

BOOK REVIEWS

Nicholas R. Amor, *From wool to cloth: the triumph of the Suffolk clothier*

(Bungay: RefineCatch Ltd, 2016). Pages 308, including figures. £20 hardback.

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This book is about the Suffolk textile industry in the late Middle Ages, and, as such, represents the first full-length monograph on the subject. It is divided into two parts, the first of which comprises two chapters that set the Suffolk textile industry within its national context. The second part consists of four chapters that trace the production of woollen cloth in Suffolk from the sheep's back through to its distribution via woolmen, and the spinners, weavers, dyers, fullers and shearsmen who created the finished article. The penultimate chapter before the book's short conclusion concerns the clothiers who marketed the cloth.

Nicholas R. Amor uses information from a wide variety of sources including wills, occupations of men and women in textiles from the poll tax of 1381, and the scale and geography of cloth production revealed by cloth inspections documented in the Suffolk aulnage accounts of the 1460s. He is to be especially commended for his groundbreaking use of pleas of debt, trespass and other misdemeanours extracted from the thousands of cases recorded in the rolls of the Court of Common Pleas. In part he has benefited from the Anglo-American Legal Tradition (AALT) project at the University of Houston, which has photographed the original plea roll documents and indexed each case for the majority of the late medieval examples of this class of records. Amor looked at some 60 rolls, which date from between 1381 to 1530, representing in excess of 250,000 cases. He has clearly made significant use of the AALT indexes, but has also done a great deal of work with the originals – a third of the rolls he cites are not yet covered by the AALT. These records enable Amor to reconstruct in great detail the various elements and actors in the medieval Suffolk textile industry, and set them in context.

The first chapter is ambitious in scope, comparing the scale of the Suffolk textile industry with that of the rest of England at the end of the fifteenth century. In addition to surveying the existing regional literature, Amor underpins his discussion with evidence of 2,326 cloth workers mentioned in plea rolls from the period 1483–1500. He concludes that by 1500 Suffolk was the premier textile county, both in terms of cloth production, and in terms of the numbers of cloth workers and clothiers. This pre-eminence of Suffolk is perhaps open to question. Cloth

production is based on aulnage data of the 1460s, which suffers from the problem that while the information for Suffolk is relatively accurate, the figures for some of the other major textiles counties are understated. Recent work by Sugden using a sample of pleas of debt in the AALT indexes for the period 1483–1524, weighted to take account of the effect of county populations, ranked Suffolk behind Yorkshire and Somerset. Still, at the end of the day, differences in the relative ranks of different counties are not crucial to the book's argument. Even if Suffolk may not have been the premier textile county, it was still of great importance.

The second chapter examines the success of the industry in Suffolk as compared to elsewhere in terms of the influence of physical geography, economic factors, adoption of technology and societal differences. This is the least satisfactory part of the book, although in part this reflects the difficulty of the exercise. Attempts to explain the differential location of an industry are fraught enough for the data-rich nineteenth century (see for example Crafts and Wolf's work on the geography of the cotton textile industry in Britain in 1838), but this reviewer agrees with Mark Bailey that for Suffolk in the late Middle Ages, the sources are simply too weak for robust conclusions to be drawn.

The real meat of the book is in the second section. Here Amor's innovative quantification and mapping of the occupational and debt data from common pleas is deployed to striking effect. In the third chapter the geography of wool production is revealed by mapping court cases that mention sheep or shepherds. There is also much that is new concerning the distribution of wool by woolmen, including typical journey distances of woolmen carrying fleeces (10 and 20 miles). Cloth production and dyeing, the subject of the next two chapters, again provides much new and interesting information concerning spinsters, weavers, fullers and dyers, such as the insignificant contribution of fulling mills to the industry. The penultimate chapter on the rise of the clothier is particularly powerful. The plea data show rapid growth in the number of clothiers from 1440, with a disproportionate concentration in the hundred of Babergh in terms of numbers, wealth and connections to the lucrative London market. This, coupled with evidence for their development of the putting-out system, with clothiers bypassing woolmen by buying direct from producers, and debt evidence, demonstrates that clothiers had come to dominate the industry before 1500.

While there is much to like about this book, there are also some puzzling anomalies. In a number of instances it is not clear which common plea rolls provide the evidence behind particular sections. For example, database CP40B, which underpins a number of figures and tables in the book, is given a date of 1480–1500, and is variably described as being based on eight and ten plea rolls. In fact, the National Archive references given in the text are for 11 plea rolls, which date between 1483 and 1500 (p. 24 and p. 222). The inclusion of 14 maps is to be applauded, but their intelligibility suffers from the names of towns being so small as to be unreadable, and the absence of conventional legends. Quantification of the data is also very basic and on occasion could be presented much more clearly. These criticisms do not detract from the overall value of this book. It not only fills a significant gap in the historiography of the textile industry, but its pioneering use of tens of thousands of court records, an approach that could

be applied elsewhere besides, has enormous potential for a more nuanced understanding of economic development in the late medieval and early modern periods.

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Clifton Hood, *In pursuit of privilege: a history of New York City's upper class and the making of a metropolis*

(New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). Pages xviii + 488, including figures and maps. £30 hardback and ebook.

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Every society has its economic and political elites. Yet how and to what extent they form and operate as a more or less coherent and enduring upper class, integrated through dense networks of social relations and sharing a distinctive self-understanding, lifestyle and world view, varies substantially over space and time. One of the major achievements of Clifton Hood's history of New York's upper class is its courageous long-term perspective, covering from 1750 until the present. On the one hand, this enables him to propose a number of space-specific, path-dependent characteristics and institutions fundamental to the construction of the city's upper class; on the other, it allows him to highlight systematically the shifting strategies deployed by the upper class to reposition, reorganise and indeed reinvent itself during a number of transformative historical periods. In this respect, Hood's study is a welcome addition to existing historical scholarship on New York's elite, which tends to focus on more constrained periods, and on the Gilded Age in particular.

Since the eighteenth century, New York's upper class has obviously changed considerably in terms of size and socio-occupational composition, but, as Hood argues, less in term of its shared world view and mentality. Not so restrained by the religious and political ideals that stimulated elite formation in Boston and Philadelphia, New York's elite have, according to Hood, always been 'bolder in their quest for wealth, prestige and power' and at the same time more receptive to new people and open to new ideas (p. xi). In a chronologically organised series of chapters, loosely focusing on the 1750s, 1780s and 1790s, the 1820s, 1860s, 1890s, 1940s, and the 1970s and beyond, he elegantly elaborates on this key idea, although the comparative perspective that strengthens his opening chapters gradually disappears as a methodological tool. Instead, Hood increasingly pays attention to the ways in which established members of the upper class defined and organised themselves in relation to the *nouveau riche* as well as to the middle and working classes. In this context the 'comparatively dynamic, open and aggressive' character