

Entrepreneurial Families: Business, Marriage and Life in the Early Nineteenth Century

Review Number:

1417

Publish date:

Thursday, 16 May, 2013

Author:

Andrew Popp

ISBN:

9781848932364

Date of Publication:

2012

Price:

£60.00

Pages:

208pp.

Publisher:

Pickering and Chatto

Publisher url:

<http://www.pickeringchatto.com/titles/1446-9781848932364-entrepreneurial-families>

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

James Taylor

Born in 1782, the son of a Staffordshire farmer, John Shaw's family were keen for him to make his way in commerce. So the turn of the century saw him apprenticed to a firm of Wolverhampton factors – middlemen, whose job was to bring buyers and sellers together in the burgeoning capitalist market. John worked as a commercial traveller, undertaking long and arduous selling journeys around the midlands and the north of England. It was on one of these journeys in 1810 that he met Elizabeth Wilkinson, daughter of a Lancashire shopkeeper with whom he had business dealings. Separated by many miles, a courtship by correspondence ensued, culminating in marriage in 1813; six children followed over the next dozen years. Though leaving her brother's grocery shop in Rochdale and living with John in their new home in Wolverhampton, distance continued to characterise the relationship, as a result of John's frequent selling trips and Elizabeth's family visits to Lancashire. But John's career thrived – having already established his own business in his early 20s, he entered into a mercantile partnership with a former employee, Henry Crane, in 1815, which proved both long-lived and lucrative. He died a rich man in 1858.

John Shaw's life, though materially successful, was hardly unique at a time of rapid commercial development. As such, it might seem appropriate, even conventional, subject matter for Andrew Popp's excellent new book, *Entrepreneurial Families*. But this is no conventional business history. Popp's goal is to develop a new kind of business history, one which presents economic concerns not as independent of, but as inextricably linked to – and in some senses subservient to – the family. His ultimate ambition is to 'reclaim entrepreneurship... as an intensely human, perhaps even humane, art' (p. 2). Central to his approach is the idea of John and Elizabeth's relationship as an 'unlimited partnership' in which love and marriage fused with entrepreneurship and economic decision-making (p. 4). Existing analytical categories employed by historians – public versus private, economic versus non-economic, efficient versus affective – are entirely inadequate to capture this process.

The physical distance which separated John and Elizabeth both during their courtship and through much of their marriage, though a source of great sadness to the couple, is a boon for the historian: the letters they exchanged during these periods of separation constitute the raw material for this study. Over 100 letters between John and Elizabeth survive, and these are supplemented with another 100 or so letters between members of the Shaw and Wilkinson families. Social historians have been mining correspondence for some time for all kinds of insights into gender roles and relations, but business historians, according to Popp, have rarely used letters as anything more than straightforward records of fact. Appropriately, then, he spends some time justifying and explaining his methodology, displaying great sensitivity to the ways in which letters were written and received in an age when they were a central strategy for 'combating absence' (p. 12). Sometimes the letters surprise as much by what they exclude as what they include. Historians looking for running commentaries on the great events and trends of late Georgian Britain – war, industrialisation, the factory system, political reform – will come away disappointed: Elizabeth's 'breathless' reportage on local Luddite disturbances in 1812 is a rare exception (p. 113). But the author is more interested in the inner lives of his subjects, and while fully aware of the limitations of the letters as historical sources, he is also eloquent on their strengths, viewing them as essentially different from other forms of life writing such as diaries and memoirs due to their 'relational' nature (they involve two or more people), and their richness and immediacy (p. 6).

Indeed, the letters provide much material relevant to current debates on the nature of companionate marriage in Georgian Britain. Though Elizabeth seemingly accepted the subordinate role marriage accorded women, informing her suitor that 'I will never be inclined to dispute the mastership with you (it will be put out of my power in the Church)', power dynamics in the relationship were more subtle than this acceptance suggests (p. 52). Her early letters effectively set out the terms of the marriage, and reveal her to be far from docile or submissive. In one, she explained to John that

a command will not go half so far with a woman as an intreaty [*sic*] – but I hope your curiosity will not lead you so far out of the beaten path (p. 54).

At the same time, the letters divulge much more than simply Philip Larkin's 'wrangle for a ring': we sense John's intense passion for Elizabeth, and her slower-burning but no less profound affection for him. After a few months of marriage, Elizabeth wrote to her absent husband that:

I thought I knew what absence was before I was married but I believe I never knew rightly what it was till now – I feel as if part of [my]self was torn from me (p. 55).

Their married life confounds simplistic notions of 'separate spheres'. Elizabeth, as part of a shop-keeping family, always imagined that she would play a role in her husband's business. Her main wish when John was searching for a marital home was that it would not be too distant from the warehouse. And so, her early post-marriage letters are full of references to business, keeping John informed of the progress of trade during his

long absences. Her role went beyond mere retailer of news and included active participation in the business, such as dealing with agents and workmen and handling payments: in one letter, John refers to her 'Treasuryship' (p. 89). Though her involvement diminished when Crane matured into his role as partner – and when the demands of childrearing set in – it did not cease altogether.

If Elizabeth felt a pull towards the business, then John gravitated towards the home. Never fully reconciled to the peripatetic existence of a commercial traveller, his letters reveal an aching longing for the 'pleasures and enjoyments of home' (p. 84). And when the roles were reversed, with John at home and Elizabeth visiting family or friends, home provided some comfort, but was not the same:

It appears now my Dear Girl a long time since I saw you. I do assure you being at home when you are away is very different to being on a journey ... but coming into one meals [*sic*] and all other parts of the days without seeing you does appear so strange and uncomfortable that I could not live alone again for a trifle (p. 85).

This was a couple who shared everything, who depended on each other emotionally and professionally. Popp seems fully justified when he concludes that although Elizabeth 'could not enter into a formal partnership with her husband ... the partnership she did enjoy with him was far more profound and unlimited' (p. 90).

Wider family imperatives also shaped the firm's development. The collapse of Anglo-Indian merchant houses in Calcutta in the early 1830s created an unexpected opportunity for expansion into international trade which Shaw and Crane seized, with great success. Popp argues, however, that the taking of this risk cannot be explained in just pecuniary terms: 'it was also a vehicle for renewal at the level of both individuals and families', giving the partners 'a redoubled stimulus to enterprise and exertion', and providing employment opportunities for the next generation of Shaws and Cranes (p. 73). Indeed, when Elizabeth and John's eldest son came of age, he was dispatched to India, but tragically died of tropical fever soon after arriving. Yet this outcome, Popp argues, should not obscure the fact that '[t]rade sustained rather than supplanted life. Family and friends were not there to be leveraged for advantage'; rather business – and business networks – existed to service the relationships which mattered the most (p. 110).

One question which might reasonably be asked is whether the source base is sufficiently substantial to sustain the author's ambitions. The personal correspondence is supplemented by the business archives of John Shaw and Sons and other related firms, but a problem remains: though Elizabeth and John's letters range over a long period – 1811 to 1839 – covering courtship to middle age, Popp admits in an endnote that no letters survive from the last 19 years of their marriage. This gives their story an incomplete feel, and although John's will is analysed in detail, we do not discover when Elizabeth died. The author is always perceptive and resourceful when handling the fragmentary evidence, but there is an occasional feeling that the material is being stretched: some quotations, even long ones, appear more than once in the book. Would other sources have shed further light on these lives? Popp finds only occasional references to share ownership in the letters, suggesting that the couple were not particularly involved in the associational culture of Georgian England. But has he scoured the shareholder registers of local joint-stock companies (do they survive?) to discover how frequently the Shaw and Wilkinson names appear there? Given that this is a relatively slender volume (the main text runs to just 140 pages), some of the extra insights contained in the substantial endnotes (36 pages) could usefully have been incorporated into the main text to flesh out some of the arguments.

The publishers have not served the author well in that there are large numbers of typographical errors throughout the text; there are also some transcription inconsistencies between quotes which appear more than once. Despite this, the book is appealingly written and jargon-free, and Popp's deep respect for, and sensitivity towards, the subjects of his study is manifest. Moreover, the author is alert to the implications of his findings for recent work on gender and the family by historians such as Margot Finn, Eleanor Gordon, Gwyneth Nair, John Tosh, and Amanda Vickery, and as such, the book is as much a contribution to social

history as it is to business history. Historians working in both fields will find much here to interest and engage them.

Though Popp has published several articles based on the Wilkinson-Shaw archives, this book in no sense duplicates his previous work: its scope is far wider than that. His research has rescued two fascinating Georgian lives from obscurity, a mission sealed by his forthcoming entry for the couple in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. More importantly, in this charming study he has succeeded in his aim of humanising business history, and the implications of his approach are profound. Popp convincingly demonstrates that real lives do not fit the neat categories created by historians, and to recognise the 'porosity' of the boundaries between these categories poses the challenge of developing new ways of thinking and writing about entrepreneurial lives (p. 86). It is to be hoped that other historians take up this challenge and produce work as stimulating and original as this.

Other reviews:

EH.net

http://eh.net/book_reviews/entrepreneurial-families-business-marriage-and-life-early-nineteenth-century [2]

Source URL: <http://history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1417>

Links

[1] <http://history.ac.uk/reviews/item/62907>

[2] http://eh.net/book_reviews/entrepreneurial-families-business-marriage-and-life-early-nineteenth-century