

BOOK REVIEW

Stephen H. Rigby and Robert C. Nash, *The Overseas Trade of Boston, 1279–1548*. Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2023, 135pp. 9 figures. 14 tables. Bibliography. €32.00 pbk. doi:[10.1017/S0963926824000506](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000506)

In the second half of the fourteenth century, Boston was among England's 10 largest towns. Yet, despite the survival of several key medieval buildings, including the infamous Boston stump, few written sources survive to illuminate the history of the town and its port. In *The Overseas Trade of Boston*, Rigby and Nash set out to rectify this by bringing together all the statistical information contained within Boston's enrolled customs accounts for the period 1279–1548 for the first time. In doing so, they give the reader an overview of the changes that the port underwent during this period, along with an account of the key commodities imported and exported, and how the information pertaining to this was originally compiled.

The book is divided into three sections. The first introduces the reader to the exchequer enrolled customs accounts as historical sources. This collection includes the 'ancient custom' from 1279 and the 'new custom' introduced in 1303 on wool and woolfells (known together as the 'great custom'). To this was added the 1303 'new custom' on cloth, wax and miscellaneous goods and the cloth custom of 1347 which became collectively known as the 'petty custom', all of which are of importance to scholars and students alike. Although initially only used for recording the export of wool and woolfells, as the fourteenth century progressed more and more commodities fell within the scope of the records, meaning that we are provided with a rich window into the commercial activity at the port. While the authors warn of the fallibility of the men responsible for producing the medieval customs records, they state that this was partly mitigated by supervision of customs collectors by Boston's controllers, searchers who looked for illegal trade and regular exchequer audits of the collector's accounts. Historians have long used such accounts as evidence for long-term changes in the volume and composition of England's commerce in the later Middle Ages, including the transition from raw wool to manufactured woollen cloth in England's export trade, and 'the increasing monopolisation of the country's overseas trade by London at the expense of the provincial ports' (p. 20).

The second section of the book deals with the town's overseas trade in wool, cloth, wax, wine and finally goods liable to poundage. The pleasing addition of a detailed analysis and discussion of alien imports of wax between 1303 and 1548 adds further weight to evidence of Boston as one of England's leading ports, and provides a welcome addition to the more obvious inclusion of raw wool, woollen cloth and wine in discussions regarding England's overseas trade. Detailed tables and graphs allow the reader to see with ease the fluctuating figures of imports and exports which were influenced by England's changing political landscape.

The authors' final section is a succinct conclusion which provides the reader with a clear summary and future avenues for investigation. It also points, once again, to some of the gaps in the evidence, including the lack of details regarding coastal trade, which does not feature in the exchequer accounts. However, as Rigby and Nash confirm, even if this were recorded it would not have compensated for Boston's gradual loss of overseas trade. The final section highlights the sad fate of the port: 'paradoxically as the Boston stump grew taller, Boston sank ever lower down England's urban hierarchy' (p. 105). An appendix provides a transcription of particulars from the account of the collectors responsible for collecting tunnage and poundage in Boston for the period 28 November 1386 – 28 November 1387 (The National Archives E 122/7/19). This is followed by a helpful glossary detailing the commodities, measures and places mentioned in the document. This book will be of keen interest to scholars and students researching medieval European towns and trade. In particular, those seeking to observe at a local level the switch from raw wool to woollen cloth as England's primary export, the rise and fall of the Gascon wine trade and England's economic engagement with merchants from across Europe, especially the Hanseatic League.

Claire Kennan 

Royal Holloway, University of London

Claire.Kennan@rhul.ac.uk