

*The British-Atlantic Trading Community, 1760–1810: Men, Women, and the Distribution of Goods.* By SHERYLLYNNE HAGGERTY. The Atlantic World. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006. 303 pages. \$120.00 (cloth).

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If the wheel of Atlantic commerce propelled the consumer revolution of the eighteenth century, then this book is about the spokes in the wheel. In this ambitious study, Sheryllynne Haggerty uses comparative profiles of Philadelphia and Liverpool to sketch the complex British-Atlantic trading community in the revolutionary era. The author takes distribution, rather than consumption or importation, as her subject, writing, for example, “the story of the distribution of five shillings worth of sugar and of chintz valued at two dollars rather than high commerce and thousands of pounds worth of credit” (4). Only a deeper understanding of distribution, she argues, will permit scholars to evaluate the reach and significance of consumer goods in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Tracing the participation of minor dealers and exploring their methods of “breaking bulk” (196), Haggerty demonstrates how new goods reached far down the social scale, precisely because of these minor dealers and traders. At the same time, she claims significant, though unquantified, economic power for these small traders and their customers.

By first expanding the definition of trader and then exploring the diverse functions, merchandise, and clientele of this group, Haggerty aims to replace the iconic international merchant with an entrepreneurial crowd as the centerpiece of trade. Setting elite merchants to the side strengthens the idea of an Atlantic world rather than fragmenting it. Extensive archival digging unearthed no counterculture of petty traders but clear evidence of hagglers and hucksters behaving as much like their wealthier counterparts as circumstances would allow. The Atlantic trading community, Haggerty believes, was as much a product of these commonalities as of trading relationships.

Trader was a broad category in the revolutionary era, encompassing not only transatlantic merchants but also brokers, dealers, grocers, shopkeepers, auctioneers, and hucksters, all of whom led lives marked by diversity and change. Margaret Moulder of Philadelphia listed herself as a boardinghouse keeper in the city directory, yet she also took on work as a carter and grocer, bridging the communities of Philadelphia and its hinterlands in multiple ways. Haggerty highlights this prevalent tension between how traders identified themselves and their actual economic activities. Many individuals who chose to call themselves merchants, for example, were really local traders hoping to gain status and customers by declaring a direct connection to the Atlantic world of trade. Rather than view their self-promotion as empty posturing, Haggerty argues that these individuals were as much a part of the merchant community as the established men familiar to readers from the work of Thomas M. Doerflinger and David Hancock, among others.<sup>1</sup>

Philadelphia’s traders were less diverse than Liverpool’s. Since merchants, favored by their access to imports and facing little competition from local manufacturers, did everything in the colonial city—from importing to wholesaling to retailing—intermediaries such as brokers, dealers, and warehouse keepers were comparatively few, a trend that continued well into the first decades of independence. It was particularly difficult for women to break into the resulting economy. While Liverpool women found specialized niches, Philadelphia women scraped by with small general

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas M. Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1986); David Hancock, *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735–1785* (Cambridge, 1995).

shops. Women in Liverpool owned shares in trading vessels; Philadelphia's ships were owned and controlled by a small group of elite male merchants.

Haggerty's argument that female Philadelphians' marginality flowed from local, colonial economic patterns more than from law or culture has important implications for the study of urban women and the intersection of ideology and economy. Legal constraints on married women and emerging ideas about pure, pious femininity were common to both cities, after all, so neither can account for the smaller percentage of female traders in colonial city directories. Women's divergent opportunities came from the influence of international commerce, a point Haggerty could have explored in greater depth. What was the effect on gender ideologies? Were intermediaries in a feminine position relative to merchant masculinity, and did that influence hierarchy within the trading community?

If the diversity of the trading community is the theme of the first half of the book, unity and interdependence is the theme of the second half. All traders were joined, in their own minds and in the minds of an often critical public by working, in Thomas Sheridan's words, "merely for money" (15). They did not produce work of their own, nor did they practice a craft. They all faced daunting conditions including vulnerable products, scarce cash, and the slow movement of information. "Although an uninsured ship being lost at sea may have lost more money *per se* for a merchant, a small parcel of ribbons that were damaged in the rain, or a basket of apples just too rotten, could equally spell disaster for a hawker or higgler" (64–65). Furthermore they managed these uncertainties in surprisingly similar ways, though often on a dramatically different scale. Rebecca Jones was a small-time Philadelphia trader and Thomas P. Cope was a well-known merchant, yet both imported goods on multiple ships to spread their risk. Wealthy and poor likewise drew on trading networks to supply start-up capital, ongoing credit, and vital business information. When human networks of kin and congregation failed them, traders scrambled to other sources of information and job leads, such as newspapers.

To a certain extent, small, local traders did business in the manner of their better-known and better-funded elite neighbors. Providing credit, for example, was as much a part of the small trader's business as the merchant's, and the small trader's efforts in building the informal capital market of each port were essential to the functioning of the Atlantic system as a whole. Merchants, shopkeepers, and other traders supported a system of "contra'd accounts" (149), whereby third parties paid off debts they owed by reimbursing another creditor on a trader's books. Though Haggerty stresses commonalities, numerous examples illustrate that traders of different levels of exchange also had to adjust their practices to local conditions. They may have expected to follow common "Atlantic" practice, but small local dealers had more trouble enforcing codes of honor and trust. While bills of exchange and merchant conventions made transatlantic trade an increasingly steady field, extending credit to a local shopper was fraught with uncertainty and case-by-case negotiation. Many petty traders found themselves caught between the expectations of their suppliers and the capriciousness of their customers.

This book's persistent attention to small traders is one of its great strengths, but also a source of frustration because lively and engaging case studies are harder to construct from the partial and fragmented records left behind by the poor. Indeed, when Haggerty comes to the concluding chapters and applies her findings about risk management and social networking to particular individuals, she is forced by the sources to spend more time reconstructing the lives of larger merchants. Questions about how women's networks changed during an individual life cycle or what hucksters (as opposed to disapproving city fathers) might have thought about wheeling and dealing go unanswered. Haggerty asserts that evidence of common entrepreneurial behavior reveals a shared entrepreneurial spirit among traders, but surely some of the people she describes were motivated by ambition and others by desperation. The capacious "trading community" profiled in the first half of

the book does not fully cohere as a body of shared interests in the second half, in part because complexity and rich detail tend to overwhelm and cast doubt on the larger argument about mentalité. Nevertheless, Haggerty's insistence that scholars look for connections rather than presume inferiority and isolation among lesser male and female traders should inspire others to tease patterns out of these same complexities and explore the larger implications for the Atlantic world.