

Byers, Edward. *The Nation of Nantucket: Society and Politics in an Early American Commercial Center, 1660-1820*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987. Pp xv, 367. Illustrations, tables, maps, index. \$35.00 (U.S.)

Jere Daniell

Volume 16, numéro 3, february 1988

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1017745ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017745ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Daniell, J. (1988). Compte rendu de [Byers, Edward. *The Nation of Nantucket: Society and Politics in an Early American Commercial Center, 1660-1820*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987. Pp xv, 367. Illustrations, tables, maps, index. \$35.00 (U.S.)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 16(3), 297–298. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017745ar>

What emerges from these pages is a carefully detailed profile of the Hill, an immigrant colony with an unusually low rate of geographic mobility, few periods of instability (which the author attributes to the colony's long settlement and migration process), and a quality of permanence in the years 1900-1930 based on evidence found in naturalization petition statistics and city directories, although here the author's sample covers only the principal streets and the six years that spanned 1921-1928.

For all those interested in urban and immigration history, this study of the Hill offers rich rewards. Baseball fans will learn among other things that its playing fields produced Joe Garagiola and Yogi Berra. Whether all the author's positions on more substantive issues ultimately prove to be acceptable — and as stated I am dubious about some of them — he has nevertheless produced a scholarly, stimulating history that makes an important contribution to immigration literature.

Marian C. McKenna  
Department of History  
University of Calgary

---

Byers, Edward. *The Nation of Nantucket: Society and Politics in an Early American Commercial Center, 1660-1820*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987. Pp xv, 367. Illustrations, tables, maps, index. \$35.00 (U.S.).

Add one more to the growing list of well executed local histories of early Massachusetts communities. Edward Byers has done for the island town of Nantucket what others have done previously for Andover, Boston, Concord, Dedham, Newburyport, Springfield, Sudbury, to name only some of the localities receiving full treatment in the past generation. Byers' book covers the years from Nantucket's first European settlement through the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Its contents reflect both the uniqueness of the Nantucket experience and the now standardized themes of much New England local history written by professionals.

Nantucket was, indeed, a special world. Its native population remained largely unaffected by the various epidemics which decimated coastal tribes in the seventeenth century, adapted readily to Christianity, outnumbered whites until about 1710, and contributed much to the island's economy until shortly before the revolution. Nantucket's first European settlers—speculative proprietors from northern Massachusetts and what is now New Hampshire—arrived expecting to raise crops and livestock, yet their descendents became some of the most imaginative, aggressive, and successful commercial entrepreneurs in early America. The island was part of New York until 1692, of Massachusetts

after that, and pretty much a world unto itself no matter what province it found itself part of (today it is both a town and a county, and periodically threatens to secede from the Bay State). Congregationalism and Quakerism shared top billing among the island's various denominations, but no one seems to have taken religion as seriously as colonial New Englanders in general. During both the American Revolution and the War of 1812, Nantucket did its best to remain neutral. Byers has entitled his book "The Nation of Nantucket" to emphasize the island's uniqueness.

The development which most influenced Nantucket's early history was whaling. There exists, of course, an immense literature on the subject. Byers has been careful not to repeat what others have emphasized. He is less interested in the technical details and romance of whaling than in its impact on community. Some of the richest passages in the volume appear in a lengthy unit called "The Rise of A Whaling Port 1690-1740." Population became increasingly concentrated near the best harbour on the north shore. Indians, once relatively independent, found themselves reduced to an impoverished underclass. Ship captains and owners dominated political and cultural life. Island wives—their husbands at sea for longer and longer intervals—managed family life even more thoroughly than did their mainland farming counterparts. Whaling in subsequent decades made Nantucket one of New England's most prosperous and populated towns. The island in 1726 had about 900 inhabitants. In 1775 it had over 4,500. Dependence on whaling, in turn, made the community especially vulnerable during the wars and explains, along with Quaker antipathy to the military, why many islanders tried to find a middle ground between the combatants.

For all its differences from other New England towns, however, the Nantucket Byers presents will seem familiar to those who keep up with literature in early New England community development. The whole genre has become a bit predictable. Writers address the community vs. individual theme: Byers at several points describes the island culture as more "liberal" and individualistic than the rest of New England. There has to have been a period of harmonious stability which as modernists we can look fondly back on. Part three of *The Nation of Nantucket* is called "Life in an American Utopia, 1740-75" and includes chapters on "The Culture of an American Utopia" and "The Politics of Cultural Uniformity and Social Stability"; part four has "The Shattering of Unity, 1775-1820" as its title. A third theme has to do with elitism. Everyone acknowledges the presence of dominant elites defined by intermarriage, wealth, and generational continuity. Byers describes with precision the emergence of this group in Nantucket, but seems torn between admiration and rejection of their world. The latter is most evident in casual aside (p.8, n.8) that despite its liberalism the Nantucket of his book "must still be judged as undemocratic." Finally, the proof of having mastered statistics. Byers concludes his work with nearly thirty pages of elaborate figures

and tables which should satisfy even the most addicted printout buff.

One additional observation. As a colonial historian I applaud and am grateful for the volumes produced by Byers and his predecessors. As an historian of New England, however, I think it's time to move on. The New England town didn't disappear after the colonial period. What we need now are studies of towns in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Should Edward Byers be looking for another project, he might find fascinating the study of Nantucket's last 160 years. His interest in the tension between conformity and individualism, in utopianism, in elites, and in statistics could be put to fully as productive use as it has been in this admirable volume.

Jere Daniell  
Department of History  
Dartmouth College

---

Lis, Catharina. *Social Change and the Labouring Poor: Antwerp, 1770-1860*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986. Pp. xiii, 237. Tables, maps, index. \$20.00 (U.S.).

This necessary and substantial piece of scholarship adds much to current knowledge about evolving European cities and the development of their working populations. Using rich archival sources to provide extensive quantitative evidence, Catharina Lis attacks the theory that poverty was the result of economic underdevelopment or backwardness and that the problem of the poor would be solved with "industrialization" or "modernization." The theory under attack, as it is stated by the author, is somewhat of a "straw thesis" which does not give credit to the complexity and nuance of the works which support it; but Lis goes on to draw a fascinating portrait of Antwerp in change during a period which, she argues, was not one of underdevelopment but rather "an accelerated phase in the development of capitalism," with drastic social effects.

Antwerp is remarkable because economic growth during the period 1770-1860 was accompanied by industrial decline. From the mid-seventeenth century, it had been a textile manufacturing centre with a large population of masters and skilled journeymen. But during the 1740s, those with capital began to invest in the textile industry. This trend and increasing competition led to the gradual degradation of textile craftsmen and concentration of industrial mastery into the hands of a wealthy few. Even as artisans became poorer in the late eighteenth century and the use of cheaper child and female labour increased, the reform of poor relief was underway to provide a more centralized, stringent system which abolished guild relief, forbade begging and provided

miniscule allowances as an incentive to work for reduced wages in increasingly miserable conditions.

This increasing division between capital and labour is the familiar weave of classic Marxian fabrics, but Antwerp was not to become a classic industrial town. By 1820, a combination of technological problems, political changes and the transfer of capital to more profitable ventures in commerce and finance had undermined the importance of textiles, and the town on the Scheldt had become primarily an international port. This transformation had "disastrous" results for the labouring population. Already "proletarianized," they were more than ever to suffer "pauperization." As port-related activities gained predominance, there was some new employment to compensate for the loss of textile jobs, but casual labour, the primary new occupation, was even less reliable and more taxing than the degraded textile work. Work in the port usually also demanded the physical strength of young males. This necessity excluded women and children, and deterred many former textile workers. Much of the casual labour force was therefore provided by migrants from rural areas of surplus population and economic crisis. The influx of young immigrants was fundamental to the expansion of the wealthy commercial economy; but it also aggravated the social problems caused by deindustrialization. Natives with unwanted skills were more than ever forced to accept poor relief. An increasingly young, single, working population competed in a fierce and uncertain labour market.

While she eschews the debate on living standards in her introduction, Lis nonetheless enters that fray with great statistical vigour in chapters six to nine. Military considerations, commercial expansion and the extension of exclusive areas for the elites reduced living space for a growing population of workers whose income in any event was such that new residential building for the poor was unprofitable. Rents rose and families were often forced to inhabit windowless rooms with only a few square metres of space per resident. In addition, the poor of Antwerp suffered a steady dietary degradation in both caloric intake and the quality of food. Despite increasing strictness in the application of eligibility criteria, the proportion of relief recipients in the total population remained high throughout the period, rising above forty per cent in crisis years, such as 1845.

In the almost continuous emergency of the early nineteenth century, according to Lis, the poor resorted to various strategies of self-preservation. Attitudes to marriage and procreation, for example, underwent a gradual change as incomes became less certain and the port economy diminished the value of female and child labour. The abandonment of infants grew increasingly common until the 1840s, when working people began to adjust their matrimonial and sexual habits to the reduced prospects which by then seemed permanent. Even *in extremis*, however, the labouring classes of Antwerp were not dangerous. Rates of theft, begging and prostitution did rise, but crime remained a marginal solu-