

Schmiechen, James A. *Sweated Industries and Sweated Labour: The London Clothing Trades, 1860-1914*. Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1983. Pp. xii, 209. Tables, index

Mary Kinnear

Volume 14, Number 2, October 1985

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1018013ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018013ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Kinnear, M. (1985). Review of [Schmiechen, James A. *Sweated Industries and Sweated Labour: The London Clothing Trades, 1860-1914*. Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1983. Pp. xii, 209. Tables, index]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 14(2), 227–228.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1018013ar>

of interest to all scholars concerned about the North American fur trade and business history in general.

Lawrence H. Larsen
Department of History
University of Missouri-Kansas City

Dennis, Richard J. *English Industrial Cities of the Nineteenth Century: A Social Geography*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984. Pp. xiv, 368. Tables, maps, index. \$49.50.

This is a most valuable addition to the Cambridge Studies in Historical Geography. At the core of the work is Dennis's own research on community and interaction in Huddersfield, but he ranges beyond this to provide a synthesis of the many recent detailed studies of other nineteenth century cities, providing *en route* a sustained critical and theoretical dialogue between the geographer and the historian. The historian is warned against too simple an invocation of spatial determinacy—“from shapes on the ground to shapes in society”—and geographers are alerted to the mediating role of class consciousness and social stratification in testing the ecological variables that pattern their model making. Overall the author seeks to promote a creative liaison between the positivism of his own first discipline and the more humanist, experiential perspective of today's social historian, applying this approach to central themes in the history of his cities: uniqueness and generality; segregation and community.

Thus on the first theme, where modern research emphasises diversities among the new industrial towns, Dennis argues for the continuing validity of contemporary testimonies to their general similarity, since it was these perceptions that governed social relations and decision making among the Victorians (though this is as much the history of ideology as of experience). On the second duality, the book is particularly good. Contemporaries were equally convinced of the great fact of segregation, usually as an explanation for class alienation and urban degeneration. In fact, physical segregation of the classes can now be shown to have been exaggerated, its mythic persistence a function of a more deeply wrought defensive social and psychic separation. Dennis is not arguing the primacy of past or present knowledge but an appreciation of different views of reality.

He takes issue with treatments of the city that remain too static or deal with change by stages rather than process, and his concern to relate temporal to spatial determinacy is considered within the specificities of daily life as well as longer range shifts in social and economic development. Chapters on public transport and the journey to work, the geography of housing, and residential mobility and persistence effec-

tively combine this dynamicism with attention to structure and agency.

The reviewer's test of any book whose range and eclecticism (however properly instructive and discriminating) outruns his own will lie ultimately in its handling of his own speciality. Thus Dennis's propositions on working-class community structure appear questionable by his reliance upon the concept of a labour aristocracy, at a time when many historians seem ready to discard it. (He seems also to award more importance to Neale's formulations of class than historians do). But yet his overall discussion of this area is so well done that it may serve to revalidate the concept. And his general proposition that *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* are co-existing states of experience rather than historically specific and mutually exclusive entities is profoundly illuminating for any historian trying to reconcile views of the late nineteenth century working class as locked into the dense affectivity of the neighbourhood *and* afflicted by the desolations of an anomic mass society.

For all his evocation of the experiential Dennis is most at home with a technical methodology, and here his book serves as a sophisticated primer as well as a critical review to the field, for he illustrates as well as discusses the use of statistical analysis applied to census records, directories and marriage registers. The extensive notation and comprehensive bibliography also add the virtue of the reference handbook to those of an effective synthesis and a provocative analysis. This is essential reading for the modern urban historian.

Peter Bailey
Department of History
University of Manitoba

Schmiechen, James A. *Sweated Industries and Sweated Labour: The London Clothing Trades, 1860-1914*. Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1983. Pp. xii, 209. Tables, index.

James Schmiechen takes an analytical and chronological view of sweating in London during the nineteenth century. His argument is that sweating was a result of industrial growth, not stagnation. Skilled artisans were replaced not by factories but by mechanised outwork. Effects of the sweating system included “social compression,” by which he means that workers remained to live in the inner city, near their sources of work, and, he argues, sweating “perpetuated many of the preindustrial values of working class women” by requiring women to perform their paid work in their home, spatially integrated with family responsibilities. Women continued their preindustrial responsibility as managers of

the family economy and avoided the starkness of workhouse existence by converting their homes into sweating dens as the "only way out of poverty." Not that sweating made many people rich: neither villains nor victims loom large in Schmiechen's account.

The first half of the book examines definitions and the causes of sweating. The term originated in the tailoring and shoemaking trades and involved primarily work performed in unregulated premises, usually a worker's home, where there was disregard for hours and condition of work and for quality of goods. A sweated worker would take goods from an employer's shop or factory and then work on them further as an outworker. The causes of sweating were manifold: Schmiechen lists the rise of foreign and provincial competition to the London clothing industries; the fall of the early trade unions and the end of the apprenticeship tradition; the development of technological innovations, particularly the sewing machine, which made many skilled jobs obsolete; "consumerism" in the new era of mass production and mass consumption, especially the new emphasis on clothing as "the mark of those who had moved into the realm of Victorian respectability"; and he looks too at the notion of an oversupply of labour, especially by the two bogeys of the trade unions of the end of the century: women and Jews. He is concerned to differentiate sweating from the preindustrial "putting-out" of the domestic system in textiles before the advent of the factories. He argues that at best, the relationship of the outwork system with the factory system was symbiotic; at its worst, it was "parasitic." While neatly describing the features he found, this does not tell us enough about the relative significance of its various causes.

The book's second half looks at the role of both the trade unions and the state in reducing sweating. Trade unions were unclear whether they should include sweated workers in their membership. Even when some unions tried to organise among sweaters, they were singularly unsuccessful, not only because the unions had no unified approach to women and Jews, both characterized as willing to take less pay and work in poorer conditions than male unionists. Mainly the unions failed to recruit because the work force was isolated and splintered, employment was casual, and many of the women carried also the double job of household work: widows and married women were more numerous, Schmiechen argues, than the official government statistics in Census returns and factory inspectors' reports suggest. It was not the trade unions, therefore, which effectively ended sweating.

State regulation achieved what trade unions could not. Schmiechen argues that in the late 1860s and 1870s the state, by its unenforced 1867 Workshop Act, "quite unwittingly" encouraged the growth of sweated labour by laying down too stringent requirements for employers to follow. The work therefore left the regulated factories and workshops and flowed into the sweating dens. A generation later, however, fortified by the shocked public opinion roused by the

1906 Daily News "Sweated Industries Exhibition," pressured by a newly formed National Anti-Sweating League, and bolstered by the arguments of a Conference on a Minimum Wage, the government in 1909 legislated a Trade Boards Act. This Act established wage boards, with employee representation, which fixed a minimum hourly wage for the quarter of a million workers in four general areas employing unskilled labour, including the tailoring trades. Schmiechen concludes that the resulting Trade Boards were important in protecting and raising wages before, during, and after World War I and then prevented wages from falling as fast as other wages in the early 1920s. Higher wages, Schmiechen argues, resulted in increased worker productivity, better employer organisation and production management, which in turn resulted in higher revenues, and "proved that sweated wages were not economically necessary." A happy ending: but the two pages allotted to discussion of this topic could well be expanded.

The book hints at the various reasons why sweating lasted — and indeed continues — as a feature of women's work in the needle trades. However, there is no clear analysis of cause and effect. Nor is there more than a fleeting reference to the role of sweating, and, by extension, of other unskilled, low paying work, in providing an alternative to a state welfare system in the alleviation of destitution.

Mary Kinnear
Department of History
St. John's College
University of Manitoba

Jo Ann Ruckman. *The Moscow Business Elite: A Social and Cultural Portrait of Two Generations, 1840-1905*. DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1984.

A sudden flurry of publications has illuminated the problem of that missing Russian bourgeoisie which failed to transform Russia into a liberal democracy before World War I. Recent studies by Thomas C. Owen, *Capitalism and Politics in Russia: A Social History of the Moscow Merchants, 1855-1905* (1981); Alfred Rieber, *Merchants and Entrepreneurs in Imperial Russia* (1982); and, to some degree, William Gleason, *Alexander Guchkov and the End of the Russian Empire* (1983) have addressed the problem. They come to a similar conclusion, namely, that the Russian business and professional classes were too fragmented to cooperate against a monarchy which was, after all, serving many of them well by sponsoring economic nationalism. Rieber's and Owen's books, in particular, explore a common theme of the *soslovie* (estate) mentality which defined Russian merchant consciousness before the Revolution leading them to defer to the social and political superiors and adopt a defensive strategy to protect their wealth. As a result, the