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Pierre Vernus, *Art, luxe et industrie: Bianchini Férier, un siècle de soieries lyonnaises*. Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 2006. 425 pp. Illustrations, tables, notes, lexicon of technical terms, annexes, bibliography and index. €35.00. ISBN 2-7061-0997-3.

Review by Colin Heywood, University of Nottingham.

The silk industry of Lyon stands out as quintessentially French, in much the same way as the cotton industry of Manchester appears quintessentially British or the steel industry of the Ruhr quintessentially German. It retained a relatively small-scale, dispersed form of production well into the twentieth century, in contrast to the concentration into large factories more in evidence among its neighbours. It relied on highly-skilled, artisanal labour while its rivals moved more quickly into the process of ‘de-skilling’ workers by turning them into semi-skilled machine operatives. Indeed the Jacquard loom, developed in Lyon during the early nineteenth century, is a famous example of technology underpinning a system of ‘flexible specialization’, as opposed to the mass production of the factory system. By mechanizing handicraft production, it allowed skilled labour to perform a variety of tasks (in this case in the weaving of fancy brocaded silks) and to respond quickly to changes in demand. Silk was also a luxury goods industry, where France succeeded in occupying a profitable niche on world markets, along with products such as fine woollens, champagne and perfume.

All this takes us to the heart of the debate on the performance of the French economy during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Did its reliance on small-scale, high quality production emerge as a relatively successful adaptation to its material conditions? Or was it always vulnerable to competition from its rivals in Europe and North America who had adopted mass production techniques? In the case of the Lyon silk industry, the handlooms, small rural mills, family firms and specialization in luxury goods did not appear ‘backward’ in so far as it was a successful export industry, generating substantial profits for the entrepreneurs and high wages for the skilled *canuts* (silk weavers). Yet even by the end of the nineteenth century, the historian Pierre Cayez could describe it as an old industry, struggling to compete with newly-established rivals organized on an industrial, rather than an artisanal base. Its rapid adoption of new technology after the Second World, although in the end too little too late, could be taken as evidence to show that the French economy never really became competitive until faced with the full blast of market forces imposed by membership of the Common Market (now the European Union) during the 1950s and 1960s. [1]

The firm of Bianchini Férier (BF) in its turn serves as a representative example of the local silk industry, indeed one of the larger and more successful ones. It was a family firm, with two of the three founding families retaining control until the end. It formed part of the *fabrique collective*: that characteristically French form of industrial organisation made up of a cluster of

firms of varying size that took on all the stages of production of a particular product. The firm involved itself in silk throwing and spinning, weaving, printing, dyeing and also selling the goods. It was strongly oriented towards the export market, relying on its close association with the haute couture houses of Paris for its luxury cachet. It went through a trajectory of steady growth from its foundation in 1888 to the First World War, a heyday during the 1920s, and a period of upheaval and decline beginning in the 1930s leading to its eventual demise in 1992. As it happens, we are well served by historians from Lyon who have examined the overall pattern of development in the silk industry and the history of its labour force: besides the work of Pierre Cayez, one might cite that of Maurice Garden, Yves Lequin and Gilbert Garrier.<sup>[2]</sup> What Pierre Vernus offers is the rather different perspective of the history of a single firm. He has had the advantage of being able to consult the *archives de l'entreprise*, deposited in the Departmental Archives of the Rhône. This type of source material is quite rare in the public domain in France, because of the secretive nature of businessmen there. The material has its strengths and weaknesses, as the author acknowledges in his introduction. In the case of BF, the documentation elucidating the strategic decision-making in the early decades of the firm's existence is sparse and, more importantly, the whole archive is geared to the interests of the firms' owners and managers, leaving the mass of clerks and workers as the unrecorded 'poor relations' of the story.

The underlying problem posed in this study is to explain the rise and fall of a family firm. Given that the firm specialized at the high end of the market, in *articles de haute nouveauté*, this leads on to consideration of the history of fashion and of the links between industry and art. Running like a red thread through the work is the argument that historians should take a sympathetic look at the small and medium enterprises of family capitalism. He asserts that they have taken a long time to escape the influence of the American business historian Alfred D. Chandler and his interest in the emergence of modern managerial capitalism. Large, corporate enterprises were by no means unknown in France, as a recent history of their impact during the nineteenth and early twentieth century by Michael Stephen Smith makes clear.<sup>[3]</sup> However, Vernus denies that this was 'the one best way', and takes up the cudgels in support of the family firm—an interesting but potentially contentious view, as noted above. He also sets out to use his monograph on the one firm as an 'observation post' to view the changing conditions of its milieu, as BF both adapted to and helped create the economic, social, cultural and political conditions surrounding the silk industry. The book is organized chronologically in four parts, investigating successively the early expansion of the firm between 1888 and 1914, its apogee during the 1920s, the period of struggle during the Great Depression and the Second World War, and finally the recovery of the post-war years and the gradual disengagement of the families from the 1970s onwards. Each part examines systematically the way the firm was financed, the nature of the labour force and the technologies adopted, and the organization of marketing.

To explain the rapid rise of the new firm during the Belle Époque, the author highlights the entrepreneurial dynamism of its three founders. Certainly, they benefitted from a favourable economic climate, with years of prosperity between the late 1880s and the outbreak of war in 1914, and a buoyant 'aristocratic' market at home and abroad for expensive clothing. Moreover, silk was an industry where entry costs were low and where it was possible to expand by reinvesting profits, without resort to external sources of funding. All the same, the young entrepreneurs seized their opportunities with gusto. In particular, Charles Bianchini took advantage of the growing prestige of Parisian haute couture, establishing himself in the capital

with a sales outlet on the Avenue de l'Opéra to cater to high-end clients. The firm was quick to respond to the demand from this sector for smoother, more flowing silks, as the couturiers sought to give a more slender line to the feminine silhouette (pp. 56-7). By a 'stroke of artistic genius' (p. 331), in 1912 Bianchini also recruited the painter Raoul Dufy as a designer for the company, helping it to develop its own characteristic style. Meanwhile, back in the Lyonnais, the entrepreneurs invested in new power looms and in a silk printing mill in Tournon (Ardèche). With the First World War out of the way, the company returned to its very profitable position in the forefront of the Lyon silk industry during the 1920s, as Paris fashions continued to set the tone for the rest of the world. However, ominously enough, Vernus observes that, the early adoption of artificial fibres excepted, the industry continued with the same form of small and medium-scale organization and similar methods of production to those of the pre-war period (p. 155).

The explanation for the slow and painful decline of BF from the 1930s is equally interesting: Vernus echoes Philip Scranton in considering the dynamics of a decline no less complex and significant than those of growth. For a start, he argues that the social and political environment became less hospitable to the traditional outlets for silk in the world of haute couture. There were new democratic ideals coming to the fore, favouring mass production and mass consumption, not to mention the rise of a youth culture. Rising incomes did not translate into more spending on luxury clothing, as the wealthy preferred to put their money into other goods and services, such as leisure and health. At the same time, the author is clear that the changing environment provided new opportunities for entrepreneurs to make a profit from luxury goods. Some succeeded spectacularly, like the Louis Vuitton-Moët-Hennessy group, whilst others, including BF, failed. The spectacular rise of ready-to-wear clothing was one such opportunity, seized for the most part by British, American and Italian firms, with designer brands such as Calvin Klein and Giorgio Armani largely supplanting the established fashion houses on the international market. BF was slow to catch on to this shift, caught between a desire to move into new lines such as sportswear, and a certain reluctance to move down market from Parisian Haute Couture. Moreover, the second half of the book dwells on some of the difficulties frequently faced by family firms. The lack of a male heir on the Bianchini side of the partnership caused problems of succession for the founders, and there were disagreements between the two families on how far the company should risk heavy investment in new plant. With no one coming forward from the families with a grasp of all aspects of the firm – creation, manufacture and sales – there was an absence of firm leadership during the critical years following the Second World War (p. 245). With such disarray in the firm at this point BF appears as another example of the 'Buddenbrooks effect' (the 'clogs to clogs in three generations' syndrome). As a family enterprise, it was also difficult for BF to mobilize sufficient capital to take new initiatives, such as investing in a modernised weaving shed at la Tour-du-Pin or setting up a chain of retail outlets during the 1970s (p. 327). In the end, it was clear that the Fériet family lacked both the human and the financial resources to shore up the company, reduced by 1992 to a shadow of its former self, when they sold it to the Mayor group (p. 330).

The work impresses by its systematic documentation of changes in the environment for BF, its managerial strategies, its organization, its markets, and its performance under various headings. Vernus has meticulously trawled his way through the business archives to assemble a huge amount of data, presented in no less than eighty-five tables, and complemented by a range of other archival and published primary sources. He sustains a valuable interplay between the details of the firm and the surrounding environment. He also substantiates his case that family

capitalism is worthy of investigation, with *'une entreprise à la française'* to set beside the prevailing Anglo-Saxon model. It is a pity that he has not been able to include illustrations of the colourful designs of the firm's printed silks, notably those of Raoul Dufy, though there are plenty of black-and-white photographs of the entrepreneurs, their families and their plant. Not everyone will be convinced by his partisanship for the family firm, particularly during the early twentieth century, though it must be said that he provides plenty of evidence to show its limitations as well as its advantages. Overall, this is an excellent contribution to the historiography of a key French industry.

## NOTES:

[1] Pierre Cayez, *Crises et croissance de l'industrie lyonnaise, 1850-1900* (Paris: CNRS, 1980); Colin Heywood, *The Development of the French Economy, 1750-1914* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Jean-Pierre Dormois, *The French Economy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[2] See, for example, Maurice Garden, *Lyon et les Lyonnais au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Société d'édition 'Les Belles-Lettres', 1970); Yves Lequin, *Les Ouvriers de la région lyonnaise* (2 vols., Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1977); and Gilbert Garrier, *Paysans du Beaujolais et du Lyonnais, 1800-1970* (2 vols., Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1973).

[3] Michael Stephen Smith, *The Emergence of Modern Business Enterprise in France, 1800-1930* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

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