



DAWN OF A NEW CLASS

The Industrial Revolution was undoubtedly a time of massive advancement for working people, according to a new book reviewed by **Lydia Bevege**.

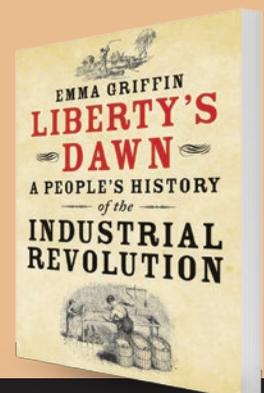
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We can thank Charles Dickens for the way the term 'Industrial Revolution' brings to mind the image of a grimy-faced Oliver Twist or a hungry David Copperfield roaming the mean, dirty streets of London. In fact, Dickens' portrayal of the miserable life of the poor in Victorian England is now so entrenched that the term 'Dickensian' has become a byword to describe that period of history.

It certainly makes for a good story. The characters of Dickens' novels leap vividly from the pages—wicked industrialists, petty criminals, cold bourgeois women, virtuous labourers and suffering children all trying to get by in times of great social and economic upheaval. There can be little doubt the novelist deserves his place among the great literary masters.

Yet how accurate are Dickens' novels when it comes to reflecting



*Liberty's Dawn: A People's History
of the Industrial Revolution*

By Emma Griffin
2013, Yale University Press, 320 pages

the human experience of the Industrial Revolution and its aftermath? If we take Dickens' word for it (and most people seem to these days), the lives of the working poor during this period were miserable indeed, with few redeeming features. As it turns out, however, many people who lived through the Industrial Revolution tell quite a different tale about their experiences, a fact we now know thanks to a controversial new book by Emma Griffin.



■ Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*

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Liberty's Dawn examines the autobiographies of nearly 350 working class people who lived the majority of their years between the end of the eighteenth century and the middle of the nineteenth century in Great Britain.

These works, both published and unpublished, paint a rich and detailed picture of the lives of working people during the Industrial Revolution. It says something about how little attention has been paid to the voices of these ordinary people that many of the autobiographies, before Griffin turned her attention to them, were 'locked away gathering dust in the strongrooms and vaults of local history libraries and country record offices.'

What Griffin uncovers in the crumbling, yellowed pages of these varied works is a unheralded fact: the Industrial Revolution actually helped lift people out of poverty and delivered a better quality of life. It may seem obvious, but it is a key fact



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that is too often overlooked in the bleak narrative usually painted about the lives of the poor during this time.

Of course, this is not to say that people, particularly children, didn't experience hardship or exploitation during the Industrial Revolution (Dickens' novel *David Copperfield* was, after all, partly autobiographical). But the overarching theme that weaves its way through the tales of these autobiographies is that of self-improvement—that life finished up better than it had started and that the writers were able to take up new opportunities for both economic and social participation that had never presented themselves to the previous generation. In short, things were getting better. The mere act of writing

their autobiographies demonstrates that these people were not so down-trodden and marginalised as we may believe.

The common experience of the men who left the land for work in the factories and warehouses of the nascent industrial hubs was that the work they performed there was 'better than the labour which had consumed their fathers' energies – and often their own early labours as well,' according to Griffin. There is a certain romanticism associated with pre-industrial rural life that leads us to believe people's lives were simpler, healthier and better than the lifestyles brought on by mechanisation and industrialisation. The problem with this view is that it is not reflected in the first hand accounts of workers

who experienced the change. For our autobiographers, 'rural roots were something to escape, not glorify.' Throughout the book we hear stories of the dissatisfaction of rural life. Jobs were too few, and what jobs there were paid too little. Agricultural wages were unreliable, hard to come by and barely enough to eke out the most basic existence for a man and his family.

The harsh reality of rural life helps explain why so many people abandoned villages and hamlets for the industrial towns and cities springing up across the country at this time. Factory work was not pleasant or easy, particularly by today's standards, but it paid well and importantly, it paid regularly. It seems our autobiographers did not find work in the big city to be so objectionable as we might think. As Griffin writes, 'implicit in the accounts of good wages and plentiful work is a relative judgement about the alternatives that were available.'

Industrialisation had two very important effects on the economy that are often neglected in the tales of woe about Victorian workers. The first is that the new urban workforce, armed with better wages, created unprecedented demand for consumer goods. They needed food, clothes, housing and the other staples of life—and so new jobs sprung up to create and bring these goods to the cities. Skilled workers enjoyed an increase in their demand for products. As one autobiographer who was the son of a shoe-maker wrote, the trouble with the poverty of pre-Industrial Britain was that there were 'plenty of feet requiring comfortable shoes, though too little money in circulation to pay for them.' Industrialisation fundamentally transformed this equation. The barriers to entry into the skilled professions began to break down. Once the craft of the privileged few, opportunities to enter the ranks

of the carpenters, shoe-makers and other artisans were opened up to more poor people than ever before with the advent of industrialisation.

The second effect that is often largely ignored is the shift in employee/employer relations that occurred at this time. The scarcity of employment opportunities before industrialisation left workers with little choice but to submit to the whims of their employers. Many of the autobiographers describe an almost master-servant relationship with the landowner for whom they worked as an agricultural labourer. Industrialisation shifted this power balance significantly. Many of the autobiographies tell tales of young men leaving a position of employment to seek better wages or better conditions. In fact, many of the autobiographers paint the leaving of one job to seek a better one as a watershed moment in their lives.

Walking away from a job, however awful and low-paying, was unheard of before the Industrial Revolution got going. Once it did, deference and submission gave way to autonomy and independence—things which the working poor rarely achieved while struggling under the yoke of rural poverty. We should not underestimate the powerful social changes unleashed by this shift in the balance of power.

Of course, not all sections of society benefitted immediately and to the same extent as some of those whose positive experiences are documented in the book. Women, for example, made up few of the autobiography writers and there is little evidence to suggest that industrialisation changed the rates of female workforce participation or increased wages for women at that time.

FACTS & FIGURES

9.3 million

The population of Britain in 1801

15.9 million

The population of Britain in 1841

1850

Britain became the first country in history where more people lived in cities than rural areas.

£11

Average per capita real wage in Britain in 1780

£28

Average per capita real wage in Britain in 1860



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It must be pointed out, however, that this was largely the result of enduring cultural norms relating to marriage and motherhood, rather than factors arising due to the Industrial Revolution. Griffin contends that women were unable to take advantage of the opportunities presented by industrialisation due to ‘the weight of existing social structures and cultural expectations.’



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Similarly, the experience of the Industrial Revolution by children certainly offends our modern sensibilities of what a childhood ought to be. The image of young children working long, tough hours on the factory floor is one that has captured the imagination of many and contributed to the bleak picture that comes to mind when we think of early industrialisation. As with women, however, child labour is more a function of Victorian era culture than any unique features of the Industrial Revolution. Certainly the number of children working grew rapidly as a result of industrialisation, but Griffin points out this is a result of the fact that there were now more opportunities for parents to send their kids to work—a tendency they had already exhibited before the onset of the Industrial Revolution. Sadly, there was nothing new or particularly remarkable about sending young children to work at that time—the difference the Industrial Revolution made was that there were more jobs to go around.

The dark and grim palette usually used to paint the Industrial Revolution leads us to mostly

overlook the enormous social change it unleashed. All too often we ignore the fact that while women and children certainly suffered before and during the Industrial Revolution, it was industrialisation that fundamentally transformed our societies and made them what they are today. The concepts of feminism and child welfare simply did not exist as we know them until industrialisation paved the way for radical social change.

Liberty’s Dawn highlights how this radical social change, wrought by the Industrial Revolution, increased the social participation of working class people. This was partly due to a ‘flowering of new educational opportunities.’ Night schools, Sunday schools, mutual improvement societies and mechanics’ institutes sprung up during this period and provided new opportunities for working class people to gain literary and numeracy skills. More than that, though, they provided opportunities for self-advancement. These organisations, rudimentary though some were, required some organisational capacity. Someone had to manage the day-to-day running, and that meant new chances to learn new skills. Keeping books, managing enrolments, teaching your peers—these are just some of the skills and knowledge picked up by the working class people who became involved in these organisations. In short, these organisations didn’t just provide education—they provided leadership opportunities. It’s hard to overstate just how important this was to improving the social participation of working people.

It’s no coincidence, then, that this period also coincided with the birth of political engagement by working class people. It’s often assumed that working people mobilised into a political force at around this time in



response to poor working conditions. Griffin provides a counter-narrative to this idea, arguing that such mobilisation would never have been possible before industrialisation unleashed new opportunities for social and political participation for working people. She writes that ‘the flowering of clubs and societies at this time was not a symptom of the workforce’s growing discontent but of new levels of freedom, confidence and autonomy.’

Griffin points to the story of Thomas Dunning to illustrate this point. Dunning was born to a poor single mother with few prospects of social mobility. A kindly stepfather took pity on the young boy and taught him the craft of shoe-making—allowing him to take advantage of increased demand for shoes and get by. What’s remarkable about Dunning though, is his modest rise through various political activist organisations in his area—making secretary of his local branch of the Chartist Association, and becoming involved in many other causes to represent the interests of local working people. Griffin points out that Dunning’s story ‘captures nothing less than a social revolution.’ A man like Dunning would never have been able to avail himself of such opportunities had he been born in the same conditions a century earlier.

The difference between their own lives and those of their parents and previous generations was a key reflection of many of the autobiographers. It is striking how similar these reflections are—they celebrate what they see to be significant and material progress in their lives. They are upbeat and proud of their achievements. *Liberty’s Dawn* is controversial only because we can draw only one conclusion by studying these primary sources—that the Industrial Revolution brought



■ Detail from W. Wheldon, ‘Colliery and wagonway, Northumberland and Durham coalfield’, 1845

‘immediate and tangible benefits for large sections of the labouring poor.’ These benefits do not just include significant increases in the quality of life they experienced, although this was certainly significant. These benefits also included autonomy, independence and a level of social and political participation unknown to these classes before industrialisation.

The Industrial Revolution marks a key turning point in history. From the revolution to today, people have come to expect to see a level of material progress within their lifetimes. Before industrialisation, progress within and between generations was painfully slow.

As one of the autobiographers concludes, ‘I only wish [my parents] had each lived to enjoy and to see the improvements I see.’ Another writes he wishes his ancestors could ‘revisit the earth and see the domestic alterations, commercial improvements, and the wonderful and astonishing activities of life.’

These are not the words of men who have lived miserable, down-trodden lives. These are the words of confident and proud people who appreciate that the world they live in has improved immeasurably over the course of their lifetime. That is the true legacy of the Industrial Revolution. **R**