Helen Doe, Review of Enterprising Women and Shipping in the nineteenth century, Woodbridge,The Boydell Press, 2009, ISBN1843834723(hardback) 286pp. £55

This book is another keystone in the bridge constructed in recent years by researchers keen to lead us across the chasm to a fuller history of work than that left to us by the majority male body of work on the subject. It is now becoming obvious that women have worked in a far wider range and depth of occupations than previously thought. Doe’s detailed survey of five smaller seaports of the period has unearthed a mass of information about women’s involvement in owning, managing and even constructing ships in the heyday of that most masculine-seeming world of the wooden-walled sailing ship.

Thorough introductory chapters cover women’s opportunities and the legal limitations in the financial and legal constraints of the time, in which some surprising loopholes seem to have allowed women to become businesswomen. Many of Doe’s exemplar women seem to have come to their maritime involvements by inheritance and other unplanned circumstances and many have certainly made the best of things for themselves.

The five ports which Doe researched are Fowey and Exeter in the south, Whitehaven and Whitby in the north and Kings’ Lynn in the east. These may have been smaller than the great national ports of London, Liverpool, Cardiff or Glasgow, but were locally important and not restricted to single trades. They were large enough to include ship building as well as ship owning and management and often fishing too, plus the many supporting trades ashore that the ships and men afloat relied upon. Doe’s investigations into registers, wills and other documents has uncovered a surprising amount of personal detail about the women’s lives. All ports had communities of the women left behind by fishermen for a few days or weeks or merchant seafarers or Royal Navy men for months or years, and the women soon looked to themselves and each other for support. Doe shows us how women were everywhere, doing everything available, as chandlers, ropemakers, blacksmiths even. Amazingly, and I had read this elsewhere, so was intrigued to see it crop up in Doe’s research too, a number of women were famous in seaports for running very effective navigational theory schools at which ordinary seafarers could prepare for the demanding examinations to become officers. A few even became ship builders and successfully tendered in the competition to build naval ships.

The ship owners take up the majority of the book, as Doe analyses how the women became owners, usually of x/64th shares in a ship or ships, but occasionally even of whole ships. This share ownership system meant a lot of people in one area had an interest in a ship and they had to agree on its management. Since Doe found so many women holding majority shares, quite a few were also ship managers and hence must have had formidable accountancy skills and a knowledge of the international trades, and the strength of character to work with the ships’ captains, who then considered themselves “masters below god alone”. Whilst the widowed and single had more personal freedom to pursue whatever interest or occupation they could, and tended to be more active operators of their own share portfolios, even some married women flourished when the opportunity arose, buying and selling shares in their own names. Jane Slade is but one of many women involved in managing namesake ships, whose lives are cameoed in tantalising snippets throughout the book. If I have any criticism of this fabulously detailed and meticulously researched book, it is that I would have quite liked a more continuous ‘story’ of some of the women, rather than see them popping up here and there as illustrations of some point or other.

Lest we think that Doe’s analyses are based on small samples, as can be common in researching the histories of women’s work, she has uncovered a staggering total of nearly 900 female ship shareholders in just these 5 ports. Doe correctly concludes that a new history of middle class women is emerging but she has also shown how working class women too had opportunities around maritime communities and frequently made the step upwards, even if some were unlucky and lost it all at sea. Doe’s concluding tribute that women, of the type and period she has so carefully researched, played a significant part in keeping Britain’s ships at sea and trading successfully, is, I think, another hidden history dragged out from behind the tiny print and scrawling handwriting of ancient archives.

Although this is clearly an academic work, transposed from a thesis, and hence not a lightweight read, it will certainly be of interest to readers from the ports concerned, researchers of business, maritime or gender history and to the general reader who is interested to learn the unexpected about our country’s trading heyday.

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