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**Laurence Fontaine**, *A History of Peddlars in Europe*. Translated by Vicki Whittaker. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996. 280pp. Appendix, notes, index. \$54.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8223-1786-9. \$19.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-8223-1794-X.

Review by Daniel Heimmermann, University of North Alabama.

In his landmark work on the Mediterranean region, Fernand Braudel remarked of the mountain, "it has no history ... As soon as one leaves the mountain and its historical obscurity, one reaches the plains and the cities and the domain of the classified archives." [1] Until recently, the same equally could have been applied to the peddlers of early modern Europe. Laurence Fontaine addresses this neglect by providing a history of peddlers in Europe from the development of trade networks in the fifteenth century to the decline of peddling in the nineteenth century.

Fontaine documents the activities of peddlers in each of the sites crucial to their vocation--their mountain village homes, their centers of operation in major towns, and the region in which he undertook his campaign. She argues that merchant peddlers were the essential link between manufacturers of goods, with whom they cultivated long-term relationships, and the small shopkeepers and peddlers. In early modern Europe most commodities were distributed through such peddling networks. These peddling networks explain the central role of middlemen to the economy of early modern Europe. Fontaine reconstructs how these peddling networks operated by making creative use of inventories, account books, wills, and diaries. She complements her research with critical comparisons across Europe using Margaret Spufford's *Reclotting of Rural England, Petty Chapmen and their Wares in the Seventeenth Century* (1984) and other works on Italy, Germany, and Spain. [2]

The core of Fontaine's research focuses on the Alpine region of the Briançonnais where small villages produced generations of itinerant merchant peddlers ranging from the indebted peasants who strapped packs to their backs to the long-term immigrant merchants established in major European cities. The author systematically challenges the stereotype drawn first by contemporaries and then by historians that cast the peddler as a rootless, poverty-stricken migrant living on the verge of criminality. From the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries the term "peddler" was applied not only to near destitute itinerant packmen but also to wealthy and respectable city merchants.

Fontaine's work covers a broad spectrum of peddling activities, from the most visible and disturbing "destitute peddlers," who had no access to credit and trafficked in small merchandise, to "regular peddlers," who had established suppliers and steady customers and were able to finance their expeditions using their personal assets. Most of her attention, however, is focused on "merchant peddlers" who established lucrative and expansive trade networks in the sixteenth and seventeenth

centuries. Fontaine's reconstruction shows that these peddlers had their roots in the mountain villages--the Scottish highlands, Italian Alps, or the Dauphine. Although they may have lived for generations in a lowland town, which an ancestor had first visited as an itinerant peddler, merchant peddlers retained financial ties with and recruited family members from their native-mountain villages.

Over the years merchant peddlers established family-run businesses that operated over vast areas. They opened warehouses and shops in urban centers to store and sell goods, married sons and daughters into local bourgeois families, and apprenticed their own family members into an expansive trade. Through the loans and credit they extended to their poorer neighbors, the merchants not only increased their wealth from interest they charged but also gave them access to land and grazing rights which served as the collateral of poor debtors. Additionally, such loans enabled them to recruit packmen and other laborers from the villagers who would take to the road selling their merchandise in order to pay off their debts.

Fontaine illustrates these claims by recounting the histories of many prominent merchant families. The Brentanos, for example, from the valleys around Lake Como, traveled with their exotic fruits and spices to Basel and Frankfurt and developed their enterprises and trade network in succeeding generations that spanned from Amsterdam to Vienna. Likewise, the Giraud family, originally from the Dauphine region of the Alps, managed a peddling network that extended over Switzerland, northern Italy, and southern France. Like other peddling families, they maintained their own banking system and invested money in their business. Thus, far from the stereotypical itinerant destitute vagrant trader, many of the peddlers were affluent and influential businessmen who maintained geographical and familial roots.

Fontaine also traces the evolution of the peddling trade, their clientele, and their wares arguing that peddlers played a significant part in the cultural transformation and the consumer revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As the great family trade networks were disbanded, peddlers turned to selling specialty items, such as watches, handkerchiefs, optical lenses, illicit books, and other new consumer goods. Fontaine suggests that peddlers helped to create a market for luxury goods and consumer items. She states that merchant peddlers were the "privileged intermediaries of an intellectual openness between the village and the social circles which they frequented in town for business, or perhaps even for pleasure" (p. 179). Furthermore, we learn how peddlers responded to the economic changes and consumer demand of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The florist, for example, was recruited by merchants in order to procure ornamental plants and seeds from Latin America and the Middle East.

Fontaine also discusses and accounts for the decline of the peddling trade. By the eighteenth century in England and the mid-nineteenth century in France, the numbers of peddlers had declined. Improved transportation and communication facilitated the distribution of goods and expanding market networks bypassed itinerant merchants. Additionally, the increasing number of sales outlets and the rapid development of mail order made them redundant as intermediaries. Companies began to employ their own traveling salesmen, who became the new middlemen and closed opportunities to independent peddlers. Peddling became no longer a full-time profession but only offered temporary work between jobs. Despite the demise of the peddling trade, many of its practices endured. Indeed, many of the peddlers' techniques--using credit to maintain ties with clients, blending entertainment and salesmanship, employing testimonial advertising and promotional giveaways--were picked up and modified by salesmen, advertisers, and marketers.

Overall, Fontaine presents a highly interesting and important subject that is meticulously researched and complemented by a broad range of secondary sources. Her work provides an exemplary comparative treatment of peddlers that should inspire other research and be of use to a broad audience of social, economic, and cultural historians.

#### NOTES

[1] Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. 4th ed., Trans. by Sian Reynolds (London: Collins, 1973), pp. 30, 39.

[2] David Jaffee, "Peddlers of Progress and the Transformation of the Rural North, 1760-1860." *Journal of American History* 78 no.2 (September 1991): pp. 511-535.

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