

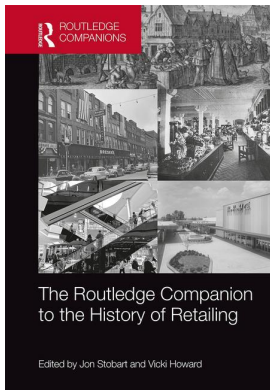
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The Routledge Companion to the History of Retailing

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Introduction

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1

INTRODUCTION

Global perspectives on retailing

I. Introduction

The digital age has severed retail's historic ties to geography and place. Shoppers have turned to their smart phones and computers to purchase everyday items like food and clothing as well as luxury goods and personal services. Internet commerce is now a global challenge to the so-called brick-and-mortar retailer. On both sides of the Atlantic, historic retail firms have gone under, whilst many others are struggling to compete in the new environment. By many accounts, the High Street is in crisis in the United Kingdom, indicated by declining footfall of shoppers in central business districts and by store closures. Concerns over the displacement of the High Street economy in the UK have spurred numerous studies and hopeful plans for redevelopment (Portas, 2011; Wrigley, 2015). In the United States, a country with much more retail space per person than Europe, "dead malls" have become a well-known phenomenon (Europe's Retail Market, 2017). Although a global trend, e-commerce has diffused across national markets in varying degrees: in the United States, it hovered between 9% and 10% of total retail sales in 2017; Great Britain saw online sales hit 16.5% of total retail sales in January 2018, yet China dwarfed this, accounting for 40% of total e-commerce spending globally. Every nation has experienced growth and disruption in this sector, signalling another retail revolution is upon us (Statistical Bulletin, 2018; Quarterly Retail, 2018). While the future is not foreseeable, it is safe to say that recent trends are unprecedented in their global reach. Industry observers have described a "retail apocalypse", seeing the end of traditional face-to-face modes of selling in a physical setting. The rise of e-commerce, which is less labour intensive by nature, has negatively affected retail employment opportunities as well. Amazon might employ more than half a million people, but these are lean numbers in relation to the firm's value. Currently the world's third most valuable company, its market capitalisation stands at more than \$702 billion at the beginning of 2018 and its founder, Jeff Bezos, is the richest person in the world (Carr, 2018).

This revolutionary commercial landscape calls for a reconsideration of the general history of retailing. Retail has never been static, as the chapters in this volume amply demonstrate, and lessons for the present can be learned from the past. Just to take the United States as an example, current concerns over retail monopoly and the effect of bigness on small business enterprise can be seen to have a long history. Nineteenth-century American department stores were the Walmarts of their era, posing a threat to single-line merchants who were unable to complete

with their low prices. Mail order firms like Sears and Montgomery Ward reached rural markets as never before with their general merchandise catalogues and subsidised distribution, undercutting small retailers in the same manner as Amazon. Chain stores undersold independents which instigated a successful movement in the interwar period to tax and regulate away their economies of scale. After World War II, American branch department stores in the suburbs began to undercut downtown sales, damaging urban centres. And, by the late twentieth century, discounters and big-box stores overtook them all. In the past, such retail developments were geographically confined: their effects limited to local, regional, and in some cases national markets. Place shaped the identity, practice and success of retail firms throughout most of its history. In the computer era, however, this is less the case. But, although the Internet age has collapsed time and space, allowing unprecedented market access for a diverse range of entrepreneurs and firms, the chapters in this volume demonstrate how different national contexts continue to play an important role in shaping retail traditions and practices.

Despite recent threats to the survival of traditional retailing, the industry is still a vital part of the early twenty-first century economy. In the UK, the retail sector as a whole contributed just over 11% of total economic output in 2016 and was the largest private sector employer (The Retail Industry, 2017). Wholesaling and retail combined were the second largest employer in the EU, after manufacturing, constituting 13% of the labour force (Retail and Wholesale, 2014). And across the Atlantic, retail employed roughly 16 million people in the United States at the beginning of 2018 and contributed \$2.6 trillion to the nation's GDP (Current Employment, 2018; Economic Impact, 2018). Brick and mortar retailing remains a central feature of the commercial landscape, the physical place where everyday business is conducted and the ordinary experience of life goes on. Whether located on UK High Streets, American Main Streets, in open-air street markets or in privately developed shopping complexes and malls, it provides the public space that creates communities.

And it has done so for a long time. Indeed, we might argue that retail history tracks the evolution of human societies and their economic activity, which makes it surprising that scholarship has often been quite narrowly defined. Previous histories of retailing have followed national lines or tracked the evolution of different retail formats, such as public markets, shopping malls, or department stores. In this *Companion to the History of Retailing*, the authors draw on their disciplinary specialties, but were tasked to bridge national divides wherever possible. As a result, some key influences and processes are revealed. Western retailing practices, for instance, shaped business enterprise and shopping experiences the world over, but local and regional differences are also shown to have persisted or in some cases, created interesting hybrid forms. A longer perspective has also shaped the picture of change over time, with strong continuities being identified and new periodisations suggested. Previous scholarly works have focused on the consumer revolution or the rise of modern mass retailing, but what comes from our longer chronological view and global perspective is a messier, more interesting history.

II. Approaches

Retail history is a rich, cross-disciplinary field that demonstrates the centrality of retailing to many aspects of human experience, from the provisioning of everyday goods to the shaping of urban environments; from earning a living to the construction of identity. This diversity is reflected in the broad range of disciplines that contribute to retail history, including economics, business, labour, architectural and social and cultural history, historical geography, marketing and management studies and urban planning. This diversity is a real strength, making the study

of retail history a vibrant and constantly changing field of enquiry: each discipline brings its own perspectives and concerns, asking a different set of questions, and each writes retail history in a different way. Diverse sources are drawn on to reconstruct the spaces, dynamics and practices of retailing: architectural historians might use plans, designs and the extant fabric of the city, whereas economists utilise statistics of sales, wages and the like, and business historians draw on the records of individual companies. These different sources reflect different methodologies: the quantification and model building of economists, for example, or the case studies and “thick descriptions” of social historians.

Such diversity is underscored by the different approaches and timeframes considered by historians in different countries. To caricature: American scholars tend to focus on the emergence of big business in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whereas those in Europe also examine medieval and early modern retailing, and are more concerned with a diversity of retail forms (Strasser, 1989; Leach, 1993). More subtly, definitions of key institutions (such as department stores) can vary, as can the relative importance of issues such as race or the role of central and local government in retail regulation (Benson, 1986; Howard, 2015; Monod, 1996). This disciplinary and national diversity is readily apparent in this volume, bringing to it a range of voices and perspectives that illustrate the varied ways in which retail history is studied and written. For instance, the discussion of itinerant tradesmen, written by the French social historian, Laurence Fontaine, is very different in style from Nitin Sanghavi’s account of the retail history of India, which reflects the perspective and priorities of business management. Yet both, and all the other contributions to this volume, offer rich and varied insights in the many facets of retail history. Indeed, this diversity enriches our understanding of retail history in its many forms.

Uniting these different perspectives and approaches is a broad consensus around the overall narrative of retail development, a consensus that has both temporal and spatial dimensions. Starting from the ancient world, the focus is largely on markets and fairs, which were increasingly formalised and regulated. Social and spatial gaps in provision were met by an array of itinerant retailers who were especially significant in serving the needs of rural populations less able to access urban markets (Holleran, 2012; Stabel, 2001; Fontaine, 1996; Calaresu and van den Heuvel, 2016). Yet shops were always present alongside the market, often operated by craftsmen who made as well as sold their wares; these fixed shops became increasingly important, eventually dominating retail provision, especially for durable goods and non-perishable foods – a process traced by Dyer in this volume (see also Keene, 1990; Welch, 2005; Carlin, 2007). In part because of guild regulations in many European cities and in part because of the growing array of goods available, retail provision diversified and specialised, a process that often involved the separation of production from retailing. In colonial America, import merchants sold goods through several distribution chains, including their own stores located at their warehouses in port cities and through networks of smaller merchants in the hinterland (Matson, 1998). Across Europe, the eighteenth century witnessed a proliferation of shops that were much more geared towards actively selling their wares, as Blondé and Van Damme outline in this volume. This process continued into the nineteenth century with the emergence of ‘modern’ retailing in the form of department stores and chain stores, which ushered in a new set of retail practices (Leach, 1993; Levinson, 2011; Spellman, 2016). The spatial focus here switches to America, where the development of mass retailing is seen as being most rapid and thorough (see the chapters by Elvins, Kruger and Liverant). Through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, retailing grew further in scale and in its impact on both cities and citizens (Howard, 2015; Isenberg, 2004; Longstreth, 1997) with US practices being copied across the world (see the chapters by Miller, Howard and Stobart, and Purvis). As the twentieth century progressed, new forms of retailing

took hold, including self-service and supermarkets; growing personal mobility drove a process of suburbanisation and a consequent decline in city centres – a trend first seen in the USA and accelerated in recent years by the emergence and growth of online shopping, as discussed here by Hyder, Halebsky, Stanger and Ellis-Chadwick.

Variations on this basic narrative reflect local differences in timing, emphasis and extent, but there is broad agreement on the sequence of change. Whether this amounts to evolution or revolution is, in part, a matter of perspective, although there is a growing scepticism about notions of a single retail revolution, as we discuss below. What remains clear, however, is the way in which retailing offers a window onto other key social, economic and cultural changes, including the emergence of a consumer society, the vibrancy of the economy (ides of consumer confidence and retail sales), the vitality of towns and urban institutions and relationships of power, such as race, gender and class.

III. Key themes

Given the variety of disciplinary perspectives, it is unsurprising that there are many different themes within retail history. Naturally, these have changed over the course of time, one of the most notable shifts in the last few decades being a move away from supply side to demand-side viewpoints, a move which reflects the emergence of the consumer as the key economic actor in the 1980s era of Thatcherism and Reaganomics (Koehn, 2001; Jacobs, 2005). This not only illustrates very clearly how retail history, like any aspect of history, is at least partly a product of the time in which it is written. Trying to step back from the detail of myriad approaches can be difficult, but doing so allows us to identify three broad groups of themes: economic, spatial and socio-cultural.

The idea of modernity and the process of modernisation form a perennial focus, especially for economic and business historians (Hollander, 1960; Chandler, 1977; Benson and Shaw, 1992). At their worst, such approaches can be teleological: seeing all changes in retailing as part of an inevitable and inexorable march to the present day, often in a series of stages which involve new forms of retailing replacing more traditional formats. Thus, markets decline in the face of fixed shops; traditional specialist retailers are replaced by department stores and multiples, and suburban shopping malls replace the High Street/downtown. Conversely, other studies find harbingers of modernity in the early modern world: fixed prices, perhaps, or active marketing (e.g. Walsh, 1999; Stobart, 2013). Despite a growing distrust of such approaches and the simple readings of modernity on which they are often based (see Cox, 2000; Mitchell, 2014; Blonde and Van Damme, 2010), there remains a focus on key transformative formats and practices – department stores, advertising, “scientific” management and new technologies – and on measuring shifts in productivity and profitability (Belisle, 2011; Elvins, 2004; Howard, 2015; Lichtenstein, 2009; Longstreth, 2010; Scott and Walker, 2012; Spellman, 2016). Whilst simple notions of retail revolution have long since lost their traction, the key measures and building blocks of this transformation remain important parts of retail history – see, for example, the chapters by Elvins and Purvis. At the same time, the idea that any transformation was all encompassing has been largely abandoned, not least because of growing evidence that ‘traditional’ retail formats thrived into the ‘modern’ era: open markets, itinerants, village shops and second-hand exchange, as seen in the chapters by Guardia et al., Fontaine, McCalla and Pennell.

Running in parallel with ideas of modernisation is the question of the role of retailing in creating or nurturing a consumer society – an issue discussed in detail by Blondé and Van Damme. The publication of McKendrick’s seminal analysis in 1982 created a tidal wave of studies that

attempted to discover how changes in retailing and consumption were connected, and determine the direction of causality (e.g. Blaszczyk, 2000; Coquery, 2011; Stobart, 2010). Some have challenged the periodisation, finding evidence of a productive symbiosis in earlier times (Peck, 2005; Welch, 2005) or arguing that both sets of changes belong more properly in the age of mass retailing and mass consumption (Leach, 1993). Others have argued that consumer transformation took place in an essentially traditional retail context (Blonde and Van Damme, 2010). Retail credit is seen by some as being central to modern consumerism; store cards and credit cards gave easy access to personal credit in the late twentieth century, building on the freedom provided earlier in the century by hire purchase agreements which brought a wide range of consumer durables within the reach of ordinary householders (Calder, 1999; Hyman, 2011)). Yet credit has always been central to the selling and buying of goods and to the relationship between retailers and consumers. It is apparent that the link between supply- and demand-side changes remains a key focus for historical enquiry, with the conclusions reached often reflecting the location and social group being examined, and the perspective of the researcher.

Debates about retail and consumer revolution often assume that both shopkeepers and their customers were entirely free agents, able to determine the course of history through their personal agency. Yet retailing has always been subject to government regulation (Cohen, 2003; Esperdy, 2008; Jacobs, 2005; Monod, 1996). As Dyer demonstrates in his chapter, medieval markets were closely controlled by civic and manorial authorities concerned with open and fair trading, and Guardia et al show that state involvement in markets has continued into the present era. Guilds played a large role in shaping retailing in many European cities into the eighteenth century and sometimes beyond, while civic authorities were increasingly active in asserting planning control and devising improvement schemes that involved radically remodelling retail streets – a process which reached its apogee in the comprehensive redevelopment schemes of postwar Europe (Howell, 2010; Morrison, 2003; Gosseye, 2015). National, state and local governments also stepped in, regulating prices, wages and hours of operation and sometimes using retail as a political tool for social and economic modernisation – see the chapters by Harada and Foda.

Globalisation is another thread that ties the various histories of retail together. One perspective on this focuses on the growing power of retailers to shape production. This is perhaps most obviously seen in the influence of late twentieth-century supermarkets to influence price and product specification of a wide range of agricultural products, but there is a long tradition of retailers involving themselves directly in the supply chain – from co-operatives to department stores (Lichtenstein, 2009; Spellman, 2016). A second perspective highlights the spread of Western-style retailing throughout the world. However, as many of the chapters in section 4 of this volume attest, this influence was not always monolithic or one-directional. Non-Western and socialist societies developed department stores and shopping malls, for instance, but their meaning and even the shopping practices they encouraged were somewhat distinct from their American and European origins – see the chapters by Miller, Foda and Hilton. And Western models might be hybridised and exported to other parts of the world, as Fujioka demonstrates was the case with Japanese department stores.

The relationship between retailing and the city forms a second broad theme, linking retail history to urban and architectural history, and historical geography – as highlighted in particular in Longstreth's chapter. Despite the growing industrial specialisation of urban economies, especially from the eighteenth century, retailing continued to dominate town and city centres; understanding its geography and its impact has therefore been a key topic of enquiry. For historians of ancient and medieval cities, this has often meant focusing on market buildings and

market squares; for more recent periods, attention switches to shops and the high street, and subsequently to precincts, malls and shopping centres (Stabel, 2001; Coquery, 2011; Furnee and Lesger, 2014; Howard, 2015; Longstreth, 1997, 2010). This sequence can be traced through the chapters by Dyer, Mitchell and Howard and Stobart which draw out the shifting functional and geographical locus of urban retailing over the *longue durée*. Mapping the changing location of retail infrastructure or the concentrations of specialist retail trades provides a window onto a range of broader processes and relationships, from business location strategies and the economics of clustering, to the daily pathways of urban dwellers and the persistence of local and regional identities (Hardwick, 2004; Elvins, 2004). Retail is seen as playing a key role in shaping the layout of the city, and more especially its built environment: the style, scale and orientation of buildings were determined in part by imperatives of selling. This is most obvious in department stores and malls, but is also apparent in market halls and corner shops (Morrison, 2003; Longstreth, 1997, 2010; Guardia and Oyon, 2015). Buildings carry messages about the retail company, for example through monumentalism and house architectural styles; together they help to define the identity of the city, although a key concern in recent years has been with the growing sameness of high streets and city centres, as highlighted in Mitchell's chapter.

The link between retailing and the city centre has been weakened by the progressive decentralisation and suburbanisation of shops. Originally, retail location was determined by accessibility on foot; mass transport systems, especially trams and omnibuses, provided a strong impetus for shops to locate along the route and particularly around terminals. All these meant that city centre locations were favoured. However, this was first challenged and then broken, from the 1950s in the USA and slightly later in Europe, by the rise of the motorcar and the personal mobility that this offered. Residential decentralisation in the United States following World War II spurred development of new shopping complexes outside of traditional city centres (Longstreth, 1997, 2010). American car culture increasingly dominated the commercial landscape with the appearance of new competitors in the shape of discounters and big-box retailing, built on low-cost land outside of city centres. These shifts have created fundamental changes in the urban fabric: downtown in many American cities in particular now has little to do with retail. Restaurants, bars, cafés, cinemas and other leisure-oriented businesses have populated downtowns, replacing the types of businesses that serve everyday needs, such as grocery and hardware stores. While many lament the death of downtown in America, historians have emphasised the continual evolution of retail formats and their meaning (Howard, 2015; Isenberg, 2004; Spellman, 2016). Over the last decade or so, focusing on grassroots movements and local efforts, some have emphasised survival and transformation, rather than destruction and decline (Isenberg, 2004).

Historians are also interested in retail space at a finer scale, within malls, arcades and even within shops themselves. Some of this concerns the ways in which store layout influenced consumer behaviour, as seen in analyses of the infrastructure for display that increasingly characterised eighteenth-century shops and the heightening of such practices in nineteenth-century department stores (Walsh, 1999; Stobart et al., 2007; Whitaker, 2011; Howard, 2015). It is also apparent in the construction and layout of supermarkets, malls and shopping centres – see the chapters by Hyder, Halebsky and Howard and Stobart. In all these retail environments, space was produced and manipulated by retailers to mould people's interactions with goods and their perceptions of the retailer, with the ultimate aim of increasing sales. However, more recently, there has been growing interest in the ways in which retail space has been constructed and sometimes subverted by the spatial practices of shoppers: high streets and arcades were used as promenades and by flâneurs, department stores formed distinctly female spaces, and malls were colonised by the young and old as places to hang out or stay warm and dry. Moreover, retail

venues, operating as a quasi-public privatised space, have been sites of political resistance. Sociologists, for example, have examined the various ways that different groups, such as women and the politically oppressed, have deployed such spaces for their own purposes (Srivastava, 2015).

As this suggests, retail history is increasingly being explored through a social or cultural lens. This includes using traditional categories such as gender, class and race, and increasingly in terms of identity construction and counter cultures. Class has often been examined in terms of labour relations. On the one hand, this has involved juxtaposing powerful merchant princes and penny capitalists, as Spellman does in her chapter (see also Benson, 1992). This can be seen as part of a broader historical tradition that explores economic and social change through the actions of great heroic figures, be they manufacturers, social reformers or retailers. It is most prominent in histories of department stores, but also characterises the histories of chain stores and even supermarkets (Briggs, 1956; Moss and Turton, 1989; Mathias, 1967; Buenger, 1998). On the other hand, there is the relationship between the shop owner and their workers, which could sometimes be highly antagonistic. The former often fought attempts at statutory control of working hours, whilst also pushing for resale price maintenance, which meant that goods cost more to the consumer (Scott and Walker, 2018). The latter, meanwhile, are often portrayed as being deskilled as retailing 'modernised' through adopting new management practices, fixed prices, open display and self-service – a trend that continues through to today, with zero-hours contracts and automated check-outs (see the chapters by Purvis and Opler). Class was also important in terms of the status of customers, where they shopped, how they interacted with salespeople and what they purchased sometimes being determined by and then serving to cement their social standing (Abelson, 1989; Benson, 1986; Miller, 1981). In this context, co-operative stores has been portrayed as empowering the working classes by assuring good quality and fair prices, an aspect developed by Hilson et al in their chapter. In contrast, second-hand was increasingly seen as the recourse of the poor, but this was, as Pennell demonstrates, time and sector specific: before the eighteenth century, second-hand was important for all sectors of society and recent years have seen the growth of "vintage" shops (see also Stobart and Van Damme, 2010). Department stores, meanwhile, are celebrated a democratising luxury, although different stores catered to different social groups (especially when we look beyond the Western world (Whitaker, 2006).

In the USA, race was also important in shaping peoples experience of retailing. The Jim Crow practices of Southern retailers and boycotts of segregated store facilities and discriminatory labour practices have been well-documented by historians of the civil rights movement. Business historians have evaluated the response of managers to boycotts and legislative pressure, and have also documented the contributions of black-owned business to retail history (Chambers, 2008; Dyer, 2013; Weems, 1998; Wright, 2013). The broader subject of racialised consumption and racial discrimination in the commercial sector has recently attracted the attention of scholars across a wide disciplinary spectrum (Bay and Fabian, 2015). Race has been less of an issue in the history of European retailing, although the growing number and variety of small shops owned by immigrants from former colonies and the more recent growth of shops selling east European foods demand fuller attention – as Van Damme notes in his chapter.

A more general and widely shared concern in the more recent historiography is with gender and especially women's relationship with retailing and shopping. As with class, attention has focused on issues of oppression and inequality versus empowerment and liberation. Shopkeepers have long included women as well as men, and the shopkeeper's wife was often crucial in running the family business (Van den Heuvel, 2013; Barker, 2017). However, there has always been a tendency for women to trade in lower status and less remunerative retail trades, sometimes at the margins of legality. The rise of big retail businesses is sometimes seen as offering greater

opportunities for female shop assistants, although their opportunities for advancement through the tiers of management were restricted in Europe, at least before World War II (Lancaster, 1995). In the United States, department stores provided more opportunities for women to rise up the ladder as buyers and middle managers, though with the arrival of big discounters after World War II a more male-dominated climate prevailed (Howard, 2015). Poor working conditions and the danger of sexual exploitation were apparent in the early modern era and continued into the twentieth century. As a key female occupation, retail work has attracted attention from women's and labour historians (Benson, 1986; Opler, 2007). Although the unionisation of retail workers has also lagged behind that of industrial workers in the United States, women played key roles in the history of union organising, a position that created sometimes antagonist relationships with customers (Opler, 2007). Analyses of women as customers paint a more positive picture. Shops and shopping formed an arena in which they could engage in the public sphere, although the liberating spaces of department stores were balanced by the dangers of social heterogeneity which it brought with it (Lancaster, 1995; Benson, 1986). Social historians have documented the tensions within an emergent culture of consumption, visible within retail institutions such as the department store. Concerns about gender and class in Victorian America, for example, came together within the shoplifter-kleptomaniac identity given to middle-class white women (Abelson, 1989), although recent work has questioned this association – as discussed in the chapter by Blondé and Van Damme.

IV. Volume overview

The world's retail history is too rich and vast to receive full coverage within one volume, no matter how broad its remit and ambition. Recognising that it is impossible to cover every conceivable topic, retail format and location, we have sought wide-ranging coverage that is both thematically and geographically inclusive. To this end, our *Companion to the History of Retailing* is divided into four broad sections: [1] Contexts, trends and relationships, [2] Spaces and places, [3] People, processes and practices and [4] Geographical variations. Thematic chapters in the first three sections focus mostly on Europe/UK and North America, reflecting the strength of scholarly literature in this area. The geographical scope of the chapters in section 4 provides an opportunity to move beyond the European/UK/North American perspective of the volume and much of the literature. Here, we get a clearer picture of variations in retail histories across the globe although some notable global players are sadly absent. It is our hope that future studies will address areas we were not able to investigate.

Spanning the medieval world to the present, the history of retail is marked by both change and continuity. The distribution of goods and services might seem a universal activity, but as the scholars here demonstrate, everyday market exchanges are the product of diverse historical contexts, trends and relationships. Thematic chapters in this section attempt to address the historical contingency of retail phenomenon by placing such activity within its broader economic, political, technological and environmental contexts. Examining the chronological breadth of retail activity from the medieval and early modern periods and into the modern era allows the subject's connection to broader trends to emerge. Globalisation, urbanisation, industrialisation, the emergence of consumerism and the rise of bureaucratic and state controls shaped retail activity in vastly different ways over time as our authors demonstrate. Chapters reveal social relationships forged by economic exchange undergoing immense change in the modern era, first with the consumer revolution and the rise of mass markets, then with the more recent upheavals of the internet age. At the same time, several of our authors warn against seeing retail history as a succession of revolutions, with many values and practices continuing from one era into the next.

The chapters in section 2 also examine retail activity in all its diversity and distinctiveness, but a focus on building and organisational typologies highlights many interesting similarities of retail form across the globe. Architectural formats are shown to have evolved slowly over time, for instance from open-air markets and market stalls to purpose-built market halls and from village and high street shops to the large-scale enterprises that emerged in the late nineteenth century. Chapters draw attention to the shared social and cultural experience of the spaces and places where people shopped. As our authors show, retail spaces and places exerted tremendous cultural and social power over more than simply shopping or consumer behaviour. Indeed, department stores, shopping malls and big-box stores like Walmart helped constitute the very meaning of consumer society, providing the spaces where modern identities took shape. Other retail modes influenced the most fundamental of human activities – eating. The rise of supermarkets not only transformed food provisioning and eating habits, but was also connected to new agricultural and technological regimes. Retail change influenced the shape of cities and their commercial districts. By detailing the evolution of retail spaces and places, these chapters contribute to an understanding of these broader historical changes across national boundaries.

Section 3 turns to the human actors who comprise all retail enterprise. Here, chapters document the wide variety of people, processes and practices behind the retail industry, from the level of individual enterprise to big business. That retail history can be told from the bottom up or the top down is reflected in this section, which includes contributions on itinerants and peddlers and on shop workers, as well as managers and merchant princes. In addition, this section reflects the variety of retail processes or organisational modes within the distribution chain. The focus here is on large-scale organisational structures – multiples, mail order firms and co-operatives – and the ways in which their economic practices were suffused with social and cultural implications, most overtly in the case of co-operative societies with their conscious social and political agendas. Smaller-scale retailers receive perhaps less attention than they merit, which in part reflects their relative neglect in the literature: obscured by the bright lights of the high street and mall, and the growing dominance of big business. Overall, the section overviews the evolution of business and labour practices within a consumer-oriented society.

National boundaries, shaped by law, custom and geography, determine economic practices. The final section seeks to illuminate the shared structures and diverse practices of different regions and nations across the world. Chapters cover the retail history of the USA and Canada, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Australia and New Zealand, Latin America, the Middle East, Japan and India. Additional chapters on individual countries would have helped clarify national differences, for example between countries in Mediterranean and northern Europe or different states in India; but limits of space and a desire to provide a coherent overview of geographical variations meant that we focus on global regions rather than dig down into local specificities. The authors draw on their historical specialties to situate retail practices within their national contexts, but also seek to highlight connections across borders. In many cases, different countries shared markets, language, and political cultures and it made sense to treat them together. Two notable absences within the volume – China and Africa – have extremely long and diverse retail histories and need to be addressed by further study.

Through its various sections and chapters, this volume aims to provide both an overview of the history of retailing and an entrée to its many and varied elements. It is unlikely that the reader will tackle the whole book or even read through an entire section, although both would, we feel, be rewarding exercises. Each chapter is thus written in a way that allows it to be read on its own, to provide an overview of the history of itinerants or supermarkets, for example, or the development of retailing in the Middle East or Japan. In whatever way the reader chooses to approach this volume, it offers rich insights into retail history and its links to wider economic, social, cultural and urban histories.

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