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Review of Patrick O'Brien, Derek Keene, eds. Urban Achievement in Early Modern Europe: Golden Ages in Antwerp, Amsterdam and London.

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Patrick O'Brien, Derek Keene, eds. *Urban Achievement in Early Modern Europe: Golden Ages in Antwerp, Amsterdam and London*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 361 pp. ISBN 0521594081.

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This collection derives from a Renaissance Trust project set up by Gerry Martin in 1990 with a mission to provide a network for scholars to pursue, in a series of conferences, meetings and seminars, an investigation into "Achievement in Intellectual and Material Culture in Early Modern Europe." The project, which lasted five years, produced four volumes of essays, of which this was the third to be published; a final report on its activities was published in 1996. The present collection, although lacking the contributions of several French academics involved in the two conferences that inspired it, nonetheless still features an admirable range of work from scholars active in the Netherlands, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States—testament to a rare and laudable group initiative that no doubt greatly enhanced the research of the individuals involved, and that has produced this useful and interesting book of essays that are, in their own right, uniformly knowledgeable, clearly written and eminently readable.

From the outset, however, two major methodological issues pose themselves as challenges to which *Urban Achievement* has only partial answers. The collection claims to be a comparative study of the so-called "golden ages" of three northern European cities in the early modern period: Antwerp, Amsterdam and London. Yet its design gravitates against its objectives. Its contributors, as might be expected, draw on their own single-city specialisms and make only occasional gestures toward comparative critical observations. It falls to the introduction of economic historian Patrick O'Brien to attempt some kind of comparative study, or at least synthesis, but the given terms of the enterprise produce oddly overdetermined results. As O'Brien concedes, the very idea of a "golden age" is problematic—not in itself a historical fact or even common opinion, but rather a trope that structures many narratives of "the rise, decline and revival of cities" (5). There are many European cities that might feasibly have been included: O'Brien himself lists Genoa, Venice, Bruges, Florence, Milan, Brussels, Hamburg, Bordeaux and Paris. But the very selection of these three particular cities evokes another narrative: Fernand Braudel's broadly "mercantilist" model which sees hegemony moving in the period from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, albeit not smoothly or directly, from Antwerp to Amsterdam to London. A more pointed critical enquiry might have been to examine the tacit premises of this selection.

According to O'Brien, the book seeks to answer a question posed to the collective enterprise by Gerry Martin: "Why do recognized and celebrated achievements, across several fields of endeavor, tend to cluster within cities over relatively short periods of time?" This question neatly elides another key problem: the book's title category of "achievement." For historians interested in comparative study, O'Brien concedes, "achievement" as a methodological tool proved to be "a more amorphous label" than more easily quantifiable outcomes such as crime rates, rising productivity, and the status of women." Levels of achievement (however defined) for other areas of endeavor," O'Brien admits, "emerged as far more difficult to aggregate, pinpoint and weigh." In fact, it could be argued that "achievement" is difficult to define in any historical study,

comparative or not. How does one judge achievement? Tellingly, the book's chosen fields of focus and knowledge—more generally, book-publishing, art, and architecture—are neither explained nor justified in the otherwise cautious and comprehensive introduction. O'Brien merely asserts that each golden age was preceded and accompanied by "cultural reordering" which manifested itself in "intense rivalries and quests for identities along all the 'frontiers' of artistic, architectural, scientific as well as economic endeavor that divided Protestant from Catholic communities throughout post-Reformation Europe" (17). It is taken for granted that these are symptoms of "achievement" (and specifically "urban achievement"). It is significant that in an introduction that is otherwise cautious and comprehensive no need is felt to justify this Burckhardtian linking of economic supremacy with artistic flowering—an assumption that has received its share of critical rethinking elsewhere recently.

This is not to say that the parameters of "achievement" adopted by the collection are necessarily misguided, as is signalled by the narratives of the economic growth and demographic change of the three cities neatly recapitulated in essays by Michael Limberger (Antwerp), Clé Lesger (Amsterdam) and Peter Earle (London). They identify the obvious common features of the cities: all three are ports on inland waterways; all were centers of European trade and finance; during their periods of economic prosperity, all were leading cultural centers. All three examine local and internal factors (type of harbor, proximity to certain trades and trade routes), as well as external factors, such as international political and religious issues. Limberger emphasizes that, during Antwerp's golden age, not only did the city's market grow quantitatively, but "important qualitative improvements in organization and improvement also took place," such as the spread of share-companies, trade on commission and commercial bills, the opening of an exchange, and improvements in commercial insurance. Lesger focuses on Amsterdam's simultaneous leading roles in trade and shipping, and in "the manufacture of luxury goods, in printing and publishing, in cartography, in science and technology, in learning and the arts" (63). Earle, recognizing that London has had many potential golden ages, nevertheless sees 1660-1730 as the period when England's capital stopped being effectively an economic satellite of Antwerp, or in the shadow of Amsterdam, and when "what the Elizabethans had initiated was achieved and London became the equal of Amsterdam as a trading centre" (81).

What remains consistent through these survey chapters is the way in which contemporaries viewed each of the cities during its particular golden age. When the late sixteenth century's preeminent printer, the Frenchman Christopher Plantin, explained to Pope Gregory XIII why he had opted to settle in Antwerp, he wrote, "no town in the world provides more advantages for the profession I wanted to pursue. It is easy to get there, one sees different countries get together at the market; one also finds all the raw materials which are indispensable for my craft; for all professions, there is no problem in finding labourers who can be instructed within a short time" (59). Amsterdam was observed to be

one of the cities with the greatest trade that there is in the world, whether by the amount of money remitted by its merchants and bankers to all foreign countries, or by the almost infinite number of commodities with which its warehouses are filled, and which come in and go out unceasingly in the commerce which she carries on, even to the ends of the earth. (63-4)

What is identified here is the multicultural cosmopolitanism of the cities, inexorably linked to a rise in foreign (especially long-haul) trade, heightened market and banking opportunities, peaks in the availability of both raw materials and other commodities—and the concomitant lure of such financial success to strangers. If "achievement" needed a working definition, these observations—reflecting the understanding of contemporaries rather than the entrenched categories and disciplinary specialisms of historians—might be the best place to start.

Following these sketches of the three main players, the book's final four sections focus on architecture and urban space; fine and decorative arts; books and publishing; and "scientific and useful knowledge." Here again, within the given subject areas, each city is represented by a discrete essay, and comparative deduction is largely left to the reader. Sometimes, the focus of the essays will helpfully suggest differences: Piet Lombaerde plays up Antwerp's reputation as "one of the best fortified [cities] in Europe," while Marjolein 't Hart is more concerned with Amsterdam's emergent "monumentalism" following the *Alteratie* of 1578. But a common thread emerges in the authors' various emphases on the market economy: Marten Jan Bok's understanding of "Amsterdam as a cultural centre," for example, rests as much on its reputation as "a market for paintings" as on the art itself; while Paul Hoftijzer's elevation of the same city as a "metropolis of print" is as interested in Amsterdam's book trade as in its intellectual contributions to European life; Geert Vanpaemel's study of Antwerp's "metropolitan stimulus for scientific achievements" is tellingly titled "science for sale," while Larry Stewart's account of Restoration London's "coffee-house and experiment" culture is dubbed "philosophers in the counting house." In other essays, Judi Loach examines the possibilities for the architecture and urban space of London after the Great Fire of 1666; Hans Vlieghe and David Ormrod explore the fine and decorative arts of Antwerp and London respectively; Werner Waterschoot and Adrian Johns pinpoint the publishing trends of a trendsetting pre-1585 Antwerp and a Restoration London "steeped in the printed word"; and Karel Davids provides a survey of Amsterdam's long tenure as a center of learning from 1580 to 1700.

While all the chapters are valuable essays in their own right, they generously signal directions for further reading through their footnotes, and thus are clearly designed to provide convenient entry points into further reading on their subjects. There is a great deal here to admire and savor; at the very least, the juxtaposition of work on the three cities forces the reader to identify continuities and differences between these golden ages. While the comparative study ambitions of this collection are by its very nature and format somewhat curtailed, its model of thoughtful and collaborative scholarship will hopefully be repeated and pushed further in future ventures.