

The Lancashire Working Classes, c.1880–1930. *By Trevor Griffiths.* Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2001. xi + 390 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, tables. Cloth, \$85.00. ISBN 0-199-24738-2.

Reviewed by Jane Humphries

The British working class might have been made in the crucible of the industrial revolution, but not until the half-century from 1880 did it emerge as politically and culturally united. The slow and uneven pace of earlier economic change had left undisturbed, or had even enhanced, differences and tensions between groups of workers. Divisions associated with skill, employment status, gender, religion, location, geography, and ethnicity rent the solidarity of workers. But changes in the late-nineteenth-century economy encouraged a growing recognition of common interests and values and forged, in Hobsbawm's well-known phrase, "a class in itself." This is the conventional wisdom that Trevor Griffiths seeks to challenge.

In contrast to the standard story of the post-1880 emergence of a politically and culturally united working class, Griffiths describes working people as continuing to inhabit multiple identities, possessing often conflicting loyalties, and displaying a more individualist than collectivist outlook. His geographic focus is Bolton and Wigan, and consequently his industrial perspective is cotton and coal. To sustain his alternative vision, Griffiths reconsiders the economic changes that an earlier cohort of historians saw as underpinning the convergence of working-class identity.

First on this list are changes in the experience of work. Employers, it has been argued, struggling to maintain profits in the face of foreign competition, attacked the position of skilled workers. Their weapons were technological change, which reduced the power of skilled workers within the labor process, and changes in recruitment procedures, which eroded their supervisory role and promoted the substitution of a new cadre of declassed middle managers. Work became a more homogeneous experience, dissolving the differences in perspective and material status that had sustained the earlier political and cultural heterogeneity. The transition of trade unions from defending craft privilege to representing the rank and file both built on and cemented the new homogeneity.

In contrast, Griffiths argues that although both cotton and coal experienced technological change throughout the period, the work practices that prevailed in Lancashire's mines and mills remained substantially unchanged from 1880 to 1930. Far from being subdued, workplace hierarchies flourished and differences of income and status remained. Moreover, despite the high level of collective organization, trade unions did not unify workers. Nor did the working-class

family integrate domestic and industrial life through its control of recruitment and training. Instead, members of the same family could be scattered across firms and industries in response to industrial discontinuities and shifting prospects for younger people. The willingness of working-class families to seek placements for their children outside the traditional trades underlines the instrumentalist nature of occupational loyalties.

Griffiths's reconstruction of elite profiles suggests that, despite turnover in personnel, powerful dynastic continuities restrained the supposedly corrosive influence of limited-liability capital. The social responsibilities attending business leadership continued to be acknowledged, but the lukewarm response of working people was manifest in the recurring recruitment problems of textile firms that invested in welfare provision. For most people, interest in the workplace was limited to pay and hours. This suggests that perhaps the origins of the new homogeneous working class lay outside the workplace in working-class communities and their distinctive institutions, as several proponents of the conventional account have suggested. Griffiths follows the argument beyond the world of work.

He turns first to working-class savings institutions and finds that although the forms that saving took and the motives that promoted it were common to working people, expressing both their economic and social position, thrift was essentially geared to individual rather than collective advance. But Griffiths's vision of the working-class family involves the most ambitious revisionism. The conventional wisdom equates working-class family relationships with a limited and conditional mutuality. In contrast, Griffiths argues that, throughout the period, ties of kinship, centered largely on the nuclear family, constituted "the moral and material center of working-class life" (p. 264).

Consistent with his own nonlinear understanding of class dynamics, Griffiths views political change as irregular and gradual. The failure to endorse Labor candidates consistently over the period was, he suggests, another manifestation of the continued divisions within the working class, divisions of occupational experience and religious affiliation that were often reinforced and perpetuated by the continuity and dominance of family ties.

Griffiths's reassessment of the history of the working class is firmly rooted in an array of original sources: parliamentary papers, trade-union records, employers' association archives, newspapers and periodicals, and friendly society accounts. The sources are obvious for a local history prescribed by cotton and coal, and they are adequate for looking at the workplace dynamics or the evolution of thrift or the ongoing involvement of cotton dynasties. Where these sources would be strained is in the attempt to probe the working-class family. Even the best and most innovative historians of working-class family life, Michael Anderson or Marguerite Dupree,

for example, have been forced to infer family relationships and practices from census-based accounts of household structure. Here Griffiths innovates. He uses the records relating to a disaster relief fund set up in the wake of the explosion at the Hulton Colliery, known locally as the Pretoria Pit, in December 1910 to investigate family circumstances, the role of kin, the attitudes of neighbors, and even the nature of marital relations. Evidence from the fund highlights key aspects of family life not easily detected through more traditional materials. For example, the sacrifices required of younger women, who were often called upon to give up work and prejudice their own futures in order to render assistance to older relatives, are well documented.

My only criticism of this rich and rewarding book is that it is rooted too firmly in the historiography of the working class. Packaging his account as a response to an alternative dynamic, Griffiths undervalues its contribution. For one thing, the authors he associates with the conventional wisdom have different focuses and varying time frames. It is not easy to present their work as a single metanarrative without looking superficial. For another, casting his story as a revision of the conventional wisdom obscures a major achievement: the presentation of class as one component of identity for people who simultaneously continued to draw on other markers, such as kin, religion, location, and gender. Where I part company with Griffiths is in his view of these alternative reference points as necessarily diluting class affiliation or solidarity. They may do so in some historical contexts, but in other times and places they may help to build a class in itself.

Jane Humphries is reader in economic and social history at the University of Oxford and a fellow of All Souls College. She has written many articles on the history of the working class, family life, and women's work. She is currently conducting research on child labor in the industrial revolution.