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Reviewed by Cynthia Johnston

Covering the dynamic period of cultural change in late medieval England between 1350 and 1550, John Lee’s captivating book, The Medieval Clothier, examines an industry that played a crucial role in the first industrial revolution as well as its better-known descendent. In this year of the bicentenary of John Ruskin’s birth in 1819, it is especially enlightening to see the connections between what has been termed the first industrial revolution in the late medieval period and the nominal Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Both of these industrial revolutions were powered by development in the production of cloth, from the natural fibers of indigenous wool in the late medieval period and from imported cotton in the modern era.

As Lee notes in his introduction to this deeply researched and nuanced study, the beneficiaries of the revolution in the manufacture and export of wool in the late Middle Ages were not only the producers and manufacturers of the wool itself, but those associated players in the cloth-making process: “makers of dye, butter and oil, fuller’s earth and teasels” (p. 2). In the second industrial revolution, fortunes were also made by those who produced the ropes that turned the cotton looms, the suppliers of spindles and lubricating grease. Lee’s study examines not only individuals who made great fortunes from their entrepreneurial pursuits—Thomas Paycocke of Coggeshall, the Springs of Lavenham, William Stumpe of Malmesbury, and John Winchcombe II of Newbury—but also the wide range of individuals who made their livings, at a great variety of economic levels, as clothiers. Lee makes an important distinction in defining “clothiers” as encompassing individuals involved in both the production and the marketing of the finished products produced from wool. It is this linked commercial activity that engendered the astonishing economic success of some members of this demographic. These fortunes enabled negotiation of class structures for these late medieval entrepreneurs, as it did for the cotton barons of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Technological innovations such as the
invention of the fulling mill in thirteenth-century England provide a striking connection to the innovative water-powered inventions of the eighteenth century: the spinning jenny, the water frame, and the spinning mule. The fulling mills mechanized the process of cleaning the woven cloth of oils, and the thickening of the cloth, which was accomplished by pounding the cloth with large wooden hammers. Water-powered “tappet-wheels” accomplished in a few hours what had traditionally taken four or five days to complete (p. 53). The shift from using a distaff and spindle to operating a wheel possibly tripled productivity, as did using a horizontal as opposed to a vertical loom. It was these creative leaps of technological invention, combined with the layering of commercial infrastructures connecting producers, manufacturers, and sellers, all delicately balanced upon a dependence on credit that engendered the entrepreneurial zest of this medieval industry.

Lee’s book is structured on six chapters, each explicating a defining component of the clothiers in their historical context. The book is perhaps most fascinating to a nonspecialist with regard to the intricacies of the production process: preparation of the wool, spinning, weaving, fulling and tentering, finishing, and dyeing, as well as subsequent transportation and marketing. These processes are clearly explained and excellently illustrated by means of photographs of surviving objects, as well as their representation in architectural motifs, such as the charming corbels depicting fulling stocks in clothier John Lane’s (d.1529) aisle in his church in Culollopton, Devon. The chapters “Identifying Clothiers” and “Clothiers and Government” provide lucid analysis of the fragility of the credit-based delivery systems that provided the none-too-stable structure of the industry. Clothiers most often provided their products to London merchants before payment. When crisis interrupted the payment process, clothiers were unable to pay their workers, sometimes precipitating financial collapse and civil unrest.

The Medieval Clothier contains a very useful vocabulary section, which I would have liked at the front of the volume. The book is generously illustrated with diagrams, graphs, and photographs including a splendid color portrait, dated 1550, of John Winchcombe the Younger (Jack of Newbury), who does look a bit of a lad. Literary scholars will be glad of the references made to clothiers in the works of Chaucer, Gower, and Skelton, and art historians will be fascinated by the shared methodologies and materials used in the process of dyeing and in transforming pigments into paints for the decoration of manuscripts and medieval interiors. The book may be aimed primarily at medievalists with interests in economic history, particularly in trade and taxation, and at those who study the history of entrepreneurship and social history, but the general reader will also be delighted by this appealing,
beautifully organized book. And certainly, all those with the surnames of Weaver, Webb, Webster, Fuller, Walker, Dyer, and Lister, and there are many, will find themselves in the realm of family history as Lee narrates the daily lives of their ancestors.

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Reviewed by Ryan Patrick Hanley

This volume gathers essays from ten eminent contributors (with an introduction by four equally eminent editors) to honor the scholarly legacy of the late Istvan Hont. Hont (1947–2013), a leading historian of eighteenth-century political and economic ideas, was a prominent member of what has come to be known as the Cambridge School. Collectively the essays in this volume helpfully illuminate his distinctive substantive and methodological contributions to the Cambridge approach and also, in a number of cases, fruitfully take up themes of his to break new ground in their own right.

The volume begins with a very fine introductory essay by the four editors. It aims both to document how Hont’s own life history shaped his scholarship and to present the political and philosophical questions that Hont addressed through his work. On the former front, the editors helpfully call attention to the degree to which Hont’s early life in postwar communist Hungary helped to create the scholar he would become. The son of a senior official in the National Planning Office and the Ministry of Agriculture, and himself a member of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party, Hont came of age in a “privileged and highly political setting” that both afforded him the resources to pursue an academic career and led him to be deeply concerned with the past, present, and future of the socialist state (p. 6). After completing his Hungarian dissertation on David Hume and Scotland, Hont defected to the West in 1975, going first to study with Hugh Trevor-Roper in Oxford and then to King’s College, Cambridge for the project “Society and Political Economy, 1750–1850.”