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**Bringing Businesswomen to a Count:
A Transnational Methodological Experiment Researching Nineteenth-century
Businesswomen**

CATHERINE BISHOP, JENNIFER ASTON & CARRY VAN LIESHOUT

This article is part of an innovative experiment to explore the influence of methodologies on the drawing of historical conclusions. Two historians researching nineteenth-century businesswomen in different places compared results. One found a preponderance of widows in business in late-nineteenth-century Leeds, estimating 10 per cent of businesses were run by women. The other estimated 15-20 per cent of businesses in Sydney were run by women in the mid-nineteenth century, most by wives. Each used slightly different methods, based around trade directories. Simultaneously, a third historian's big-data analysis of the British census revealed further nuances. This article analyses the strengths and weaknesses of these methods to determine if the differences between places is real or constructed. It explores the relationship between local quantitative data and micro historical studies and how these can contribute to an international story of female economic activity.

Detailed microstudies of particular places at particular times are invaluable in uncovering the idiosyncrasies of individuals, the variety of experience, and the fascinating minutiae of daily lives that broadbrush history can find difficult to evoke. Placing local stories in a global context, however, reveals the peculiarities and specificities of place and time, alongside phenomena that are more widespread. Jennifer Aston investigated women and business in Birmingham and Leeds in the United Kingdom in the second half of the nineteenth century. Catherine Bishop researched businesswomen in Sydney in Australia and Wellington in New Zealand between 1840 and 1880.¹ Having each considered two

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different cities, in Bishop's case across colonial borders, in Aston's across counties, we were aware of the need to look beyond the local and move beyond the assumption that businesswomen were the exceptional features of colonial or particular economies. We both found women in business, but our numbers differed markedly. For example, Aston established that 7 per cent of businesses in the trade directories were listed using the names of female proprietors, most of them widows. Bishop found closer to 20 per cent of businesses in colonial Sydney involved women as managers, partners or proprietors and many were married women.

Through comparative analysis we may address some core questions. Did Sydney have a higher proportion of businesses run by women than Leeds? Were married women in Sydney more likely to run businesses than in Leeds? Was there a fundamental difference between Leeds and Sydney in the presence of wives as business partners? What range of explanations might we develop for such differences? Were female businesswomen a function of the increased scope offered by a new (colonial) economy, where there were more business opportunities, a flattening of the social class structure and where middle-class women had to be 'useful'? Were colonial women simply more entrepreneurial than their British counterparts? These are important questions for feminist and business history, speaking directly to the debates around female suffrage, education and public sphere activity.

However, before addressing any of these questions, we must consider the impact of sources and methodologies on our results. Are the different conclusions we have reached about the proportions of women in business merely the result of our differing methodologies? In the process of answering this question, we discovered a new data source: the British Business Census of Entrepreneurs (BBCE), a data deposit containing information on the business population of Victorian and Edwardian Britain.² Created by

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

¹ Jennifer Aston, *Female Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth Century England: Engagement in the Urban Economy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Catherine Bishop, *Minding Her Own Business: Colonial Businesswomen in Sydney* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2015); Catherine Bishop, *Women Mean Business: Colonial Businesswomen in New Zealand* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2019).

² Robert J. Bennett, Harry Smith, Carry van Lieshout, Piero Monteburro and Gill Newton, *British Business Census of Entrepreneurs, 1851–1911*[data collection], (UK Data Service: SN 8600, 2020), DOI:

members of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, the BBCE makes use of technological advances to analyse individual nineteenth-century census forms. Carry van Lieshout, one of the creators of this database, joins us here in considering how the introduction of the BBCE data has altered the wider picture of female entrepreneurship. Accordingly, this article also reflects on the interaction between large-scale data driven methodologies and intricate local case studies containing richer detail.

Businesswomen in History

This article is one part of a much broader project, spearheaded by two historians with common research interests but now involving more than twenty researchers working around the world. Historians researching economic activities of nineteenth-century women have found them running small businesses in multiple countries, including the US, Canada, Britain, Spain, France, Russia, Italy, Turkey, Chile, Brazil, Angola, Australia and New Zealand.³ Those women were overlooked by almost half a century of feminist scholarship, and have been obscured by the white noise of domesticity rhetoric and historiographical tradition.⁴ As Beatrice Craig noted, ‘historians were disinclined to

[10.5255/UKDA-SN-8600-2](https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8600-2); Robert J. Bennett, Harry Smith, Carry van Lieshout, Piero Montebruno and Gill Newton, *The Age of Entrepreneurship: Business Proprietors, Self-employment and Corporations Since 1851* (London: Routledge, 2019).

³ See Jennifer Aston and Catherine Bishop, eds, *Female Entrepreneurs in the Long Nineteenth Century: A Global Perspective* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). ReWOMEN (Researching Women Of Management and Enterprise Network) <https://www.mq.edu.au/research/research-centres-groups-and-facilities/prosperous-economies/centres/centre-for-workforce-futures/our-research/rewomen> (accessed on 1 September 2020); <https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/about-us/academic-departments/humanities/institute-of-humanities/projects/rewomen> (accessed on 1 September 2020).

⁴ In the case of Australia see Catherine Bishop, ‘Women in the Economy: Reconceptualising Women’s Place in the Public Sphere’, in *How Gender Can Transform the Social Sciences: Innovation and Impact*, ed. Marian Sawer, Fiona Jenkins and Karen Downing (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). For a comprehensive examination of the global historiography of female business ownership see Jennifer Aston and Catherine Bishop, ‘Discovering a Global Perspective’, in *Female Entrepreneurs* ed. Aston and Bishop.

look for [businesswomen]: one does not search for what one believes does not exist'.⁵ In the British, European, North American and Australasian traditions, a woman's natural domain was supposed to be in the home, and so some early feminist historians sought to emphasise that women's domestic work was equal to the political and business affairs of men. Further, they focused on the structural barriers to women's participation in the economy and the gradual progression out of the home and into the public sphere once those barriers lost their power.⁶ Davidoff and Hall's influential work, *Family Fortunes*, which described a retreat by middle-class British women into the domestic sphere, reflected similar arguments by other historians such as Katrina Alford in Australia and Raewyn Dalziel in New Zealand. In France there was Bonnie Smith; in North America, Nancy Cott.⁷ Historians described the limited female employment opportunities, predominantly in domestic service. The new social and labour history also showed no interest — probably they considered female business to be 'petty capitalists' and so not sufficiently marginalised and exploited to warrant consideration.⁸ Businesswomen, being neither 'workers' nor 'homemakers', fell through the cracks.

⁵ Beatrice Craig, *Women and Business since 1500: Invisible Presences in Europe and North America?*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 4.

⁶ See for example Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*, revised edn. (London: Routledge, 2002); Marilyn Lake, 'Feminist history as national history: Writing the political history of women', *Australian Historical Studies* 27, no.106 (1996): 154–69; Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden From History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It* (London: Pluto Press, 1973); Jane Rendall, *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States 1780–1860* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1985); Amanda Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History', *The Historical Journal* 36, no.2 (1993): 383–414.

⁷ Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*; Katrina Alford, *Production or Reproduction?: An Economic History of Women in Australia, 1788-1850* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1984); Raewyn Dalziel, 'The Colonial Helpmeet: Women's Role and the Vote in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand', *New Zealand Journal of History* 11 (1977): 112–23; Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: 'Woman's Sphere' in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978); Bonnie Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class, The Bourgeoises of Northern France in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

⁸ Aston, *Female Entrepreneurship*, 25

Now that historians have, as Beatrice Craig advised, ‘gone looking’ for businesswomen in the nineteenth century, they have discovered more of them than they might have expected. Within national contexts these histories have been important in reframing business and feminist history conversations. To do this, however, they have used different sources in different ways. Fundamentally, this article is concerned with ways of counting. We seek to delineate how many women were in business, what businesses they were running, how long-lasting the businesses were, where they were located and the women’s marital and motherhood status. As demonstrated below, the way we count these women and from what sources affects our results and interpretation. So we begin by looking more closely at sources.

Sources

As ever with the histories of women or other marginalised groups, historical sources are an issue. Women in business were ostensibly in the ‘public’ sphere, more so than domesticated wives and mothers. Yet the documentary sources remain problematic and their type and availability varies greatly across jurisdictions. Different sources lead to different results, so if we want to go beyond national frameworks and make our conclusions more meaningful, we must find ways of making the results of our research comparable across different times and places. Even within the five anglophile jurisdictions of English Canada, the US, the UK, Australia and New Zealand, all of which had similar cultural, economic and legal structures, there are significant differences in the records that were collected and which survive. For example, while trade directories are available in all these places, newspapers are not digitised in Canada, individual census records exist only for Britain and the US, and only Canada and the US have the Dun and Bradstreet credit reports for the nineteenth century.

Census records are vital to our research, although as a way of counting businesswomen they can be problematic. Gendered assumptions influenced the work of data collectors in ways that rendered women’s work less visible.⁹ Such bias was

⁹ See Jane Humphries and Carmen Sarasúa, ‘Off the Record: Reconstructing Women’s Labor Force Participation in the European Past,’ *Feminist Economics* 18 (2012): 39–67.

amplified during the collation of data into statistical reports, further hiding women's work.¹⁰ We can see evidence of the impact of gender on the collation of data in New South Wales in 1871. The colony's chief statistician, Edward Ward, concerned 'not to over-estimate the numbers of those employed', ordered that 'all females who were not clearly stated to be assisting in any of the trades ... irrespectively of age and whether employed in house work or not, were classed under the one head of Domestic Duties'.¹¹ This highlights the importance of considering what we do with data, and of questioning more carefully just how our sources were created. Further, part-time and seasonal work, as well as multiple occupations were hard to capture. In New Zealand, statisticians actually acknowledged that the data they were collecting was potentially flawed because many individuals followed multiple occupations, for example, and many were inclined to,

enter in the Schedules the professions and callings to which they were brought up, or with which they would prefer to be identified (perhaps from a notion of their superior 'respectability') rather than those in which they are most habitually engaged or from which they principally derive their maintenance.¹²

This effect can be mitigated where individual census returns have been reserved. Recent individual census-based research from Britain using the BBCE has uncovered some startling new figures, indicating a far greater proportion of businesswomen in the population than previously thought.¹³ But even this richer data source is flawed because

¹⁰ See Edward Higgs and Amanda Wilkinson, 'Women, Occupations and Work in the Victorian Censuses Revisited', *History Workshop Journal* 81 (2016): 17–38; Sophie McGeevor, 'How Well Did the Nineteenth Century Census Record Women's 'Regular' Employment in England and Wales? A Case Study of Hertfordshire in 1851', *The History of the Family* 19 (2014): 489–512; Leigh Shaw-Taylor, 'Diverse Experiences: the Geography of Adult Female Employment in England and the 1851 census', in *Women's Work in Industrial England: Regional and Local Perspectives*, ed. Nigel Goose (Hatfield: Local Population Studies, 2007), 29–50.

¹¹ New South Wales Census of 1871, Note 90 p 2_xxvi, <https://dataverse.ada.edu.au/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.26193/MP6WRS> (accessed 21 September 2020).

¹² *Results of a Census of the Colony of New Zealand, Taken for the Night of the 1st of March 1874*, VIII https://www3.stats.govt.nz/historic_publications/1874-census/1874-results-census.html (accessed 21 September 2020).

¹³ Carry van Lieshout, Harry Smith and Robert J. Bennett, 'Female Entrepreneurship in England and Wales, 1851–1911' in, *Female Entrepreneurs*, ed. Aston and Bishop. Carry van Lieshout, Harry Smith,

female respondents were also likely to understate their occupations in the interests of keeping up appearances and conforming to popular notions of domesticity. Further, census records represent only one point in every ten years. Evidence from the BBCE of a small group of female business proprietors whose entries can be manually linked throughout their lifespan suggests that women usually maintained the same or a similar occupation over long periods of time. However, they could switch their status from worker to independent business proprietor and vice versa between subsequent census dates, with everything that happened during the ten years in between hidden from the record.¹⁴ Unfortunately, in contrast to England and Wales, in Australia and New Zealand individual census returns were destroyed. All that remains are statistical summaries, with all the gendered assumptions that probably shaped them.

Other records survive in differing states, including probate records, births, deaths and marriage certificates, passenger lists, court records, rate books, maps, insurance records, insolvency records, bank accounts, diaries, letters, and photographs. Few available records tell us much about the actual business of these women's enterprises. Only very occasionally are there actual business records, and these are usually fragmentary. However, even these can be instructive. Individual bank account records, can give some indication of the size and profitability of a business, showing incomings and outgoings and a running total. A surviving customer account book for one small shop run by Susan and John 'Old' Smith in Wellington in New Zealand in the 1860s shows who bought what and how much for in a short period.¹⁵ It did not indicate profit margins, and without comparative records it is difficult to say more than that the store sold a wide variety of goods and had a lot of customers, who included some well-known settlers and, importantly, other businesswomen. The best sources are the Dun and Bradstreet reports, available for North America. These assessed the creditworthiness of small businesses, and while they record the opinion of one (male) inspector at one point in time, they are nevertheless revealing. They have been used by Susan Ingalls Lewis to illustrate the

Robert J. Bennett, and Piero Montebruno, 'Female Entrepreneurship: Business, Marriage and Motherhood in England and Wales, 1851–1911', *Social History* 44 (2019): 440–468.

¹⁴ See examples of Mary Ann Bennett and Emma Smith in Bennett et al., *Age of Entrepreneurship*, 193.

¹⁵ Smith John Sidney, 1808–1880: Account Book, qMS 1826, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington New Zealand.

profitability of women's businesses compared to those conducted by men, and to uncover further evidence of 'hidden' businesswomen, mostly wives who ran businesses nominally in their husband's name.¹⁶

A common source in many jurisdictions is trade directories. These potentially tell us the types, locations, ownership and longevity of businesses. Trade directories have a number of problems, particularly when it comes to finding and following businesswomen. It is rare to find complete runs of directories from multiple publishers for each city. Some directories were subscription only, so only included businesses prepared to pay for the privilege. Others opted not to include certain occupations. One early 1850s Wellington New Zealand directory, for example, had no categories for lodging house keepers, monthly nurses or laundresses, all common businesses for women.¹⁷ Inevitably, the directories can mask as well as reveal business activity. George Hudson continued to be listed as being in business as a music seller in Sydney for at least two years after his death in 1854: in fact his widow was running the business. Some trade directories have three separate listings – by street, by name, by trade – but the entries do not always agree.

Trade directories (like census records) also represent only one point in time when, certainly in colonial towns, people and businesses were very mobile and business ownership could be fluid. Such records present a more static picture of business than reality warranted. Also, some proprietors were excluded from trade directories because they shared a premises with another business. For example, a daughter dressmaker who lived with her father business proprietor was more likely to be excluded from trade directories than a dressmaker who headed her own household.¹⁸ In addition, trade directories often failed to distinguish between employees and independent businesspeople. That is evident in the Leeds directories, for example, in the case of men identified as journeymen. They were employed and contributed to the family economy

¹⁶ Susan Ingalls Lewis, *Unexceptional Women: Female Proprietors in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Albany, New York, 1830–1885* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009).

¹⁷ *The Wellington Almanack for the Year of Our Lord 1853* (Wellington: Wellington Independent, 1853).

¹⁸ Based on a detailed comparison of individuals listed in Trade Directories and census records at two specific locations: the village of Idle and town of Devises.

but were not necessarily business owners. It is unknown if doctors, lawyers or accountants in firms were ‘businessmen’ or ‘employees’. In the UK in the nineteenth century, most male ‘professionals’ worked on their own account or in family firms, so they could be counted as business owners as well as professionals.¹⁹ Similarly, women listed as ‘dressmakers’ could be employees or in business on their own account, and they could be sole or joint ‘breadwinners’ in the family.

The digitisation of newspapers in several countries, including the US, Australia, New Zealand and the UK, has enabled researchers to trace businesswomen across time, between addresses and through different married names, thus overcoming the limitations of the census and trade directories.²⁰ This research reveals that women’s businesses were often as long-lived as those of similar size conducted by men. Newspaper advertisements can tell us what was being sold or offered as a service, and sometimes, but not always, we find out how much was being charged. Insolvency records sometimes provide tantalising glimpses behind the scenes, especially in the interviews between the bankrupt and the Official Receiver and the accounts section where we can hear the bankrupt’s story in their own words.²¹ Court cases reported in newspapers can also provide intriguing snippets of information, including details about who was really running a business. Sometimes, as in the case of Mary Ann Fourness who traded as a chemist from 10 Tanfield and 17 Kirkgate, Leeds, we would know nothing other than the name and location of her firm, as recorded in trade directory, were it not for a report in *The Pharmaceutical Journal of Great Britain* telling us that she appeared in court in 1881, charged with having illegally manufactured explosives. The account provides some vital details about her business that

¹⁹ Laurence Brockliss, *The Professions in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ESRC Project number ES/K005138/1 <http://www.victorianprofessions.ox.ac.uk/index.html> (accessed 1 September 2020)?

²⁰ See Aston, *Female Entrepreneurship*; Hannah Barker, *The Business of Women: Female Enterprise and Urban Development in Northern England 1760–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Bishop, *Minding Her Own Business and Women Mean Business*; Alison Kay, *The Foundations of Female Entrepreneurship: Enterprise, Home and Household in London, c. 1800–1870* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009); Nicola Phillips, *Women in Business, 1700–1850* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2006).

²¹ Jennifer Aston and Paolo Di Martino, ‘Risk, Success, and Failure: Female and Male Entrepreneurship in Late Victorian and Edwardian England’, *Economic History Review* 70, no. 3 (2017): 837–858.

could otherwise be never known.²² She also left a detailed last will and testament that tells us much about her children and the provision she made for them. For example we learn that although her son Robert worked with her in the business ‘Mary Ann Fourness & Son’ for many years, he had to wait until his mother died before he was officially handed control of the firm. We also learn that Mary Ann bequeathed valuable items of jewellery to each of her daughters, Sarah, Florence and Emily but, more importantly, created trusts for them which would provide an income of fifty pounds per year, paid in quarterly instalments. These trusts were created with specific instructions preventing any current or future husband from interfering with the income, in the event of her daughter’s death, the trust would be transferred to their children or, in the event of no children being alive, to her surviving sisters. While fifty pounds per annum would not be enough to support a family to a middle-class standard, it would have given Sarah, Florence and Emily valuable financial security. Probate records can provide insight into wealth levels and the intergenerational transfer of business. It is only by joining together these disparate sources that we get some picture of Mary Ann Fourness as a businesswoman. Even photographs can be informative, revealing building signage or personnel, although they can be misleading, as in the case of a picture of M. Ross’s drapery in New Plymouth in New Zealand. The man standing proprietorially in the door is not in fact M. Ross, who is actually Mary.²³

All of these types of source material exist, to varying degrees, across a range of places where businesswomen made their mark, but the quality of the sources and the manner in which they are used may yield different results, as a close examination of our own work illustrates.

Aston in Leeds

Aston’s approach was the more systematic and statistically robust of the two projects examined here. She devised a dual-stage quantitative and qualitative methodology which first extracted the names of all identifiably female business owners from the trade

²² *The Pharmaceutical Journal of Great Britain*, Vol 11 (March 1881). See Aston, *Female Entrepreneurship*, 135–136 for more detail of this case and the Fourness family.

²³ Bishop, *Women Mean Business*, 129.

directories of Leeds and Birmingham published at the same five-year intervals. The information extracted included (where given) marital title, given name, family name, business type, business name, business address, home address and reference to any advertisement(s) included in the directory. This information (over 30,000 entries of female-owned businesses) was entered into a database, allowing for comparison across the fifty-year period and between cities. Significantly, this enabled an examination of female entrepreneurship rates during potentially important changes to the legal system, including the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870, 1882 and 1893, although the analysis suggested that none of these reforms influenced women's willingness to enter the business world.²⁴

Aston then selected 100 businesswomen (50 from Birmingham and 50 from Leeds) who left a last will and testament, and used their probate records as a launching point for a series of prosopographical case studies. She also sought to uncover their business practices and the profitability (or otherwise) of their firms. Using sources including photographs, advertisements, newspaper reports, court minutes, Birth, Death and Marriage Indexes, maps, family papers, notices of shareholders and business sales, she tested and ultimately challenged Davidoff and Hall's argument that businesswomen disappeared in the middle of the century, when it was apparently not considered respectable for a woman, particularly a middle-class woman, to run a business. Aston's approach revealed a broad spread of entrepreneurial activity, with women operating firms to varying levels of success and using many (if not all) of the same business skills and techniques as their male counterparts.

Aston's aim was to establish a baseline of female entrepreneurship in the latter half of the nineteenth century, avoiding any overstatement of women's presence or importance (an accusation frequently levelled at historians discussing female agency) by recording only those names clearly identifiable both as female and in business in the directories. She made no assumptions about identity based on occupations that were predominantly (perhaps even exclusively) female, such as dressmaking or midwifery. Her method also ignored those not listed as having a business even if they did, and those in partnership with husbands if the business was only listed under the husband's name.

²⁴ Aston, *Female Entrepreneurship*, 88.

Aston's percentage of businesses run by women was calculated by taking the number of identifiable businesswomen and dividing by the total number of directory entries. This assumes that every other entry was a businessman, but she has since realised that this is not the case. Not all entries that were not female were businessmen: some entries were for partnerships and companies, employees or those without occupation.²⁵ Taking a sample page of 59 entries from a Leeds alphabetical directory, we see that, while only 8.5 per cent of the page were businesswomen, only 61 per cent were actually businessmen. The remainder were journeymen or with no occupation declared. Of the actual 72.8 per cent of listings that were identifiably businesspeople in this one page sample – men were 83.7 per cent and women 11.6 per cent with 4.7 per cent being sex unknown.²⁶ So, given other methodological choices, the *actual* number of women in business exceeded 11.6 per cent.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Figure 1. Sample Page of Leeds Trade Directory (Alphabetical) 1858

Nevertheless, her calculations did provide a baseline of female involvement in business, albeit one that certainly understated its extent. Another set of problems emerge, however, when drawing conclusions from this data about the marital status of women running businesses and characteristics of those businesses. It is entirely possible that the predominance of widows that Aston found is not a real phenomenon of female business ownership but a reflection of the fact that wives were less likely to be listed as businesswomen in their own right. That said, however, where women did list the businesses in their own names, the average number of years they appeared in the trade

²⁵ This is true across national borders. For example, identifiably male business owners were only 63 per cent of directory listings in King Street, Sydney in 1858. *Sands' Sydney Directory 1859* (Sydney: John Sands, 1859).

²⁶ William White, *Directory and Topography of the Boroughs of Leeds, Halifax...* (Sheffield: William White, 1858).

directory was higher than the number of years it was listed under the other, male owners. This suggests that where women did register businesses themselves, they tended to be longer term, successful (or at least solvent) enterprises. If Aston had included women who registered their business interests using their initial, or their husband/male relative's name (which were not included in the data collection out of caution) then these statistics, which suggest a high level of female business success when operating on their own, might be suppressed. Aston addressed some of these issues by exploring the individual intricacies of business ownership through the 100 case studies, which traced the lives of businesswomen from the 1780s to the 1940s. However, these cases represent only a tiny sample of the broader quantitative dataset and, because they were drawn from the elite group who made a last will and testament, had their own limitations.²⁷

Bishop in Sydney

In Sydney, Bishop was also seeking to uncover businesswomen but had a more qualitative approach in a shorter time period. Bishop used trade directories as a starting point, uncovering roughly similar numbers of businesswomen as Aston, and then turned to digitised newspapers, passenger lists, UK censuses, plus insolvency records, rates assessment books, bank account records and the occasional diary or letter. She created a database, similar to Aston's, of all identifiable businesswomen in the directories, but included the others identified from other sources. This approach lacked the precision of Aston's quantitative method and it was not clear that every businesswoman was included. Bishop's work illustrated clearly that there were far more businesswomen than those identified by the trade directories, but how many more? Some sort of sampling was required. In order to try and get a broader sense of the proportions of women in business, Bishop then took one street in one year and checked every single address, identifying every business and determining, using the full range of sources, whether they were being run by men, women or in partnership. She chose Pitt Street, one of the main streets in

²⁷ Aston, *Female Entrepreneurship*, 179–83.

Sydney, and the year 1858, partly because there were existing directories for 1857, 1858-9 and 1861 as well as rates assessment registers for 1858.²⁸

Analysis of the trade directory alone suggested that barely 6 per cent of the entries were female. After looking in every house, however, Bishop found about 100 female business owners, property owners or independent tenants in the 400 or so properties (See table 1). While these were not all businesswomen, the majority were engaged in business or were lessors (often several properties, in which case they could be considered ‘in business’ as a landlord). In addition, Bishop found, particularly from her analysis of newspaper advertisements, that there were many wives in business, not necessarily listed in the directories and often in partnership with husbands.²⁹As a result of this sort of double checking, Bishop was able to estimate that the 6 per cent figure derived from trade directories should have been more like 20 per cent. If you strolled down Pitt Street in 1858 you could not have avoided businesswomen. They occupied prominent shopfronts in every block. Their visibility suggests that, in the lived experience of most ordinary people inhabiting the streets of Sydney, as distinct from the uppermost echelons of society, it was neither unrespectable nor unfeminine to be in business.

Did Bishop’s strategy just happen to light upon Pitt Street in a year in which it had a lot of women? Fast forward twenty odd years to 1880 and Pitt Street was much more mercantile and financial, abounding in male bankers, accountants, lawyers, merchants – the big white-collar end of town. The female business presence was much diminished.³⁰ In 1882 only 26 of the 462 properties in Pitt Street had identifiably female inhabitants running businesses or as sole owners/tenants. Even after looking for ‘hidden’ women, there were only 39. This might have reflected a change in the use of Pitt Street

²⁸ For further details of this study see Catherine Bishop, ‘A Virtual Walk Down Pitt Street in 1858’ in *Labour History and Its People: Papers from the Twelfth National Labour History Conference*, ed. Melanie Nolan (Canberra: Australian Society for the Study of Labour History and National Centre of Biography, ANU, 2011), 116–43 and Bishop, ‘Women of Pitt Street 1858’, *Dictionary of Sydney* (2011), https://www.dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/women_of_pitt_street_1858 (accessed 1 September 2020).

²⁹ Eg Mary Ann and William Robson. See Bishop, *Minding Her Own Business*, 40, 51–53.

³⁰ Methodology was similar to that used in 1858, using similar sources. See Catherine Bishop, ‘The Changing Face of Pitt Street 1840–1890’, (paper presented at the conference ‘From the Ground Up: People and Places in Sydney’s Past’, Sydney, 23–24 August 2012).

itself, with businesswomen moving elsewhere. The types of businesses owned by men and women on Pitt Street had also changed since 1859. Professional offices occupied 30 per cent of the properties, compared to 13 per cent in 1859, while manufacturing dropped from 25 to 18 per cent and, most notably, food and accommodation from 20 to 14 per cent. Alternatively, the change could indicate a shift in women's willingness to participate in business, or in the nature of business itself, as it became more corporatised and offered fewer opportunities for small-scale female entrepreneurship.

If Aston's strategy undercounted, Bishop's was more likely to have overstated women's presence. Extrapolating from Pitt Street in one year would be problematic. In addition, Bishop also included businesswomen who she knew from other sources moved in and out over the year, but not the men who did likewise. So the actual total number of businesspeople is more than the 400 properties – it is 400 plus the women who moved in and out plus the men who did the same. This could (and probably would) lower the percentage of businesswomen. Also, Bishop was actually counting the percentage of properties with a female business presence, rather than the percentage of businesspeople who were women.

Bishop has developed two preliminary tests to assess the significance of these factors. The first was to examine the female presence in another street. King Street is also in central Sydney and crosses Pitt Street. Of 170 properties in King Street, there were six businesswomen listed in the 1858 trade directory, representing a meagre 3.5 per cent of the properties in the street. This is the street, too, in which only 105 of the 170 properties (61.8 per cent) were identifiably inhabited by businessmen.³¹ (This was almost identical with Pitt Street, where 233 or 59 per cent of properties were identified as being occupied by businessmen.) The rest were men and women without occupation, or businesses not identified as female or male, or banks, churches or unoccupied properties.

³¹ It is possible that some of these men who were identified as 'carpenter' or 'plumber', for instance, were not businessmen but employees, but this is not possible to determine from the sources available. This is unlike the Leeds directories, where 'journeymen' are identified. Perhaps more accurately, then, these listings identify occupations as well as businesses.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Table 1: Figures for Pitt and King Streets, Sydney Trade Directory (Street Listings) 1858

Each property on King Street was cross-referenced with other sources, including advertisements that revealed several wives involved in what were nominally their husbands' businesses.³² Newspapers showed clearly, for example, that women were helping to run (or were the de facto publicans of) hotels that were in their husband's name.³³ Other records indicated that businesswomen were moving in and out of the street.³⁴ The rates books for 1858 show that 14 properties were owned by three women, with Rosetta Terry owning 10 of them.³⁵ In total, 36 of the King Street properties had female owners, were home to women or were the site of businesses involving women – 24 per cent. Even discounting female property ownership still left 22 businesswomen – 18 per cent. This is far more than the 3.5 per cent in the directory. This result is still an indication of the numbers of properties hosting businesswomen, rather than an indication of the proportion of businesswomen compared to businessmen. One solution to this problem is to focus, not on the properties in the street section of the directories, but on the individuals in the alphabetical section. This removes the issue of double-counting (as businesswomen moved in and out) but is also more comparable with Aston's method, which also used the listings of people rather than addresses.

It is not possible to check backgrounds using records linkage for every single property or even individual person in Sydney's trade directories from 1850 to 1900, even

³² *Empire*, 24 July 1851, 5, *Goulburn Herald*, 30 May 1857, 8; *Freeman's Journal*, 26 November 1859, 2; *SMH* 27 November 1855, 5 and 2 January 1857, 1; *Catholic Press*, 7 August 1919, 39.

³³ *Empire*, 15 May 1856, 5 and 15 September 1857, 4; *SMH*, 23 September 1865, 8 and 28 January 1871, 5.

³⁴ *Cox and Co's Sydney Post Office Directory* (Sydney: Cox & Co, 1857); City of Sydney rates assessment books, 1845–1948, City of Sydney Archives, <https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/learn/search-our-collections/house-and-building-histories/assessment-books> (accessed 1 September 2020); *Sands' Sydney Directory 1861* <https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/learn/search-our-collections/sands-directory> (accessed 1 September 2020).

³⁵ City of Sydney rates assessment books, 1858.

every ten years. Even with digitised records, the meticulous checking of multiple sources required for each property would be too labour intensive. A sampling method is required. From the alphabetical directory (which includes suburbs) the first name at the top of each column that is not in the suburbs was extracted. This resulted, for 1858, in a sample of 192 households. This time the addresses were not being checked – no moving in and out. The focus was on the individuals. The results were comforting.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Table 2: Figures for Sample of Sydney Trade Directory (Alphabetical) 1858

This method revealed fifteen businesswomen – 7.8 per cent of the total, almost exactly comparable with Aston’s findings in Leeds. There were listings for 148 businessmen, or 77 percent of the total. There were also fifteen men, seven women and one unidentified individual listed with no occupation, and seven businesspeople just listed with initials, making up 15 per cent of the directory. After checking each individual, it was revealed that four of the seven women without occupations were economically active in their own right – one through managing property, another was a laundress and two were boarding-house keepers. Seven of the fifteen men listed without occupation were also in business. Of the seven initialled businesspeople, three could be identified as men and two as a male/female partnership. Furthermore, thirteen wives of the 148 businessmen listed could be identified as being partners in the businesses that were ascribed solely to their husbands in the directory. All of this means that, instead of fifteen women (or 7.8 per cent of listings) in the directory being businesswomen, the businesses sampled included nineteen women in business on their own account and at least another fifteen in partnership with their husbands, bringing the total to thirty-four businesswomen, 17.7 per cent of the 193 directory entries (and 16.3 percent of the 208 people represented in those listings).

This records linkage method, which reveals that more women were engaged in business than officially recorded, is important for highlighting the inadequacies of the

trade directories in the under enumeration of women's participation in business: there was *more than double* the number of businesswomen than the directory suggested in this sample. It does not, however, provide a complete picture. It also relies on as many assumptions as counting names in the directory. It assumes that a wife working behind the bar is a business partner and not unpaid help. It assumes that a woman making hats is also making business decisions. It assumes that widows who carry on businesses were already involved in those businesses. It assumes that all businesses listed under women's names are operated by women, but questions all those listed under men's names. These are notably – and deliberately – the opposite of assumptions generally made about gender and business. Nevertheless, this method highlights which businesswomen are obscured: feminist historians will not be surprised to find that they were predominantly married women.

Adding the BBCE and the Continuing Problem of Wives

Recent work on individual data from the UK censuses suggests that the risks of double counting in Bishop's data are low. The BBCE used digitised census responses to a question on employment status that asked whether a householder was an 'employer', 'employed', or 'neither employer or employed' – the latter category consisting of those working on their own account as self-employed small business proprietors. The BBCE contains all employers and own-account proprietors for the 1891–1911 period, as well as an approximation based on reported and supplemented business owners for the 1851–1881 period.³⁶ The proportion of businesses owned by women over the period 1851–

³⁶ After adjusting for occupations that required either no response (e.g. scholars, retired) or an obvious response (e.g. domestic workers), the non-response rate to this question was reassuringly low at around 5 per cent. A weight for each self-reported entrepreneur to adjust for this is available as a supplement download with the BBCE. For the supplementation method to construct the early censuses see Robert J. Bennett, Piero Monteburuno, Harry Smith, and Carry van Lieshout, *Reconstructing Entrepreneur and Business Numbers for Censuses 1851–81*. Working Paper 9: ESRC project ES/M010953: 'Drivers of Entrepreneurship and Small Businesses', University of Cambridge, Department of Geography and Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, 2018.

1911 ranged between 26 and 30 per cent of the total number of businesses. This was considerably higher than previous estimates mainly based on trade directories.

Still, participation in business of one group of women in particular – wives – remains underestimated. For instance, the 1891 census form instructed ‘married women assisting their husbands in their trade or industry’ to be returned as ‘employed’, although leaving the interpretation of what constituted ‘assisting’ up to the household and/or the enumerator.³⁷ Because of this and similar gendered instructions, the BBCE data constitutes a lower boundary for married women’s participation in the workforce and in business.³⁸ The BBCE data and analysis highlight the way in which new technologies have transformed our ability to analyse previously inaccessible ‘big data’ sets. Antipodean historians, who lack detailed census data, may be able to extrapolate from the BBCE, but to do so requires considerable caution.

The invisibility of married women is an age-old issue of historical studies. In the case of business history, the hidden entrepreneurship of wife-partners needs to be uncovered. Just as women’s unpaid work is often hidden in the historical records, the contribution of ‘wives assisting’, as they were sometimes disparagingly called in later nineteenth-century censuses, is obscured in the sources. The language suggests a marginal role while – as both methodologies demonstrate – they could be absolutely central to the family business.

Before the 1870s, property laws in both Britain and New South Wales decreed that a married woman’s property was her husband’s. Hence, technically, all married women’s businesses were the property of their husbands. Wives could not ‘own’ their businesses, or any income generated from it. This is one reason why Aston’s counting of female names in trade directories resulted in more widows and spinsters, who were legally owners of their businesses. Trade directories sometimes listed a married businesswoman’s husband instead. The reality on the street however, whether Pitt Street, King Street, Kirkgate, the Briggate or elsewhere, was that wives ran businesses. Legally

³⁷ van Lieshout et al, ‘Female Entrepreneurship’, in *Female Entrepreneurs*, ed. Aston and Bishop; ‘General Instructions’, The National Archives UK (TNA), RG 27/6, Census of England and Wales, Householder’s Schedule, 1891.

³⁸ Bennett et al., *Age of Entrepreneurship*, 70.

and ostensibly they were acting as ‘agents’ of their husbands, but in a practical everyday sense they were in business and frequently interacting with the wider business community on their own account. Other hidden contributions to the family business can be brought to light by using large-scale data to analyse the relationship between the marital status of male business owners, and whether they formally employed any workers or not. BBCE analysis has shown that married farmers were less likely to employ labourers than widowed or single male farmers (independent of farm size), likely because they could source the required labour of running the farm within their household.³⁹ On a smaller scale, analysing individual households uncovers some of the overlooked wives who were partners in the family business in Sydney and Leeds. This encourages us to think of small businesses not so much as a man’s business, or as a father-and-son enterprise, but as family businesses, in which the wider household had a role, either directly or by freeing up other household members’ time, just as historians have already suggested in relation to family farms.⁴⁰

More visible were deserted wives and widows, who are often listed in their own right. Identifying women’s marital status, however, is not always straightforward. In the British census marital status was self-reported, and a considerable group of businesswomen, particularly lodging house keepers, stated they were married but not with their husband on census night.⁴¹ Many were single or separated women (sometimes with children) who claimed to be married for reasons of respectability. In Australia, too, it was difficult to distinguish between widows and deserted wives. After 1858, deserted wives in New South Wales could apply to be treated as *femes sole*, protecting their property from erstwhile spouses and those spouses’ creditors. Women were quick to take

³⁹ Piero Monteburano, Robert J. Bennett, Carry van Lieshout, Harry Smith, and Max Satchell, ‘Shifts in Agrarian Entrepreneurship in Mid-Victorian England and Wales’, *Agricultural History Review*, 67 (2019): 71–108.

⁴⁰ Aston, *Female Entrepreneurship*, 212–13; Michael Winstanley, ‘Industrialization and the Small Farm: Family and Household Economy in Nineteenth-century Lancashire’, *Past & Present* 152, no. 1 (1996): 157–95.

⁴¹ Bennett et al., *Age of Entrepreneurship*, 211.

advantage of it to protect their profits.⁴² This law was based (with some significant differences) on the English 1857 *Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act*. Under the Act, deserted wives could apply to regional Magistrate Courts for maintenance and protection of their assets, which made legal recourse much more affordable, but divorce cases were still held exclusively in London. This may not have increased the numbers of women in business – they were likely in business in any case – but it meant that they had more security and may have encouraged businesswomen to expand their enterprises safe in the knowledge that any rewards were their own. The importance of these acts can be seen in the life of Leeds waste dealer, Mary Wilcock, who was abandoned by her husband Samuel when she was heavily pregnant with their fifth child. After Samuel’s desertion, Mary established herself in business and amassed a property and stock portfolio, as well as a successful business. She was the first woman in Leeds to apply for a Section 21 protection order under the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act 1857, appearing at Leeds Magistrates Court on 19 January 1858. Her application was successful and local newspaper the *Leeds Mercury* commented that there were several similar cases waiting to be heard.⁴³ Married women living with their husbands, however, had to wait until the 1870s to be able to legally ‘own’ the businesses they operated, and even then they often remained hidden.

What Next

The devil, as they say, is in the detail, not only in the way we count but also in what that counting does not tell us. Counting women in directories has given a baseline of involvement, and adding other sources, many of which are piecemeal and problematic, not only illuminates some invisible women but sometimes reveals the more intimate details of business lives. Extensive records linkage has suggested that there are many more businesswomen hidden behind doors. The next step is to take samples from the rest of the directories for Sydney and Leeds and compare them. This will hopefully reveal whether Leeds wives were more domesticated than their Sydney counterparts, as well as

⁴² Register of Orders Under the Deserted Wives Act, 1858–1948, NRS 13476, State Records of New South Wales.

⁴³ Aston, *Female Entrepreneurship*, 132.

whether women's participation in business changed over time. Then we can start thinking about why.

When we began our comparison, the BBCE big data analysis project was just beginning. Its findings have now changed the playing field. On a positive note, the UK findings do suggest that the assumptions underpinning the records linkage approach are not overcounting numbers of women. The data also allow us to ask more questions. The BBCE analysis has started to reveal circumstances, sectors and locations in which people were more likely to start their own business. These include recently arrived migrants who were excluded from local labour markets, women with small children needing to run a business from home and women in rural areas where there were fewer wage-earning opportunities but more openings for small-scale food sellers and essential service providers.⁴⁴ This shows that the particular demographic and economic environment was important for business ownership, and leads us to consider the environment in which Leeds and Sydney married women operated. By asking such questions, we can better understand the opportunities either city afforded women to earn a living from home, or whether they could easily access the local labour market. Furthermore, did living in these locations necessitate a two-income household? But this method will still not reveal some other aspects: the mobility of businesses, the prevalence of business clusters on the ground, and the way businesses moved around as areas changed.

With individual census returns unavailable in Australia, we need to develop different approaches. One possibility might be to adapt the 'Verb method', developed in Sweden and Britain by eighteenth-century historians. They have extracted information from evidence in court cases to investigate work. By ignoring job identities and instead focusing on what people said they were *doing* and when they were doing it, they have provided new understandings, not only of gendered work patterns, but also of the structure of the working day. For example, research in early modern England suggests that the working day extended far beyond daylight hours, and that *both* men and women

⁴⁴ Harry Smith, Robert J. Bennett, and Carry van Lieshout, 'Immigrant Business Proprietors in England and Wales (1851–1911)', *Continuity and Change* 34 (2019): 253–276; van Lieshout et al, 'Female Entrepreneurship' in *Female Entrepreneurs* ed. Aston and Bishop.

were engaged in indoor and outdoor work.⁴⁵ This methodological approach is labour intensive but rewarding. It provides opportunities for quantitative analysis as well as a critical sense of the labour and reality of work within the household.

Why does this matter? Does it matter if 7 per cent (Aston) or 20 per cent (Bishop) or even 30 per cent of businesses (as suggested by the BBCE in England and by Peter Baskerville in Canada) were run by women in the nineteenth century?⁴⁶ We argue that our findings challenge fundamental assumptions in both women's history and business history. They encourage us to reconfigure our understanding of what women's appropriate roles were in the past. Second, establishing more reliable figures affects what we say about the characteristics of the businesses and the women who ran them. Most significantly, the higher figures draw attention to hidden wives. We need to look at (and for) women in business at all stages of their lives, single, married, separated and widowed, recognising that business could be lifelong or temporary, and that women, like men, might run more than one type of business at different times in their lives. More broadly, this investigation into businesswomen complicates the domesticity debate, re-evaluating ideas of female respectability and re-assessing women's economic contributions. It invites us to consider the connections between family and business and questions around money and power dynamics within the family, however that family might be understood and structured.

Within business history, investigating women in business also refocuses attention on small and medium-sized enterprises, reminding us that they were the majority of businesses in the nineteenth century for both women and men, and, taken together, were significant. It raises important questions about gender divisions in business and questions assumptions that trivialise some businesses and valorise others. Cases of necessity entrepreneurship, where people engaged in enterprise because of financial need rather

⁴⁵ See for example Jane Whittle, 'Enterprising Widows and Active Wives: Women's Unpaid Work in the Household Economy of Early Modern England', *History of the Family* 19, no.3 (2014): 283–300; Marie Ågren, 'Making Her Turn Around: The Verb-Oriented Method, the Two-Supporter Model, and the Focus on Practice', *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 13, no.1 (2018): 144–152.

⁴⁶ Peter Baskerville, *A Silent Revolution?: Gender and Wealth in English Canada, 1860–1930* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008).

than commercial ambition, and businesses that never expanded or even folded after a number of years, are often ignored by business historians. However, vast numbers of grocers, bakers, blacksmiths and dressmakers ran businesses that sustained them for decades, but never grew beyond one-person or one-household concerns, and in some cases barely broke even. For many contemporaries these ‘unsuccessful’ businesses were the most visible form of entrepreneurship in their localities, as were people moving between waged employment and running their own business as life circumstances necessitated. These issues force historians to reassess their understanding of the structure of nineteenth century society, not just in terms of business and home life but also in what cultural capital women were able to exercise.

In order to explore these matters, however, we need to ensure our data are as accurate as possible. Census data have allowed us to re-evaluate previous local studies, showing that the number of female business proprietors was far higher than any of these studies had been able to prove based on locally available data. But while big data are useful to show the national overview as well as spatial and temporal differences, structural bias in the source, such as with married women, affects the way trends and differences are interpreted. Very localised studies, focusing on what people were actually doing, are therefore vital. Equally important is a transnational approach, so that we can identify which experiences were shaped by conditions specific to a place and which were shared. Then we can begin to uncover when and to what extent women’s place was ever in the home, and find how many small businesses they were running there. The first step however, is to examine critically our ways of ‘bringing businesswomen to a count’, whether single, widowed, deserted, or hidden behind husbands.

Catherine Bishop

Macquarie University

Email: catherine.bishop@mq.edu.au

ORCID 0000-0001-9409-6186

Jennifer Aston

Northumbria University

Email: jennifer.aston@northumbria.ac.uk

ORCID 0000-0002-6392-4652

Carry van Lieshout

The Open University, UK

Email: carry.van-lieshout@open.ac.uk

ORCID 0000-0002-3856-3701