

Lancashire Cotton Operatives and Work, 1900–1950: A Social History of Lancashire Cotton Operatives in the Twentieth Century. *By Alan Fowler.* Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2003. xv + 236 pp. Photographs, tables, references, index. Cloth, \$84.95. ISBN: 0-754-60116-1.

Reviewed by Geoff Timmins

In this volume, which forms part of the Ashgate Modern Economic and Social History series, Alan Fowler examines key themes in the history of Lancashire's cotton operatives from the late-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. His insights illuminate many aspects of their social and working lives, and he assesses how, and to what extent, they were able to improve their working conditions in the face of the marked changes in the economic climate that their industry came to face.

The book begins with a helpful scene-setting chapter that outlines the rise and fall of the Lancashire cotton industry from the Industrial Revolution onward, briefly rehearsing differing lines of argument that historians have put forward on the subject. Focusing on the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the two following chapters consider distinctive features of the industry that had a close bearing on the prosperity of its workforce. One is concerned with the nature and importance of the main trade unions in the preparatory, spinning, and weaving branches of the industry and with the collective-bargaining processes, based on standard wage lists for piecework, in which they engaged. The other considers the importance of the family wage, including the contributions made by both single and married women, in enabling cotton operatives to secure relatively high living standards.

Subsequent chapters deal with the difficulties experienced by Lancashire's cotton operatives as their industry entered into long-term decline following the onset of World War I. Chapter Four considers earning levels, pointing out that while they consistently remained above the cost of living in the 1920s and 1930s, periods of high unemployment and short-time working—the unemployment rate approached 40 percent in the industry during 1931—would nonetheless have impacted adversely on individual family incomes. Chapter Five analyzes the political activities of the cotton unions, including their links

with the emerging Labour Party, arguing that, after 1914, they were able to exert little pressure on government, as the officials they appointed were selected for their technical proficiency in making remarkably complex wage calculations rather than for their political acumen. Chapter Six, by some way the longest, comprises a detailed discussion of progress made in securing healthier and safer working conditions in the carding, spinning, and weaving processes, arguing that notable though slow improvement was made, as, for example, with the vexing question of steaming in weaving sheds. Steaming was a process in which jets of steam were piped into weaving sheds so that heavily-sized yarn could be woven, thereby adding to the bulk of cloth. However, the weavers complained that steaming was injurious to their health. The final chapter examines developments during and immediately after World War II, including the problems of modernizing the industry and adjusting its labor supply to the pronounced changes that occurred in market conditions.

The book is detailed and authoritative, reflecting the author's considerable knowledge and deep understanding of the cotton industry's labor history. His interpretations are based on extensive and thoughtful review of secondary literature and judicious use of primary evidence drawn especially from official reports and personal reminiscences. The strategy of incorporating individual experiences into the narrative provides an effective counterpoint to the generalizations that emerge and allows useful qualification to be made. The perspectives of both employed and employer are critically weighed, and neither group emerges as faultless in the stances they adopted while seeking to cope with the industry's varied and changing problems.

I have some minor concerns with the book. First, its scope might have been more fully articulated at the outset, not least by setting out the main lines of discussion and argument and, for the nonspecialist reader, clarifying how the topic contributes to the cotton industry's historiography on labor matters. Perhaps, too, guidance on the type of work that still remains to be undertaken might have been helpful, not least in relation to unionist activity in the cotton-finishing trades. Second, the introductory chapter may overgeneralize at times. For example, I was a little perturbed to see my name linked with the notion of handloom weavers being immiserated and starved by the mid-nineteenth century, a view that is highly debatable.

Yet such comment does not detract unduly from the quality of the book. From beginning to end, it is a highly informative and enjoyable read, accessible in style, considered in discussion, and rooted in a firm evidential base. It will, of course, have particular appeal to labor historians, but a more general readership, including medical and business historians, will find that it contains much of interest and value. The book is a most welcome addition to the literature on the cotton industry and will undoubtedly and deservedly come to be regarded as a standard work.

Geoff Timmins is head of history and reader in industrial history at the University of Central Lancashire and a national teaching fellow. His current research focuses on road transport developments in Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with recent articles published in the Journal of Transport History (2005) and Industrial Archaeology Review (2003). Recent books include, with Steven King, Making Sense of the Industrial Revolution (2001) and, with Keith Vernon and Christine Kinealy, Teaching and Learning History (2005), in the Sage Publishers Teaching and Learning Humanities in Higher Education series.