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The Paradox of Prosperity: The Leiden Booksellers' Guild and the Distribution of Books in Early Modern Europe

Laura Cruz

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In The Paradox of Prosperity, Laura Cruz explores the world of the book trades as it was constructed in Leiden in the decades after the Revolt against Spanish rule. She traces the migration of printers from the Southern Netherlands to Leiden and observes how they congregated within the city and sought contracts with the city's new university. But this is only the beginning of a multifaceted analysis of the development of a market-driven industry that eventually is organized under the protective umbrella of a guild. And this guild, in turn, is something other than the traditional guilds of medieval origins. Rather than a bulwark against market forces, the guild of the printers was an instrument to exercise market power. This book offers a fresh look at the role of an institution that is often dismissed, even in the early modern period, as a relic of an earlier time. Leiden's book trade was unique, exhibiting a specific quality that calls for a specific explanation. Laura Cruz addresses this historical specificity, but goes a step further. Leiden publishing emerged as an industry with a European scope and with national and international competitors. Distinguishing the particular from the general and the accidental or providential from the systematic forces at play within early modern European society is an historian's duty, but one that is often neglected. Savoring the particular is often thought to be enough, indeed, to be the only real purpose of history. Laura Cruz goes further, harnessing her rich historical material to the methods of economic and social history. From this vantage point, she addresses questions that give new insights to the culture of the young Republic that are based not only on the thoughts and dreams of individuals, but also on the behavior and aspirations of groups and the constraints and opportunities presented by institutions.

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