

An Assessment of Family and Business During the Industrial Revolution, by Hannah Barker
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In *Family and Business During the Industrial Revolution*, Hannah Barker sets out to examine one of the most transformative periods in world history through the perspective of the previously underappreciated voices of the lower-middle class. To maintain a focused and coherent scope, Barker concentrates her investigation to the north-west of England, particularly Manchester and Liverpool. A notably strategic choice as these urban centers bore witness to some of the most significant socio-economic transformations of the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth century. This work explores the lived experiences of individuals that owned and operated small enterprises during this period, which are crucial to understanding the role that the evolving urban and economic landscapes played in family dynamics. Barker's central argument underscores the profound impact that the Industrial Revolution had on both traditional familial structures, and the way in which businesses were organized and operated. In essence, *Family and Business* provides a nuanced analysis as to how the interconnectedness of economic practices and family life transformed the trajectory of industrialization and British social dynamics.

Hannah Barker's book has contributed greatly to the historiography of this topic through its emphasis on the intersection of family and business. The most common narrative accredits industrial giants and financial elites with the successes of the early Industrial Revolution, but Barker redirects this focus towards the profound implications of the Revolution on familial structures and social dynamics.¹ One of the hallmark features of her work is her distinct separation from more conventional literature of this era that focuses on the technological aspects of industrialization. Rather, she presents a more human-centric perspective by connecting the significance of family relationships to the broader economic and social contexts. This book is

¹ Hannah Barker, *Family and Business during the Industrial Revolution*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): 4.

primarily divided into three thematic sections consisting each of two chapters in chronological order. This paper will analyze the contents of this book through the sub-arguments presented in each of the sections.

The first two chapters simultaneously reinforce Barker's central argument and present a sub-argument that examines how the changing nature of property ownership and inheritance practices during the industrial age reshaped familial structures. Barker substantiates these claims with the analyses of 254 wills produced by middle-class tradesmen from Liverpool and Manchester.² Notably, Barker's sample discovered that in sixty-three percent of inheritance cases the widow was to take over the family business, regardless of what the will indicated.³ The use of this statistic is paramount to building an accurate depiction of women's role in business, as contemporary writers such as William Wright tend to bemoan the idea that they were integral to its operations.⁴ Moreover, there is "little indication that they [widows] were unacquainted with business and unprepared to take over the reins,"⁵ which suggests that middle-class women were becoming increasingly involved in the economy. The parameters of this study are slightly limited by the small focus-group, but Barker's ability to recognize this and provide further studies with differing statistical outcomes confirms her commitment to ethical research and instills trust with her audience.⁶

Barker makes another intriguing revelation from the sampled wills that demonstrate a widespread divergence from traditional, male favoured, gender-based inheritance patterns. Evidently, in less than ten percent of these wills made by tradesmen with both male and female

² Barker, *Family and Business*, 19.

³ Barker, *Family and Business*, 38.

⁴ Barker, *Family and Business*, 38.

⁵ Barker, *Family and Business*, 38.

⁶ Barker, *Family and Business*, 39.

children was the estate divided unequally in the male's favour.⁷ There is also a discernable concern for protecting the inheritance of female relatives from interlopers, which suggests a newfound importance placed on the financial autonomy of women, as well as a heightened awareness of legal practices.⁸ Barker reflects on the motivations of will-makers – exploring the duality between domestic arrangements and the desire to control one's property in compliance to social norms – and concludes that tradesmen showed a strong sense of emotional duty to their immediate blood and marital ties above all else.⁹ Furthermore, her examination of various relating case studies are effective in exhibiting the intertwined complexities of familial hierarchies and estate claims, but their volume can be overbearing and confusing to follow as Barker fails to provide the relevant legal background information.

In the second section of the book, or the third and fourth chapters, the study's focus is on the familial relationships of tradesmen. Barker's examination of the fractures within the familial power dynamics of this focus group is necessary and revelatory, as most scholarship about this topic refers to 'the family' as a consistently cohesive unit and tends to overlook internal strife and obscure the operations of family-decision making.¹⁰ This section does lack the relevant inclusion of secondary sources, other than to critique the analyses of other scholars like Raymond Pahl, but her continuous use of primary material supplements this limitation.¹¹ She argues that it was commonplace for the death of a head household to trigger familial disputes, so much so that their wills were often accompanied with guidelines on how their wishes should be enforced.¹² Barker once again substantiates her narrative flawlessly through the use of court

⁷ Barker, *Family and Business*, 57.

⁸ Barker, *Family and Business*, 48.

⁹ Barker, *Family and Business*, 48.

¹⁰ Barker, *Family and Business*, 78.

¹¹ Barker, *Family and Business*, 79.

¹² Barker, *Family and Business*, 82.

documents from individuals such as Joseph Clare, that even threatened disinheritance if his will was taken to court.¹³ These primary documents provide to be useful while seeking to understand the internal relationships of small business families as they serve as a detailed window into the ways in which these businesses were run.¹⁴

In the latter portion of this section, Barker introduces a counterargument to her previous position by highlighting the conventional familial structure as a cohesive unit characterized by a collective duty to their household.¹⁵ Interestingly, this mirrors the same discourse she criticized Pahl for in the former chapter. However, Barker's substantial methodological shift, primarily from the examination of legal documents, such as wills and court hearings, to the exploration of diaries, memoirs, and letters, does account for the discrepancies in her argument. Perhaps, this shift serves to exemplify the depth of her analysis, as it demonstrates her capacity to depict both the professional familial relationships emboldened by the Industrial Revolution and the emotional core of traditional family structures.

A letter written by a grocer named James Fildes, addressed to his wife Mary and her relatives, was a particularly striking inclusion by Barker. He asked Mary to convey his 'affectionate kiss for me,' to her mother, and employed expressions of adoration, such as 'loving', when addressing Mary's siblings.¹⁶ Barker observes that the use of such affectionate language between non-blood relatives varied from one family to another. Nevertheless, this examination of a personal testimonial unveils the "extent to which close family members were bound together by emotional attachments, and, in particular, love."¹⁷ At its core, this chapter

¹³ Barker, *Family and Business*, 82.

¹⁴ Barker, *Family and Business*, 86.

¹⁵ Barker, *Family and Business*, 118.

¹⁶ Barker, *Family and Business*, 153.

¹⁷ Barker, *Family and Business*, 155.

compellingly portrays familial structures in the Industrial Revolution not as a mere “knot of individual interests,”¹⁸ but as an interconnected web of individuals bound together by a balance of love and duty.

In the third and final section of her work, Barker argues that the industrial era witnessed the amalgamation of domestic and commercial spheres into one physical space. She examines the consequences that the fluidity of these boundaries had on family life. Once more, she critiques conventional scholarship of this subject, this time for its separation of home life and work life. To substantiate her argument, Barker draws on variety of diaries, trade directories, archaeological findings pertaining to home layouts, and real-estate advertisements that overwhelmingly suggest that there was rarely a strict demarcation between family and business for families involved in trade.¹⁹ A case in point is the home of grocer and chandler, William Dickinson. Despite the larger size of Dickinson’s residence compared to typical trade households, Barker highlights the absence of a “parlour” – a separate space from where the family slept that was used to receive and entertain guests.²⁰ The commercial space almost always occupied the central space of the property, which makes it hard to escape the conclusion that the structure of most trade families centered around the fusion of business and domestic relations. Further, this portrayal suggests that these families housed little concern for adhering to modern conceptions of privacy.

Barker advances another enthralling argument highlighting the potential disruption of traditional family structures when both relatives and employees operated tightly under the same roof.²¹ Such as in the case brought before the Court of Exchequer in 1813, the opportunity for

¹⁸ Barker, *Family and Business*, 155.

¹⁹ Barker, *Family and Business*, 156.

²⁰ Barker, *Family and Business*, 193.

²¹ Barker, *Family and Business*, 212.

relationships to develop between unmarried and unrelated men and women was a threat to smooth running households.²² This is a strong point as it shows the consequences that arose due to an intrinsic lack of public-private divide. Barker can recognize that privacy was an ideal, not a reality, for trading households, which indicates her deep understanding of the external forces that shaped family dynamics throughout industrialization.

Barker excels in delivering complex historical data in digestible way that will be useful for scholarly audiences, as her writing is clear, concise, and detailed. Her abundant use of primary sources ensures her work is both historically accurate and thoroughly researched. Although, the plethora of personal accounts from tradesmen show large variations between familial structures and presents difficulties when trying to draw singular conclusions about the parallel between family and business. Nonetheless, the sources she utilizes provide a rich foundation for supporting her central thesis and provide readers with the unique ability to understand the economic realities of the time by connecting with real human stories. Further, Barker's evaluation of evidence is impressive, as her blended use of formal legal documents and personal accounts provides a multi-dimensional view of industrialization that is both professional and emotional. Her logical structure is sound, and she amply connects her sub-arguments to her central thesis in a way that is easy to follow.

Overall, this book makes significant contributions to the study of economic, cultural, social, familial, and urban dimensions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Her central thesis, which is substantially supported by sub-arguments and historical documentation, illustrates the profound and complex transformations of familial structures and business practices during the Industrial Revolution. Moreover, the new ideas presented in this book are effective in

²² Barker, *Family and Business*, 212.

demonstrating the relevant influence that human relationships have on the economy. Despite this being a heavily researched area of scholarship, Barker's well-written and comprehensive study illuminates the often-forgotten significance of the lower-middle class.

Bibliography

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