English social history of the period between 1500 and 1750 concentrated for the most part on opposite ends of the social spectrum. From the 1940s through to the 1970s there were studies of the aristocracy and gentry, and then, in later years, the “polite.” On the other hand, for the better part of the last two decades, another group of scholars has been interested in what are often described as the popular classes, social groups that are rarely defined very carefully, but which are often taken to have included the dispossessed. Now, however, there are signs that the focus is beginning to change. Apart from anything else, the past few years have seen a renewal of interest in economic history, and while this is of necessity concerned with getting and spending, the development of trade, agricultural productivity, figures for exports, and so on, writers such as Keith Wrightson and Craig Muldrew have also shown that there are social and cultural dimensions to economic history. People were involved, and the vast majority of them fell somewhere between the very rich and the very poor. Just as is the case today, most early modern men and women had to find ways of earning a living that would enable them to support their households and their families, to put food on the table, and, if possible, to provide some future for their children. At the mercy of the elemental demographic facts of birth, death, and marriage, as well as the vagaries of the weather, war, and trade cycles, their lives were no doubt mundane, but they must often have been emotionally charged. Whether the vast array of merchants, tradesmen, artisans, smaller farmers, and lesser professional men, who differed greatly in their earning power and wealth, can be said to have constituted a distinct social category is still an open question, perhaps even a question that it is not worth pursuing too far. Nevertheless, the lives of what are now quite regularly referred to as the “middling sort” involved interactions with institutions, social relationships, and indeed, the practise of now long-lost arts and sciences that were an essential part of the fabric of English society prior to the demographic and structural changes of the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

For all of these reasons, the publication of this excellent edition of the business letters of Joseph Symson, a mercer of Kendal (Westmorland), will be welcomed by a wide range of historians. The youngest son of a large and well-established north-western clerical family, Symson (1650-1730) was apprenticed in 1666. He subsequently married the daughter of a local attorney, and in effect founded a family firm involved in the inland textile trade that he passed on to one of his sons, and which continued until the death of his grandson in 1776. Edited in their entirety from a manuscript now in the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, the 2,041 letters in the volume consist of office copies of correspondence sent out by Symson himself (who was the principal author) and his sons. The letter book covers just under a decade and is therefore only a fragment of what must originally have been a much larger archive, but the surviving correspondence was recorded systematically, and it appears as complete as one could possibly expect for the period covered. As Simon Smith points out in the introduction, the “letters are remarkable for the extent to which they combine the reflective and the routine” (p. xxiv), and they are exceptional because of the “slice of life” insight they give into Symson’s business and personal affairs.

He was a very busy man. In fact, the letters imply
activity that they do not record, since much of Symson’s time was apparently spent making deals directly for the purchase of cotton and linsey fabrics manufactured in and around Kendal, which he then sold on to purchasers further afield. As the letters show, his business dealings stretched from Bristol to Coventry, Manchester, and Bedale (in Yorkshire), but over 80 percent of them involved trade with London. The correspondence is a mine of information about the quality, cost, and availability of the different “stuffs” in which he dealt, and about the problems that were involved in shipping the “packs” of cloths either overland by horse, or, alternatively, via Newcastle to London using the shipping links originally forged to accommodate the coal trade. Though it was apparently the practice in Kendal to pay cash for local manufactures, Symson’s business was heavily dependant on credit, and while he had predictable problems with bad debts, the letter book also reveals the great reliance of businessmen on bills of exchange, negotiable financial instruments that in effect became a kind of substitute for money because they made it possible to carry out transactions without having to physically transfer cash. In addition to all of this, moreover, a number of the letters reveal Symson’s efforts to apprentice his sons and help them launch businesses of their own in Manchester and Liverpool as well as his relationship with his daughter, and to a lesser extent, his clerical brothers. While politics does not often figure directly in the letters, Symson served as mayor of Kendal, and he lived through the Jacobite occupation of the town in 1715. He was interested in elections, and in parliamentary legislation that impacted on his business. Though the letters do not reveal his religious views in great detail, Symson and his sons were involved in the maintenance of local charity schools and the campaign for the “Reformation of Manners.” Last but hardly least, there is a wealth of incidental information on a vast range of miscellaneous subjects. One letter, for example, describes in some detail what Symson expected of a good horse. Another, which concerned the purchase of cloth for a new suit of clothes being ordered by a Durham cleric, shows how peer-group pressure worked in the world of bespoke tailoring. The phrase “an Exact and Industrious Tradesman” was used by Symson himself, and it is hard to come away from the volume without the thought that this seems in his mind to have reflected a distinct social identity, one which he aspired to for his sons and which he shared implicitly with many of his correspondents.

In short, Smith deserves thanks for making this unique source available to other students and scholars. His lengthy and informative introductory account of Symson and his world is well worth reading in its own right. The editorial work is meticulous and the conventions followed in producing the text are clearly explained. The volume includes town plans of Kendal as well as portraits of Joseph and some of the other family members. While more reproductions of pages from the original would have helped to convey a better sense of the layout of the text, this is no doubt asking for too much; a complete microfilm of the manuscript has been made available for consultation at the Kendal Record Office. The appendices include a glossary of textile and trading terms as well as a collection of biographies of some of the individuals who appear in the letters. The detailed three-part index of personal names, places, and subjects will be an added attraction for the large number of customers the work should, and will, attract.

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