

Recovering corporate memory Wine porters' guilds and religious traditions in pre- industrial northern Italy

Review of: Lester K. Little, *Indispensable immigrants: The wine porters of northern Italy and their saint, 1200-1800*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2015, 229 p., ISBN: 978071909522, £ 70.00.

Miguel Laborda-Pemán

In the Epilogue of *Indispensable Immigrants*, Lester K. Little writes that 'for corporate memory to flourish, the corporate body needs to be alive' (p. 170). Resonant as it sounds, the falseness of such a claim is demonstrated by the author himself: with this book, Professor Little successfully brings to life the achievements and struggles of the wine porters who over several centuries worked in the cities around the Po valley. And he does so more than two hundred years after the corporate body was abolished by the policies of the Austrian and Napoleonic administrations. By making use of a great deal of archival evidence, Little explores in this book the world of these *brentatori* and, especially, the religious tradition that bound them together for centuries: the life, legends and canonisation of their patron saint, Saint Alberto of Villa d'Ogna.

Starting from two questions (how did an anonymous peasant become the object of veneration? How did collective action between porters become possible?) and a preliminary answer (the importance of sainthood and religious traditions), Professor Little organizes his book into three different parts that deal with the figure of Saint Alberto, the organization and activities of the *brentatori*, and Alberto's canonisation process. Popular tradition depicts Alberto, about whom almost no historical information is actually preserved, as a peasant from the Bergamasque valleys who left his native country to work as a wine porter in the city of Cremona. After a life of sacrifice, charitable works and pilgrimage, Alberto became the object of a spontaneous popular cult in the cities of the Po valley, leading to his eventual canonisation by Pope Benedict XIV in 1748. The *brentatori* were largely responsible for Alberto's immediate rise to prominence following his death in 1279. There was a trade that had made its appearance during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the rapidly growing urban economies of northern Italy. These unskilled workers of low social standing, many of them uprooted immigrants from the highlands of Piedmont and Lombardy, must have greatly welcomed a cult able to provide them with a stronger corporate identity. But the popular canonisation of common folk such as Alberto probably had also much to do with calming the waters of unstable medieval communes as the *popolo* rapidly became a central player in urban politics. Despite the primarily economic motivation behind guild establishment, the cult of Saint Alberto actually

remained an integral part of the religious and charitable activities performed by the *brentatori* guilds for much of their existence.

Interesting and well written as the book is, Little fails in part to deliver on what he actually promises. On the basis of the title, one would expect to find a detailed historical depiction of the organization, traditions and challenges experienced by urban workers situated at the low end of the social ladder in the cities of northern Italy. As already indicated, Little does reflect on this – it could not be otherwise. But the reader is left with the uneasy impression that the author has often used the book to present materials and stories not strictly in line with the expectations created by the title. On the one hand, Little fills many pages with generalities concerning the commercial revolution and the Italian communes (pp. 39-41) and the proliferation of new evangelical movements and the Church reform movement during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (pp. 108-114); he also offers details about medieval immigration patterns (pp. 64-75), pre-industrial dietary advice (pp. 83-86), the Academy of the Blenio Valley and similar artistic movements (pp. 90 and ff.), the functioning of the canonization process (pp. 103 and ff.), and other urban saints' stories (pp. 123-131). On the other, much more space and elaboration is missing from what should be (according to the expectations raised by the author himself) the core of the book: the origins, nature and functions of the porters' guilds (pp. 42-45); their membership, regulations and actual activities (pp. 45-62); their abolishment and the impact of new technologies (i.e. the glass bottle with cork) on the trade (p. 63); the links between canonisation and urban politics (pp. 120-123); and the drivers of the process of canonisation of Alberto of Villa d'Ogna by the urban community (pp. 137-140).

Obviously, such an excess and deficit of information are symptomatic of a more fundamental problem. One wonders whether the author had a clear audience and purpose in mind when writing the book. Why focus on porters' guilds? Why pay attention to the religious dimension and traditions of these specific guilds? No justification of the choice of the topic becomes apparent in the writing – not even the very legitimate one of honouring the memory of an otherwise forgotten group of labourers. In light of the recent debate about the nature of guilds in pre-industrial Europe (Epstein 2008, Ogilvie 2008),¹ the book partly reads as a missed opportunity to engage in a long-standing and relevant conversation with fellow historians. But, as indicated, its treatment of guild organization, membership and activities is usually too general to represent an important contribution in this respect. For a simple *aficionado*, however, the topic is likely too obscure and specialized – particularly when no clear justification is provided. Oscillating between these two ends, the book ends up not fully embracing either.

Significant as these points of criticism undoubtedly are, it would however be very unfair not to conclude that Lester K. Little has produced a very readable book for which a considerable volume of archival records from around twenty northern Italian cities have been consulted. The number of studies in Italian and English referred in the final notes also deserves a mention. The writing is always light but nevertheless compelling – one ends up feeling sympathetic towards the adventures and vicissitudes of all these anonymous peasants who left behind the highlands to earn a living in the brand-new urban world of the Italian communes. Lester K. Little has done a delightful job in making these corporate memories flourish again – but the result would have been even greater had he kept in mind what the book title initially promises.

¹ S. R. Epstein, 'Craft guilds in the pre-modern economy: a discussion', in: *Economic History Review*, 61, 1 (2008), pp. 155-174, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0289.2007.00411.x>; S. Ogilvie, 'Rehabilitating the guilds: a reply', in: *ivi*, pp. 175-182.

Miguel Laborda-Péman
University of Utrecht
Department of History and Art History
Drift 6 - 3512 BS Utrecht (the Netherlands)
M.LabordaPeman@uu.nl