

year, and (like the other institutions of the privatized railway) showed a voracious appetite for the employment of expensive consultants. At least until the belated appearance of its Strategic Plan in January 2002, the SRA was derided frequently as lacking both strategy and authority. Shortage of authority was a recurring feature, and the details of the SRA's complex interactions with the Office of the Rail Regulator (ORR), the DfT and Railtrack/NR are well charted by Gourvish. Despite a 'concordat' at one stage, and the fabrication of the deceptively clear formula that the SRA would specify, the ORR would price, and NR would deliver, the SRA was never trusted by the other players and competed with them for influence.

In major areas of activity, its work was disappointing. Although the second chairman, Bowker, extracted the franchising process from the shambles in which it had been left by his predecessor, it remained expensive, opaque, and inconsistent, with erratic financial judgements. There was a resolute refusal to use publicly-owned franchises even as a benchmark for assessing private performance. The SRA's ineffective rolling stock strategy has to be understood in the light of its statement (December 2003) that 'it is not appropriate for the SRA to meddle where the market does a better job'. Few outside the rolling stock companies had imagined that the market was doing a good job.

The SRA's achievements are nevertheless identified and emphasized. These include the salvaging of the West Coast Main Line project, the production of network output statements and of utilization strategies for both routes and network, and better planning of capital expenditure. Less convincing is the assertion that the SRA successfully educated the public sector into becoming a better customer of the private. This problem was, of course, self-made by governments who decided to break up, or not to restore, an integrated publicly owned system.

Gourvish is too polite and understanding about the events and institutions he surveys. This was a period in which performance did not improve, there was no major new infrastructure investment, and both fares and public subsidy rose. Nonetheless, he provides an astute guide to the intricacies of the system, and it is not his fault that so much difficult detail needs to be explained. Despite the modesty of his initial claim, this book is likely to be for some time the best overall history of the railways over the decade in question.

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GERALD CROMPTON

GENERAL

Margaret C. Jacob and Catherine Secretan, eds., *The self-perception of early modern capitalists* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Pp. vi + 279. 10 illus. ISBN 9780230604476 Hbk. £45/\$79.95)

This is a fine volume on an impossible topic: how did merchants in early modern Europe view themselves? Ever since Max Weber argued that Protestants were more likely to have a capitalist spirit than other religious groups, historians have grappled with the elusive idea that mentality or ideology was a crucial factor in the rise of modern capitalism. In 2007 the editors brought together a dozen specialists in the history of early modern trade to try and figure out whether merchants considered themselves more materialistic or self-interested than their contemporaries.

The result of their effort is a valuable collection of essays describing the life and work of merchants in Italy, Germany, Britain, the Low Countries, Sweden, and New England. We learn several important lessons from these descriptions. First of all the essays confirm that we cannot understand the behaviour of merchants by looking at their business activities alone. Certainly, as Mary Lindemann and Cathy Matson show for Hamburg and Philadelphia respectively, the entrepreneurs studied here were willing to risk their money, and

sometimes lots of it, in commercial ventures, but their pursuit of profit did not blind them to other interests. Merchants took the well-being of their families into consideration and, like most of their contemporaries, they were also deeply concerned about prudence, honesty, and other prescriptions for social interaction, as often as not derived from religion.

Secondly, between the individual contributions, it becomes clear that merchants from different parts of the world with different social and religious backgrounds had no difficulty overcoming these differences when trading with each other. Francesca Trivellato's contribution on the Sephardic community in Livorno is a fine example. She shows how Jewish merchants interacted freely with non-Jews while at the same time maintaining a distinct religious identity. This is in fact one of the most striking features of early modern trade. As Jacob has shown in earlier work, merchants increasingly became part of an international, even cosmopolitan world of commerce in which strongly divergent personal beliefs (for example, those of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish merchants) coexisted with a commonly shared set of formal and informal contracting rules.

A third lesson drawn from this volume concerns the various ways in which these collective rules were enforced. We find evidence for both the internalization of beliefs and their publication in merchant manuals, for social control within religious communities, and for the enforcement of contracts by legal authorities. Indeed, this multi-layered enforcement of social norms can be shown in locations as far apart as Amsterdam, Livorno, Stockholm, and Philadelphia. The various authors differ in the emphasis they put one on or the other of these mechanisms, but the overall impression one gets from the collection as a whole is that it was the combination of personal beliefs, social constraints, and legal intervention that shaped the behaviour of early modern merchants.

Where does this leave us with regard to the self-image of early modern merchants? The honest answer is that we still don't know. Virtually all contributors to the book try very hard to capture the moral identity and self-perception of early modern merchants in business letters and private correspondence, account books, merchant manuals, theological writings, plays, and paintings. However, as they readily acknowledge themselves, none of these sources tell us what merchants actually felt or believed; they merely reflect what merchants did or, in many cases, what they ought to have done. One can obviously draw inferences about the self-perception of merchants from these descriptions and prescriptions—and the authors do so very skilfully—but this cannot really substitute for the personal reflections one would need to have in order to establish how early modern traders viewed themselves. Given the high intellectual standards maintained by both the editors and the authors of this valuable volume, one has to fear this question will indeed remain unanswered.

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OSCAR GELDERBLUM

Karel Davids, *The rise and decline of Dutch technological leadership: technology, economy and culture in the Netherlands, 1350–1800*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2008. Pp. xx + 633. 15 figs. 2 maps. 12 tabs. ISBN 9789004168657 Hbk. €149/\$199)

This book is an impressive, wide-ranging overview of the history of technology in the Netherlands. Davids's aim is to investigate systematically the factors accounting for the rise of the Dutch Republic to a position of technological leadership in Europe (and probably in the world) and for its subsequent decline. His efforts are to be particularly appreciated because the study of technological change in the early modern period is an unduly neglected research field. In fact, the attention of historians of technology has usually focused either on the technical achievements of the middle ages or on the technological components of the industrialization process. In this sense, Davids's book has the important