

---

*H-France Review* Vol. 16 (February 2016), No. 20

Greig Parker, ed., *Probate Inventories of French Immigrants in Early Modern London*. Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014. xii + 334 pp. Map, table, figures, notes, appendices, bibliography, index. \$144.95 U.S. (all formats). ISBN 9781472420855 (hb), 9781472420862 (ebk - PDF), 9781472420879 (ebk - ePUB).

Review by Vanessa Harding, Birkbeck, University of London.

This work makes a useful contribution to the history and historiography of the French community in early modern London, which already includes editions of primary sources, theses, monograph studies, journal articles, and collections of essays. It focuses on the second phase of that history, the later seventeenth century, when thousands of individuals left France for more favorable religious and political climates. As many as 20,000 immigrants may have come to London. While some dispersed to provincial England, a significant number settled in the capital and put down roots there. The registers and other records of the French churches—mostly now in print—cover their life events and participation in the expatriate community, but this volume focuses on their domestic surroundings, presenting transcripts of ninety-two probate inventories, dated between April 1661 and September 1748. The bulk—the inventories of seventy individuals, many of whom may have been first-generation migrants—date from 1680 to 1719.

The author is careful not to claim that this selection is representative of the large and varied French community in London at the time. His criteria for inclusion are clearly outlined, even if the Huguenot immigrant credentials of some of the individuals included seem doubtful. While most have surnames found in the records of the French churches, and a few can be firmly identified with biographical details from elsewhere, one at least is a citizen of London; others are only “likely” to be of French origin. Obviously the sample centers on middling individuals and above, those with property to be inventoried. Because the inventories are taken from the lower probate courts, the richest elements in society, whose wills were most likely to be proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, are not included. The median inventory value was £60, with some worth a few pounds only.

Little additional biographical information is offered for most individuals, though they are linked where possible with contemporary tax returns and French church registers. However, a key question—since taking inventories was part of the probate process—is whether any of them left surviving wills? If so, when and where were these proved, and how do they compare with the inventories? More information on family and household size would help to make sense of the household furnishings—all those beds and bedding—and illuminate domestic habits. Probably most of the individuals were old, or older, people, but a few may have been young: Peter le Chantre (1688; pp. 81-2), with all his wealth in gold buttons, buckles, and trinkets, clothing, and debts, might have been a recent migrant as Parker suggests, but might equally be a young man yet to settle down and accumulate household goods, especially since his master (with an English surname) is mentioned. The selection includes inventories for fifteen women, most of whom are identified as widows.

The inventories vary in style and completeness, some carefully listing items room by room, others lumping them together and sometimes frustratingly concluding “and other lumber.” Parker, an

archaeologist, makes the point that inventories generally only covered goods with some resale value, ignoring many of the cheap, disposable everyday items such as clay pipes and domestic ceramics commonly found in excavations. As he also notes, inventories omit goods already bequeathed or given away, and probably also those specifically belonging to the widow or other members of the household, so we never get a full picture of all the items that the deceased's house contained. It is particularly useful, though, for those interested in how items were named or described, that the transcript is verbatim and that the index lists every occurrence even of common items, rather than settling for "passim."

Parker offers some useful insights into the archaeology of identity, and connects his discussion with the literature on consumption and lifestyle. In many ways these inventories fit with patterns already identified: seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century London saw the emergence of a "middling sort" whose tastes included greater domestic comfort and amenity, a wider variety of furniture and fittings, and an increasing number of purely ornamental or optional items,<sup>[1]</sup> and London's middle-class French residents shared in these habits and aspirations. It is hard to see any distinctive "Frenchness" in the goods they owned, apart from one or two with French-language bibles and French currency (the "French pistols" mentioned on p. 216 were more likely coins than handguns). Recent innovations such as caned chairs and chests of drawers, cabinets and looking-glasses, may have owed something to French influence and craftsmanship, but were already being produced in London and widespread in English homes in the capital by 1700. Inventories rarely give sufficient detail to identify the style and quality of furnishings, and there is nothing to say that any of the items listed here came from France, except perhaps for the "family pictures" owned by a few (e.g., p. 222). While perhaps frustrating for historians of the French community, this makes the publication valuable to a wider range of readers including those interested in early modern material culture more generally, since few inventories for English-born Londoners are in print.

London's middling sort were mostly renters or lessees, not property-owners, so the restriction on alien ownership of real estate probably made little difference to this group, even if it was observed. The inventories fill out a picture of renters' and lodgers' London, with individuals living in a variety of premises and owning varying proportions of the goods surrounding them. Nicholas Bazire (1697; pp. 122-3) clearly rented a single room in Soho part-furnished, since "in his Roome" were cooking utensils and fire-irons, chairs and tables, clothing, bedding but no bedstead, a bible and some "godly books," and the tools and products of his trade as a shoemaker. A bedstead and window curtains were likely provided by the landlord. Others such as Peter le Chantre already mentioned (pp. 81-2), Nicholas Lecount (1679; p. 61), or Mary Papin (1688; p. 82), owned no furnishings at all and probably lived as boarders or houseguests.

Wealthier or more established individuals rented several rooms or whole houses. Where items are listed by room, we can visualize the house or part of a house that they occupied. Several appear to have inhabited typical London row houses with three stories plus garret and maybe cellar, and two or three rooms per storey. Houses of this kind had been common in London for centuries; new houses followed the basic pattern and layout of the old.<sup>[2]</sup> The best room was often on the second floor, with a shop or workshop on the ground floor, and kitchen at ground or second-floor level. Several but not all rooms would be heated (e.g. pp. 63-5, 79-81, 114-16, 116-19, 127-30, 151-3, etc.). Other people occupied two or three rooms, perhaps on one floor (e.g. pp. 133-6, 167-9). The multi-layered nature of London's housing market is illustrated by John Anselin, a carpenter (1689; pp. 84-6), who occupied a house of two or three stories, of which he let out two upper chambers. Discussion of household objects in these cases needs to take account of the difference between landlord's fixtures and tenant's movables. Thus, portable stoves and fire-irons might be inventoried, and perhaps a movable fire-grate, but not fireplaces and fixed grates themselves; close-stools would be listed, but not privies; pictures and wall-hangings, but not panelling. Window-glass, shutters, and window and door furniture would not be noted, but curtain rails and

curtains usually would. Anselin provided his sub-tenants with hangings, curtains, a valance, old chairs and a cradle. They must have supplied everything else needed.

The difference in wealth between the poorest and the richest was expressed partly in the quantity and quality of their domestic furnishings and personal attire. Wealthier individuals certainly tended to have more numerous and more expensive furnishings, with featherbeds and bolsters, tapestry hangings, "India carpets," looking-glasses, pictures, and china ornaments, and a greater quantity of silver plate. Their kitchens were better equipped for cooking and dining; they had more clothes of better materials and trimmings. But much of their wealth was liquid, in cash, or semi-liquid, invested in shares, bonds, government debt, annuities, lottery tickets, tallies, and loans. Household goods, clothing, jewellery, and plate made up barely £100 of the largest inventory valuation, that of Francis Dechamps (1707; pp. 162-5). The remaining £3,900 was spread over five different kinds of investment, ready cash, and book debts, some of which were deemed desperate. Whether the face value of all these could have been realised is not known. An investigation of the patterns of investment and security of the French middling sort in London would be worth while, set in the context of the opportunities being created in the period, and compared with the investment strategies of, for example, London citizens, as analysed by Peter Earle.[3]

The inventories also illustrate some of the occupations of the French immigrant community (pp. 285-7), and support the belief that they like many immigrant groups brought and practised specialist craft skills, especially in luxury materials and products. Silk weaving is well represented; five were goldsmiths or jewellers, four were wigmakers, one an embroiderer, one a perfumer, and one an apothecary. One of these craftsmen, David De Grave (1712; pp. 184-93), living in a well-furnished three-storey house in Distaff Lane in the city of London, evidently ran a flourishing business making up jewellery, with some £700 in precious and semi-precious stones, mostly cut. He also had a minor sideline in ribbons, lace, gloves and Hungary Water. But there were also a bricklayer, a carpenter, a carter, and other more modest occupations. One of the most intriguing inventories to read is that of Robert Gascoine (1718; pp. 226-30), gardener, of St Martin in the Fields, which details the crops (cauliflowers, artichokes, asparagus, etc.) and equipment in his plot, quite possibly one of those at the Neat Houses in modern Pimlico, an area of intensive market-gardening.[4] There is no certainty, however, that Gascoine was of French extraction, let alone of recent immigration.

The inventory preambles often indicate the deceased's parish of residence, mostly outside the city of London in a wide arc from St Martin in the Fields in the west to Stepney in the east, conforming to the patterns of settlement and church foundation already known. However, the map of parish locations on p. 20, as well as being too small for easy legibility, is somewhat misleading; areas apparently blank did in fact contain inventoried individuals. Parish boundaries in the period covered are admittedly confusing, with the formation of several new suburban parishes, mostly under the Fifty New Churches Act of 1711, but the map shading should spread further than it does and cover the whole of the old parishes before their subdivision in the 1720s and 1730s.

The map is only one of several problems with the presentation, some of which a good editor/designer should have been able to avoid (especially given Ashgate prices). Not all of these problems will apply to electronic publication, of course, and if that is the main format in which this work is disseminated, these criticisms are perhaps less serious. The transcription is generally good, but there are a few dubious readings which might have been queried. The layout of the transcribed text on the page could be improved, even at the loss of exact replication of the original organisation, so that the descriptions and valuations read together, sums of money are more clearly presented, and a large amount of white space is avoided. There are no paged cross-references from the introduction to the text, so the reader has to flip forward to find the page number for an individual inventory under the first list of names in Appendix A and then back to find the inventory. It would be invaluable to have a single table of inventoried individuals with name, location and occupation if given, date of inventory, valuation (in

Arabic figures), and page number; at present these data are only found separately. The subject/topic index is all right as it stands, and material objects are better covered than topics such as leases, bonds, and other investments. It might have been possible to combine the subject index with the glossary, printed rather awkwardly at right angles to the rest of the text. An index of persons (and possibly places, currently included with subjects) could cover all the appraisers and other parties mentioned rather than listing them separately in Appendix A. And it would surely be clearer for the reader if names were indexed in strict alphabetical order, ignoring spaces, so that Delamere came before De la Motte and Le Plastrier after Lepine.

These are disappointing aspects of the production, but it is still a valuable addition to the documentation of the French immigrant community in this period. It will be seized upon by scholars interested in the inventoried individuals, and it certainly invites further research to fill out the picture and explore particular aspects such as investment, credit and debt, and networks of support in the Huguenot community. But it will also be valued by those whose principal interest is in London and will contribute to our understanding of domestic life and material culture in a cosmopolitan capital.

#### NOTES.

[1] Peter Earle, *The Making of the English Middle Class: Business, Society, and Family Life in London, 1660-1730* (London: Methuen, 1989); Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain, 1660-1760* (London: Routledge, 3rd edn., 1997); Carole Shammas, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); John Styles, "Product Innovation in Early Modern London," *Past & Present* 168 (2000):124-69.

[2] John Schofield, *Medieval London Houses* (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1995); Michael J. Power, "The Social Topography of Restoration London," in A.L. Beier and Roger Finlay, eds., *London 1500-1700: The Making of the Metropolis* (London: Longman, 1986), pp. 199-223; Michael J. Power, "East London Housing in the Seventeenth Century," in Peter Clark and Paul Slack, eds., *Crisis and Order in English Towns, 1500-1700: Essays in Urban History* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1972), pp. 237-62; Peter Guillery, *The Small House in Eighteenth-Century London* (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 2004).

[3] Earle, *The Making of the English Middle Class*, pp. 142-57.

[4] Malcolm Thick, *The Neat House Gardens: Early Market Gardening around London* (Totnes: Prospect, 1998).

Vanessa Harding  
Birkbeck, University of London  
[v.harding@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:v.harding@bbk.ac.uk)

Copyright © 2015 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of

H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172