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Writing about Life Writing: Women, Autobiography and the British Industrial Revolution

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Abstract

Few historical problems have attracted so much attention over so many years as the social consequences of the British industrial revolution. For the most part, historians presumed that working people produced very little historical evidence that could be used to contribute to our understanding. However, projects to catalogue and encourage the use of the nation's scattered, yet extensive, archive of working-class autobiography have revealed that such evidence does, in fact, exist. The insertion of working-class autobiography helps to offer a new perspective, one which suggests a more positive interpretation of industrial life than historians have usually been willing to admit. Yet there remains a problem with the archive. During the industrial revolution, life-writing was a male art form. Women only started writing autobiographies in any number around 100 years after the conventional periodisation of the industrial revolution. This article surveys the autobiographical writing during and after the industrial revolution – around 1,000 items in all – in order to rethink the relationship between economic growth and social change. It confirms that industrial growth improved the position of working men in society, but concludes that female perspectives on this change are far more ambivalent.

Keywords: standard of living; autobiography; industrial revolution; women; working class

As the moment when one small, European nation entered decisively down the path to modernity, the industrial revolution has rightly attracted considerable reflection and attention. Those living through the industrial revolution may have lacked our modern vocabulary and understanding of the transition, but they were certainly aware of the unprecedented economic change that was occurring, and the question of how this change was altering the texture of life for the population attracted wide and lively interest. By the middle of the nineteenth century a debate about the 'Condition of England' had taken

shape.¹ Political economists, poets, novelists and philosophers all contributed, and, despite considerable heterogeneity in their views, writers from across the political spectrum frequently turned to the concepts of loss and decline in order to make sense of their changing world.² John Stuart Mill's view sums up the position of many. He concluded that society's mechanical inventions had done no more than 'enable a greater proportion to live the same life of drudgery and imprisonment'.³

Just as those living through the industrial revolution were interested in unpacking its social consequences, so too have been subsequent generations of historians. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a succession of influential writers – Arnold Toynbee,⁴ Sidney and Beatrice Webb⁵ and John and Barbara Hammond⁶ – tackled the social and cultural significance of Britain's industrial revolution, and by the middle of the twentieth century the Condition of England question – now restyled the 'Standard of Living Debate' – had attracted the attention of some of the most influential historians in a generation.⁷ Yet despite the passage of time, the arguments penned by academic historians had much in common with the pessimistic interpretation of earlier commentators, emphasising the myriad ways in which industrialisation destroyed older and happier patterns of life, and describing the industrial revolution as a fundamentally deleterious event in the lives of the working poor. And although tempers have cooled since the heyday of the standard of living debate in the 1970s, interpretations have moved on far less.⁸ In the past fifty years, the

¹ Early discussion begins with T. Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population; or a View of its past and present Effects on Human Happiness; with an Inquiry into our Prospects respecting the Removal or Mitigation of the Evils which it occasions* (1803); David Davies, *The Case of the Labourers in Husbandry Stated and Considered* (1795); Frederick Morton Eden, *The State of the Poor: A History of the Labouring Classes in England, with Parochial Reports*, ed. A. G. L. Rogers (1928).

² William Wordsworth, 'Outrage done to Nature', from *The Excursion* (1814); William Blake, 'And did those feet in ancient time', from *Milton: A Poem* (1804–8); Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil, Or the Two Nations* (1845); Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (1854); William Cobbett, *Rural Rides* (1830). See also Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford, 1993), 16. Though note also a few dissenting voices, for example, Andrew Ure, *The Philosophy of Manufactures* (1835).

³ John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, ed. W. J. Ashley (1909), 751.

⁴ Arnold Toynbee, *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution of the Eighteenth Century in England* (1884), 84.

⁵ Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism* (1898).

⁶ J. L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond, *The Village Labourer* (1911), *The Town Labourer* (1917) and *The Skilled Labourer* (1919); J. L. Hammond, 'The Industrial Revolution and Discontent', *Economic History Review*, 2 (1930), 215–28.

⁷ See the essays by Ashton, Engerman, Gilboy, Hartwell, Hobsbawm and Thompson in *The Standard of Living in Britain in the Industrial Revolution*, ed. Arthur J. Taylor (1975). See also, especially, E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1976).

⁸ C. H. Feinstein, 'Pessimism Perpetuated: Real Wages and the Standard of Living in Britain during and after the Industrial Revolution', *Journal of Economic History*, 58 (1998), 625–58; S. Nicholas and D. Oxley, 'The Living Standards of Women in England and Wales; 1785–1815: New Evidence from Newgate Prison Records', *Economic History Review*, 49 (1996), 591–9; Roderick Floud et al., *The Changing Body: Health, Nutrition, and Human Development in the Western World since 1700* (Cambridge, 2011); Hans-Joachim Voth, 'The Longest Years: New Estimates of Labor Input in

literature on working-class living standards has continued to grow steadily and now encompasses a far wider range of arguments and evidence than ever before; yet the pessimistic view that the world's first industrial revolution brought nothing but stagnant, possibly declining, living standards to the first generation of workers who lived through it continues to dominate scholarly understanding of this historical moment.⁹

The pessimism that has surrounded interpretations of working-class life during the period of industrialisation forms a marked contrast to those of working-class experiences during the later nineteenth century. Whereas nostalgia for a simpler, purer, happier life is the hallmark of discussion about the industrial revolution, contemporary commentators and later historians have both taken a much more upbeat view of living standards down to the end of the nineteenth century. All the standard economic measures – gross domestic product, gross national product, real wages – indicate steady rises throughout the nineteenth century.¹⁰ As a result, we are left with a two-part interpretation of the impact of industrialisation on the working poor, which describes the first generation as having experienced this as a time of dislocation and declining living standards. Meaningful gains for working people, we are told, only started to trickle through to subsequent generations later in the nineteenth century.

At the same time as the literature on working-class living standards, both during and after the industrial revolution, has grown, so too has scholarly interest in working-class autobiography as a historical source. With the compilation of John Burnett, David Vincent and David Mayall's invaluable and much-used finding aid, *The Autobiography of the Working Class: An Annotated, Critical Bibliography*, in the 1980s, it became possible for historians to identify the themes of individual autobiographies as well as to track down copies of the autobiographies in question.¹¹ It is therefore little surprise that the use

England, 1760–1830', *Journal of Economic History*, 59 (2001), 1065–82; I. Gazeley, and S. Horrell, 'Nutrition in the English Agricultural Labourer's Household over the Course of the Long Nineteenth Century', *Economic History Review*, 66 (2013), 781–2; R. C. Allen, 'The High Wage Economy and the Industrial Revolution: A Restatement', *Economic History Review*, 68 (2015), 1–22.

⁹ I discuss this more fully in Emma Griffin, 'Diets, Hunger and Living Standards during the British Industrial Revolution', *Past & Present*, 239 (2018), 71–111,

¹⁰ C. H. Feinstein, *National Income, Expenditure and Output of the United Kingdom, 1855–1965* (Cambridge, 1972); R. C. O. Matthews, C. H. Feinstein and J. C. Odling-Smee, *British Economic Growth, 1856–1973* (Oxford, 1982); N. F. R. Crafts and Terence Mills, 'Trends in Real Wages in Britain, 1750–1913', *Explorations in Economic History*, 31 (1994), 176–219; Gregory Clark, 'The Condition of the Working Class in England 1209–2004', *Journal of Economic History*, 58 (2005), 1307–40; Stephen Broadberry, 'Relative Per Capita Income Levels in the United Kingdom and the United States since 1870: Reconciling Time-Series Projections and Direct Benchmark Estimates', *Journal of Economic History*, 63 (2003), 852–63; Stephen Broadberry and Alexander Klein, 'Aggregate and Per Capita GDP in Europe, 1870–2000: Continental, Regional and National Data with Changing Boundaries', *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, 60 (2012), 79–107, table 3; Nicholas Crafts and Terence C. Mills, 'Six Centuries of British Economic Growth: A Time-Series Perspective', *European Review of Economic History*, 21 (2017), 141–58.

¹¹ John Burnett, David Vincent and David Mayall (eds.), *The Autobiography of the Working Class: An Annotated, Critical Bibliography* (3 vols., New York, 1984–9). See also David Vincent, *Testaments of*

of working-class autobiography as source material has grown substantially over the past forty years.¹² Yet despite the existence of these two large literatures – concerned with working-class experiences of economic change on the one hand and working-class autobiographies on the other – there have been relatively few attempts to bring them together. My research over the past fifteen years has been focused on precisely this endeavour and forms the focus of this paper.

Burnett *et al.*'s *Bibliography* is comprehensive, but when I began my project on working-class life in industrialising Britain, in the mid-2000s, I noticed that the listings for the region in which I was based, Norfolk, were surprisingly sparse, so I made a speculative trip to the Norfolk Record Office to search for autobiographies that the original compilers might have missed. An item in their catalogue listed simply as 'Memoirs of John Lincoln' looked promising.¹³ The condition of John Lincoln's memoirs was too poor to be made available in the reading room, but the archivist pointed me towards the microfilm drawers and readers and advised me to access it there. And although both Lincoln's handwriting and the microfilm format made for a difficult day's reading, the rich content of this unknown autobiography more than compensated for these inconveniences. This single source spoke to a host of questions concerning autobiography, working-class life and the social consequences of industrialisation, and is worth exploring in some depth.

The author of the Memoirs was a man called John Lincoln. The eighty pages of Lincoln's notebook, written in the 1830s, are fragile and torn, filled with the untidy hand of a self-taught writer. The closely written, margin-less pages remind us that Lincoln lived at a time when paper was a precious commodity. They comprised what he called his 'simple Naritive', a detailed account of his

Radicalism: Memoirs of Working Class Politicians, 1790-1885 (1977); John Burnett (ed.), *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s* (1974); John Burnett (ed.), *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family from the 1820s to the 1920s* (1982).

¹² The literature here is large and growing. For some examples, see M. Roper, 'Re-remembering the Soldier-Hero: The Psychic and Social Construction of Memory in Personal Narratives of the Great War', *History Workshop Journal*, 50 (2000), 181–220; Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven, 2001); Carolyn Tilghman, 'Autobiography as Dissidence: Subjectivity, Sexuality, and the Women's Co-operative Guild', *Biography*, 26 (2003), 583–606; Jane McDermid, 'The Making of a "Domestic" Life: Memories of a Working Woman', *Labour History Review*, 73 (2008), 253–68; Keith Gildart, 'Mining Memories: Reading Coalfield Autobiographies', *Labor History*, 50 (2009), 139–61; Laura Ugolini, 'Autobiographies and Menswear Consumption in Britain, c. 1880–1939', *Textile History*, 40 (2009), 202–11; Lucy Delap, *Knowing Their Place: Domestic Service in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2011); Jacob Middleton, 'The Cock of the School: A Cultural History of Playground Violence in Britain, 1880–1940', *Journal of British Studies*, 52 (2013), 887–907; Julie-Marie Strange, *Fatherhood and the British Working Class, 1865–1914* (Cambridge, 2015); Fanny Louvier, 'Beyond the Black and White: Female Domestic Servants, Dress and Identity in France and Britain, 1900–1939', *Cultural and Social History*, 16 (2019), 581–602.

¹³ Norfolk Record Office: John Lincoln, 'Memoirs of John Lincoln', MC 2669/29, 991X9. Also of interest in the Norfolk Record Office are John Hemmingway, 'The Character or Worldly Experience of the Writer from 1791 to 1865', MC 766/1, 795X5; Samuel Huggins, 'Some Short Account of the Birth Life Conversation Travels and Christian Experience of Samuel Huggins Primitive Methodist Preacher', FC 17/148.

life from his earliest childhood recollections (he was born in 1777) to the present.¹⁴

John was born, he tells us, into a single-parent family. He left home at the age of seven (not unusual for a fatherless child) and moved around a succession of 'live-in' positions as an outdoor agricultural servant and as an indoor servant and valet for the following fifteen years. It was in one of these situations, at Wingfield Castle in Suffolk, that he learned to read and write. At the age of twenty-one he took a place as a footman with a clergyman in Oxborough, Norfolk. And there he got on very well and 'became acquainted' with the cook, Ann – an excellent cook but a woman with 'a hot and Violent Temper – she was a very stout person and ten years older than myself'.¹⁵ Within little more than a year, Ann was pregnant. According to Lincoln, his employer and his friends all warned him not to marry, but he would not listen. He went ahead with marriage (though was soon wishing he had 'followed their advice, and never married'). Just five short months later, Ann presented John with a son, but in the winter she took ill. Weeks later she lay dead. John removed his son to a second nurse, but the child's pitiful life was cut short at eighteen months.¹⁶ Two years had passed since John had married. Both his wife and son had died and John, as he laconically observed, 'was far from being happy'.¹⁷

But life moved on. Two years later, John had another pregnant girlfriend, and once again was contemplating marriage. In sharp contrast to the usual desires of unmarried women in her predicament, however, John's new girlfriend seemed to care little for John's suggestion of marriage. She denied she was pregnant and brusquely terminated the relationship.¹⁸ Unable to persuade her otherwise, John moved away. But marriage remained on his mind, and a few years later he once more 'began to think of trying another partner for life'.¹⁹ He met a suitable young woman and although John said little about their courtship it was clearly conducted along similar lines to his previous two. His new wife gave birth to their first child just four months after the wedding. During the course of their marriage, she bore ten children in all. The memoirs provide scant detail about the nature of their married life (he did not even note her name) or the fate of their children (from the baptisms registers we learn that her name was Sarah; the parish registers also reveal the family suffered at least one infant death that was not mentioned in the memoir²⁰). After his marriage, John's memoirs wander on to other themes and he returns to family matters only sporadically and inconsistently.

Family, both the one he was born into and the one he created, forms the foundation of John Lincoln's life story, but the matter of earning a living

¹⁴ Lincoln, 'Memoirs', 82.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 27

²⁰ At least this seems a reasonable inference given that John and Sarah gave the name Elizabeth to a daughter in 1826 and again in 1830. See Norfolk Record Office, Oxborough Baptism Registers, 1813–1998, PD 139/56.

also occupies considerable space and attention. Information about John's struggles to find work and on his experience of different positions is threaded through his life story. As a young man in rural East Anglia, for example, his jobs included minding horses, harvesting, well-digging, driving a 'Mail Cart', managing a garden, ploughing, and working as a footman.²¹ In 1807, when he received a letter from a friend who had moved to Woolwich and had found work at the Royal Arsenal, John was offered the opportunity to leave behind the rural life. Lincoln left without hesitation. He had no reason to regret his decision. At the arsenal 'the work was very Light and the pay very good,' and at one point his earnings rose as high as 38 shillings a week.²² But regrettably for Lincoln the good times did not last. Following the peace with France in 1814, the government downscaled production at Woolwich and Lincoln was laid off. He moved back to Norfolk, but returned to Woolwich soon after in the hope of a new opening at the arsenal. The opening did not materialise, so a disappointed John returned to Norfolk once again, abandoning all hope of work at the arsenal and settling down to life as an agricultural day-labourer, his paltry earnings eked out by a small dole from the parish.²³

John's autobiography provides rich detail for any historian interested in family or work during the industrial revolution, but it is important to recognise that whilst these themes may interest us, they never formed the 'point' of John's autobiography. John wrote about the material and emotional aspects of his life simply in order to contextualise and explain his spiritual journey. The defining event in John's life was his religious conversion, and midway through his autobiography John turns his attention to this. It forms the bulk of the narrative thereafter. He describes how the dull services of the Church of England had done nothing for him. As he explains, he liked to sing, but in alehouses not churches. In any case, during much of his life John was so poor that he lacked the respectable Sunday clothes that the Church's clergymen expected of their flock. And then, at some point in 1816, John began to turn the matter of religion over in his mind. The lady of the village bought him a nice Bible and prayer book and his master provided him with some 'tidy Cloaths', so he decided to go to church on Sunday – though he did so, he confessed, more from 'curiosity and Pride' than from any religious conviction. Once there, however, the minister touched 'my eyes, my ears, my heart'.²⁴ He started to attend weekly services. His religious commitment grew and within a few years he had begun to preach the occasional sermon. Then, back in Oxborough where he had embarked on married life with the stout and hot-tempered Ann many years ago, he opened his 'humble Cottage' as a meeting house, determined 'to bring the inhabitants of Oxborough under the sound of the Gospel'.²⁵

²¹ Lincoln, 'Memoirs', 15–25.

²² *Ibid.*, 27.

²³ *Ibid.*, 28–34.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 50–2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 80

It is worth emphasising how far John had moved away from the expectations of a working man in rural Norfolk when he opened the doors of his cottage and began preaching the Gospel to his neighbours. A man like Lincoln was not supposed to teach the Gospel. John fathered his first child out of wedlock. His second son was illegitimate. His third child was also conceived before marriage. John Lincoln did not conform to the Church's notions of sexual propriety and respectability. John was also a poor man. He was poor at his birth and remained poor throughout his life, never rising above his station as a day labourer, living from one day to the next through the labour of his hands and frequently unable to earn enough to support his family decently. In fact, that 'humble Cottage' that he turned into a preaching house was not his at all. It was provided by the parish as his income was too low and too precarious for him to provide lodging for his family without their help. Yet here he was: not sitting in the pews designated for the poor at the back of the parish church, listening to a religion that taught the poor will always be with us, but standing at the front, delivering his interpretation of God's teaching. In all, it is a very far cry from the dark interpretation of the industrial revolution that has dominated historical writing on the topic for the past seventy years. It is not that John did not suffer loss, hardship and poverty on a scale difficult to comprehend from a modern perspective. He did. The point, rather, is that in casting his eye back over his life, John did not accord particular significance to any of this. John did not regard himself as a victim, ground down by the march of mechanisation. He thought of himself as a preacher, playing an important role in bringing the word of God to his neighbours. This may not fit with the dark interpretation of British industrialisation that initially commentators, latterly historians, have consolidated over the past 200 years. But as a working man who himself lived through the industrial revolution, it is an important perspective and one that merits further consideration.

John Lincoln's autobiography is but one historical source, and few historians would venture bold generalisations on the basis of a single source. But since the publication of Burnett *et al.*'s *Bibliography*, historians have been able to work at scale. Their listing, if not complete, is certainly wide-ranging, and that makes it possible to move beyond the individual stories contained in the chance finds of particular archives and to consult the sources more widely. The *Bibliography* lists more than 300 autobiographies written by working people alive during the industrial revolution, and a systematic reading through this material helps us to establish which parts of John Lincoln's – or any other writer's – life story are unusual, and which are more typical.²⁶ And a careful reading of the full collection of autobiographies certainly throws up some surprises for historians familiar with the standard account of declining living standards during the industrial revolution.

A number of observations stand out. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, industrial employment pushed up male wages in a meaningful and significant way. Lincoln's comment about working in the munitions factory – the 'pay

²⁶ I develop this argument more fully in Emma Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn: A People's History of the Industrial Revolution* (New Haven, 2013).

[was] very good' – was not an exception; it was repeated by others.²⁷ A favourable comparison with the low pay and grinding hard work of agricultural labour was frequently drawn, whereas positive depictions of rural life were almost entirely absent.²⁸ Furthermore, the autobiographies (as Lincoln's implied) suggested that there was something else at stake. Poverty forced the hand of our writers in other walks of life. The decision to marry, the timing and content of their sexual lives – such things could be controlled to some degree by more powerful neighbours when a couple's outlook for raising their children by their own labour was poor.²⁹ And the same was true in the sphere of belief and ideas. How did a man challenge the religious or political views of his employer when that was the only person with the means to feed his family? The autobiographies reveal that low rates of pay in non-industrial areas obviously meant low incomes, but they also suggest that low incomes restricted the personal and political expression of the labouring poor.³⁰ And it is perhaps here that we see most clearly the grounds for emphasising the ways in which the industrial revolution enhanced rather than destroyed patterns of life. Critics will argue that the material gains for most families were meagre. Given the absence of robust information about wages and living costs for this period, definitive answers on this point are likely to elude us. We do, however, have a substantial body of autobiographical writing that provides a working-class perspective on work, wages and experience during the industrial revolution, and collectively this writing suggests that moving to cities and industrial areas brought male workers higher wages and considerably more freedom and autonomy both with respect to work, and to the things they could do outside work. This is not to suggest that the autobiographical collection provides a simple, linear account of social progress. Undoubtedly, working-class writers described complex and untidy lives, irreducible to one common theme or overarching narrative. Yet taking the autobiographical literature as a whole, the evidence is reasonably clear. From the perspective of the working men, industrial employment carried a number of advantages over the rural and pre-industrial alternatives that had traditionally been their lot.

The views of the autobiographers might be quite consistent, but this still leaves us some way from certainty about the fate of working-class experiences

²⁷ For example: Charles Campbell, *Memoirs of Charles Campbell, at Present Prisoner in the Jail of Glasgow* (Glasgow, 1828), 23; Samuel Catton, *A Short Sketch of a Long Life of Samuel Catton Once a Suffolk Ploughboy* (Ipswich, 1863), 4; Benjamin Shaw, *The Family Records of Benjamin Shaw, Mechanic of Dent, Dolphinholme and Preston, 1772–1841*, ed. Alan G. Crosby, Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, vol. 13 (1991), 45.

²⁸ George Mitchell, 'Autobiography and Reminiscences of George Mitchell, "One from the Plough"', in *The Skeleton at the Plough, or the Poor Farm Labourers of the West: with the Autobiography and Reminiscences of George Mitchell*, ed. Stephen Price ([1875?]), 96–108; Isaac Anderson, *The Life History of Isaac Anderson. A Member of the Peculiar People* (n.p., 1896), 8.

²⁹ Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn*.

³⁰ For example: Joseph Mayett, *The Autobiography of Joseph Mayett of Quainton, 1783–1839*, ed. Ann Kussmaul (Buckinghamshire Record Society, 23, 1986), 69–73; James Murdoch, 'Autobiography', in his *The Autobiography and Poems of James Murdoch* (Elgin, 1863), pp. 1–17.

at large. Thoughtful historians rarely accept documentary evidence at face value, and the gulf between the accounts of modern historians on the one hand and those of working-class writers on the other ought to give us pause for thought. Indeed, the limits of life-writing as a historical source have attracted considerable attention in recent years, as the growth of interest in life-writing that has occurred since the publication of the *Bibliography* has gone hand in hand with careful reflection about how historians can make best use of this material.³¹ There is no need to retread the detail of those debates here. The sheer size of the literature is testimony to historians' faith in their ability to navigate the challenges of working with autobiographical evidence. There has, however, undeniably been a preference in favour of deep-reading strategies of individual works over wide reading across the full corpus.³² After all, it is pointed out, the great majority of working people did not write an autobiography. Those who did had both the desire to write their story and the ability to do so, and these two qualities necessarily make them highly atypical of working-class people in general who had neither the wish nor the means to write. In consequence, there remains some scepticism about our ability to move from the particular to the general and a reluctance to engage with the autobiographical archive as a whole.

It is true that the overall number of autobiographies that have survived is small, and legitimate to consider the extent to which this small body of writing can 'speak' for working people more generally. There is no obvious solution to this problem, though it is of course worth bearing in mind that there is nothing unusual about historians working with collections of sources that are much smaller than the populations they wish to study. At the same time, it is worth wondering why these questions have attracted such detailed investigation, whilst other features of the autobiographical archive have escaped scrutiny. Indeed, it is striking that across a large, thoughtful and complex literature about autobiography as a historical source, very little attention has been paid to the complicating fact of gender.

This oversight is yet more remarkable when the gender imbalance of the sources is considered. [Figure 1](#) visualises the growth of autobiography during

³¹ In addition to the references in note 11, see also Nan Hackett, 'A Different Form of "Self": Narrative Style in British Nineteenth-Century Working-Class Autobiography', *Biography*, 12 (1989), 208–26; Regenia Gagnier, *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832–1920* (Oxford, 1991); Carolyn Steedman, *Past Tenses: Articles on Writing, Autobiography and History* (1992); Trev Lynn Boughton, *Men of Letters, Writing Lives: Masculinity and Literary Auto/biography in the Late Victorian Period* (1999); Chris Waters, 'Autobiography, Nostalgia, and the Changing Practices of Working-Class Selfhood', in *Singular Continuities: Tradition, Nostalgia, and Society in Modern Britain*, ed. George K. Behlmer and Fred Marc Leventhal (Stanford, 2000), 178–95; Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis, 2001); James Treadwell, *Autobiographical Writing and British Literature* (Oxford, 2005); David Amigoni (ed.), *Life Writing and Victorian Culture* (Aldershot, 2006); Kevin Binfield, 'Ned Ludd and Labouring Class Autobiography', in *Romantic Autobiography in England*, ed. Eugene Stelzig (Farnham, 2009), 161–78.

³² Helen Rogers and Emily Cuming, 'Revealing Fragments: Close and Distant Reading of Working-Class Autobiography', *Family and Community History*, 21 (2018), 180–201. The sole exception is Jane Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, 2010).

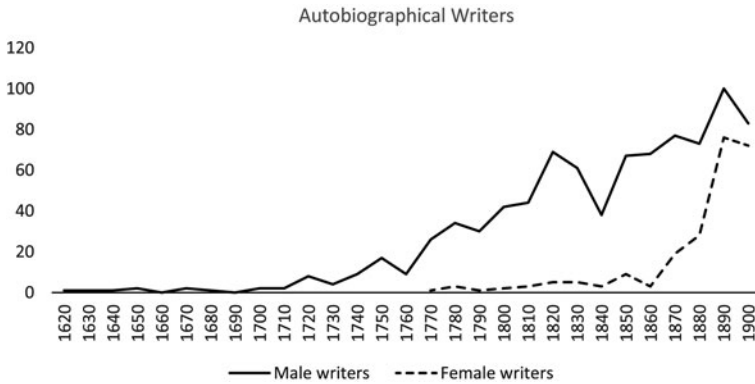


Figure 1. Autobiographies by sex, 1620–1900.

this period of industrialisation, and it breaks down the composition of writers by sex. The graph plots the date of birth of the writers, not the writing of the autobiography, which could occur anywhere between forty and eighty years later. It demonstrates a neat synchronicity between the onset of industrialisation in the late eighteenth century and an increase in male autobiographical writing. The number of writers continues to grow throughout the nineteenth century, but the rate of growth after about 1830 is less dramatic. The writing of autobiographies by women follows a very different path. Throughout most of the eighteenth century there are virtually no women that we could classify as working-class who have left behind an autobiography. There is a very small cohort of women born in the last quarter of the eighteenth century who wrote an autobiography, but the numbers are much lower than they are for men. It is not until around 1870 that the number of female writers starts to rise, and by the end of the nineteenth century the gender imbalance has narrowed considerably.

This is not to suggest that historians have been unaware of the dearth of female autobiographies. This has, of course, been widely recognised – and regretted – and feminist historians have displayed considerable imagination and ingenuity in exploiting the smaller corpus of writing by women that does exist.³³ The point rather is that scholarly analysis of women’s writing tends to remain siloed from the rest of the archive. Female-authored autobiographies are used to explore specific aspects of the history of women’s lives rather than to shed light on topics of broader interest, such as the fate of

³³ Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield (eds.), *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods* (2000); Susan Zlotnick, *Women, Writing, and the Industrial Revolution* (Baltimore, 2001); Kelly Mays, ‘Domestic Spaces, Readerly Acts: Reading(,) Gender, and Class in Working-Class Autobiography’, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 30 (2008), 343–68; Florence S. Boos, *Memoirs of Victorian Working-Class Women: The Hard Way Up* (Basingstoke, 2017); Penny Summerfield, *Histories of the Self: Personal Narratives and Historical Practice* (Abingdon, 2018); McDermid, ‘Making of a “Domestic” Life’; Louvier, ‘Beyond the Black and White’; Tilghman, ‘Autobiography as Dissidence’.

working-class living standards during the industrial revolution. Gender imbalance at the heart of the archive has never been used to problematise the use of working-class autobiography as source material. Nor have historians argued that over-representation of male voices and views might introduce a significant distortion into the narratives we derive from autobiographical records.

Indeed, it is worth underscoring that the omission of female voices goes beyond the autobiographical material. Since the inception of interest in the social consequences of industrialisation, the debate has overwhelmingly been produced by men rather than women. The Victorian commentators who helped to shape the Condition of England question were almost all men. And the historians, starting with Toynbee, running up through E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm and beyond, who authored the *Standard of Living Debate* were men as well. By the 2000s, women historians too were writing about working-class life during the industrial revolution, and whilst they often argued for great attention to the role and experiences of women and children, this fresh perspective did not dismantle the pessimism that pervaded accounts of the period.³⁴ In reality, the frameworks for understanding this historical moment had by this time become fairly firmly fixed and largely had been constructed by men looking at evidence about men. The more recent insertion of the evidence from working-class autobiographies has offered a genuinely working-class perspective and has clearly been instrumental in suggesting that the views of elite and middle-class commentators might be in need of revision. But it has not solved the problem of a long-standing omission of female voices and of the consequent risk that experiences and perspectives that are uniquely male are represented or understood to be universal and to speak to more general truths.³⁵

There is, of course, no simple way of correcting this omission. Historians have not neglected female autobiographies through lack of interest or care. As we can see from the graph, the sources simply are not there for the period of industrialisation and earlier. We can, however, learn more about the experiences of women by shifting our focus forward to the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Once again, the *Bibliography* provides a roadmap. This indicates the existence of almost 700 autobiographies written by individuals born into impoverished, working-class families in Britain between 1830 and 1903, and therefore describing childhoods from the start of Queen Victoria's reign in 1837 down to the outbreak of World War I.³⁶ Around two-thirds were written

³⁴ Maxine Berg, 'What Difference Did Women's Work Make to the Industrial Revolution?', *History Workshop Journal*, 35 (1993), 22–44; Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries, 'Old Questions, New Data, and Alternative Perspectives: Families' Living Standards during the Industrial Revolution', *Journal of Economic History*, 52 (1992), 849–80; Katrina Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialization in England, 1700–1870* (Basingstoke, 2000).

³⁵ Humphries addressed the under-representation of female-authored autobiographies by omitting analysis of them altogether. Yet the fact that the resulting account does not sustain broad arguments about wider working-class experiences is never acknowledged in her work. See Humphries, *Child Labour*.

³⁶ I discuss the archive more fully in Emma Griffin, *Bread Winner: An Intimate History of the Victorian Economy* (New Haven, 2020).

by men and one-third by women. These authors' memories do not extend so far back as the industrial revolution, but they do capture a host of information around the same spheres of wealth, welfare, experience and opportunity. The existence of records written by both men and women also permits us to question the overlap between the two – and, more generally, the extent to which male writers accurately represent the female experience.

Let us proceed once again through the use of example. Consider, then, Molly Murphy – a suffragette, nurse, mother, Socialist and autobiographer.³⁷ Molly is not only a fascinating individual in her own right, but is also one of a handful of women married to men who also wrote an autobiography. The existence of two life stories, one written by each partner of a marriage, thus enables us to address a raft of additional questions about the role of gender in shaping both autobiographical and historical narratives.

Molly Murphy was born in Leyland, Lancashire, in 1890, the eldest daughter in a family of seven children. And like most autobiographers, she started her life story with her parents – or, more accurately, with her father, Julius Morris. And in this she was far from unusual. Many elements of a writer's childhood were determined by the presence (or not) of a father, the extent of his earnings, and his willingness (or not) to share his income with his family. Little surprise, then, that fathers loom large in the sources.

Extracting the details about Julius Morris from Molly's writing produces an account of the benefits that industrial work brought to workers that chimes very neatly with those written by earlier male writers. Julius Morris was born in London but living in Lancashire and working as a cutter in a rubber factory by the time of his marriage to Molly's mother in 1886. According to both Molly's autobiography and the census which provides information corroborating her account, Julius was doing well through the 1880s, rising from rubber-cutter to factory foreman by 1891. Molly recalled living in an unusually large house at this time and remembered her early years as a period of relative affluence. Not only was Julius Morris earning well, like many Victorian men he had a range of interests and leisure pursuits outside the spheres of work and family. In Julius's case, his interest was his factory's union: he was not just a member, he was a leader and in the early 1890s led a strike for higher wages, though unfortunately the strike was not successful, and in a fit of indignation he resigned his position as a foreman, declaring that 'Never again will I be a bosses man.'³⁸

Julius was born in the 1860s, yet as an adult man he described a life that has striking similarities to those of the first generation of industrial workers born a century earlier. These included the opportunity of work that paid beyond a bare subsistence and which contained an element of skill and the possibility of advancement; the chance to get involved in other political or intellectual causes; and the enjoyment of some agency with respect to who he agreed to work for and the terms under which he would work.

³⁷ Molly Murphy, *Molly Murphy: Suffragette and Socialist*, with an introduction by Ralph Darlington (Salford, 1998).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 5–6.

But in Molly's eyes, it all looked rather different. As she wrote (in reference to her father giving up his management position to go back to work on the bench): 'That sounds very fine and noble, but coming from a man with a family of six to provide for, it was just silly.'³⁹ Julius's union activity brought an end to the family's period of affluence, and indeed was the beginning of the end for the Morrises' marriage – the family downfall and separation were both described in some detail by Molly. Within a few years, Julius was living away from the family, the family had moved from the big house and Molly's mother was trying to balance wage-earning with the responsibility for seven children. From her perspective, and from that of all seven children, there was very little advantage to the higher wages and greater autonomy that Julius Murphy had enjoyed as a skilled, industrial worker.

Molly, perhaps unsurprisingly, having witnessed the breakdown of her mother's marriage and the heavy burden of seven children at close hand, was in no hurry to tie the knot herself. As she explained, she 'wanted to be a nurse and not a housewife'. During her teens she dabbled with the suffragette movement and in her twenties fulfilled her dream of training and working as a nurse. At the age of thirty, however, knowing that if 'I was ever going to get married I should not delay much longer', she married Jack Murphy, a rising star in the British communist movement, and another autobiographer.⁴⁰ As a significant political figure in his own right, most of Jack's autobiography was preoccupied with his own endeavours.⁴¹ But Jack had once been a child and like Molly, and most other autobiographers, he started his life story there. And it is striking that Jack too knew all about growing up in a family without a reliable breadwinning father. Jack's father, John Murphy, was an ironworker, and as such engaged in relatively skilled and well-paid, industrial labour – he earned 24 shillings a week and often had the possibility of overtime. But as Jack explained, a hefty deduction from this wage had to be made for 'his beer money', which left 'not much' for a family of four.⁴² As for the overtime, Jack described its consequences as follows:

[extra hours] did not bring many blessings to our house. On the contrary, they meant an increase in the worries associated with dad's heavier drinking at the week-ends. It certainly brought a little more money into the house; but the joy of the 'extras' was somewhat short-lived. Usually they were used to clear off the debts incurred by some spell of recklessness on my father's part.⁴³

It is striking that Molly and Jack, though raised in very different families in different parts of England, both shared the experience of growing up in a household without a reliable, male wage, but they are, of course, just two

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁰ Murphy, *Molly Murphy*, 64–7.

⁴¹ J. T. Murphy, *New Horizons* (1941).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 18–19.

individuals amongst a much larger collection of writers. Since the publication of the *Bibliography*, however, it has been possible for us to query the autobiographical literature at scale. Over 600 men and women raised in a working-class family in the Victorian and Edwardian periods have written an autobiography. Some had lost their father through death or desertion during their childhood, yet this still leaves a large collection of almost 500 records permitting us to probe the typicality, or otherwise, of Molly and Jack's stories. And the figures make for sobering reading. The stories narrated by Molly and Jack, in which fathers were able to earn a relatively good wage but made decisions that left their family without, were far from rare. Reading across the entire collection, fewer than one-half of writers provide unambiguous evidence that their father was working steadily and sharing all his earnings with his family. For many men, high wages were a temptation and a distraction, and the value of a high wage could look very different from the perspective of children to that of the man who earned it. Even worthy causes, such as politics, unions and churches, were liable to drain money from the family budget.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the Victorian city was teeming with a wide range of less worthy causes. Autobiographers recalled fathers prioritising spending on clubs,⁴⁵ horses,⁴⁶ betting matches⁴⁷ and women⁴⁸ over their wives and children. And alcohol. More than anything else, pubs and alcohol were a drain on family budgets.⁴⁹ Jack Murphy was not uniquely unfortunate in having a father who liked to spend his earnings on drink. He is just one example of a large group of working-class autobiographers raised in a household where the man's enhanced earning capacity was spent on alcohol rather than on contributing to a meaningful uplift in the family's living standards.

It is interesting to compare how the evidence from Victorian writers sits alongside that produced by the earlier generation of working men alive during the industrial revolution. Without a doubt, that earlier literature provides far more evidence about some forms of masculine behaviour than others. The kind of worthy political agitation that occupied Julius Morris also occupied a large space in the earlier autobiographical material, whereas stories of drunken binges such as those of Jack Murphy were largely (though not wholly)

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Oakley, 'The Autobiography of Elizabeth Oakley, 1831–1900', *Norfolk Record Society*, 56 (1993), 113–50, at 143; John Allaway, untitled, in *Breakthrough: Autobiographical Accounts of the Education of Some Socially Disadvantaged Children*, ed. Ronald Goldman (1968), 1–18, at 5–6; Kate Taylor, unpublished autobiography, in *Destiny Obscure*, ed. John Burnett, 301–9, esp. 305.

⁴⁵ Joseph Stamper, *So Long Ago* (1960), 42, 106–7.

⁴⁶ Vere W. Garratt, *A Man in the Street* (1939), 4–6.

⁴⁷ Mary Gawthorpe, *Uphill to Holloway* (Penobscott, ME, 1962), 21–2, 26, 36; [Joseph Sharpe], *Dark at Seven: Life of a Derbyshire Miner, 1859–1936, Told by Joseph Sharpe*, ed. Nellie Connole (York, 1988), 1.

⁴⁸ Ernie Benson, *To Struggle Is to Live: A Working Class Autobiography*, 1 (Newcastle, 1979), 51–2; [Rosa Lewis], *Queen of Cooks – and Some Kings (the Story of Rosa Lewis)*, ed. Mary Lawton (New York, 1926), 4; Gawthorpe, *Uphill to Holloway*, 21–2, 26, 36; V. S. Pritchett, *A Cab at the Door. An Autobiography: Early Years* (1968), 67.

⁴⁹ For a few examples, see Leily Broomhill, 'In Memory of My Mum', in *Like It Was Yesterday: Childhood Memories*, ed. Daphne Chamberlain (1989), n.p.; Alice Foley, *A Bolton Childhood* (Manchester, 1973); A. S. Jasper, *A Hoxton Childhood* (1969), 40, 51; Bishopsgate Institute Library, London: Arthur Harding 'My Apprenticeship'.

absent. It is not simply that worthy causes make for a more edifying life story; there is also the material fact that heavy drinking was incompatible with long life. Indeed, Murphy's father himself died young owing to a mix of heavy drinking and heavy labour, leaving not much opportunity for an end-of-life autobiography.⁵⁰ Unhealthy and difficult lives were far less likely to produce an autobiography, and it is important to recognise this as a structural omission from our archive of first-person narratives.

Clearly, however, skilled and sensitive reading of the kind that historians are trained in permits us to address these kinds of omissions. Male writers living through the industrial revolution may not have written much on the themes of heavy drinking and of men (and their families) failing to flourish in the new industrial era, but these themes are not altogether absent from the archive. It is rather that we tend to learn about them through the eyes of other family members. The men writing during the industrial revolution revealed how higher wages offered them a degree of agency and autonomy in their life. Later autobiographers writing about their fathers captured the same phenomenon, but they also reveal that agency and autonomy could be experienced in ways that were harmful as well as beneficial.

The evidence in the Victorian autobiographies helps us to reinterpret the social consequences of the industrial revolution and warns us against generalising from the male perspective they provide. But writers such as Molly and Jack are not useful simply as ciphers for their fathers' generation. They also produced a rich seam of evidence for their own times. Indeed, there is a vast number of potential topics that their writing addresses, but in the space remaining here let us look at the thing that had originally brought Molly and Jack together – politics.

Since the late eighteenth century, the combination of industrial work, high wages and city life had provided a growing number of working men with the possibility of entering the political sphere. With a generation of women starting to write autobiographies at the end of the nineteenth century, it becomes possible to ask if working women were now starting to participate in the nation's political process too. Politics was a major preoccupation for both Molly and Jack throughout their lives and provided both of them with the motivation for writing an autobiography. Their writing thus provides a good starting point for larger questions about the gendered nature of political engagement in the early twentieth century.

The difference in opportunity for Jack and for Molly is very clear. After his challenging childhood, Jack went on to become a leader of the British communist movement. Shortly after starting work, he joined his local union. Within the space of a few years, Jack's union membership developed into a full-time position as a political agitator and Jack remained continuously active in the labour movement throughout his adult life. Molly, as the eldest daughter of a fatherless family of seven children, had always enjoyed far less freedom of action. After her parents' separation, Molly had spent her childhood and adolescence preoccupied with domestic duties and only got involved in politics –

⁵⁰ Murphy, *New Horizons*, 18–20.

she joined her local branch of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), a militant suffragette movement – once her younger siblings grew older and her 'household duties had lessened'. But Molly's work for the WSPU was unpaid and her immersion in the suffrage movement proved to be an interlude of around eight years. When the First World War brought an end to her local committee's activities, she redirected her energies to getting her training as a nurse.⁵¹ That, followed by her subsequent marriage to Jack and motherhood, brought a hiatus to her political activism of more than ten years. Jack's biographer describes him as 'one of the most important self-educated worker-intellectual figures of the early twentieth century British revolutionary socialist tradition', but no such claims could be made of Molly.⁵² As Jack's star rose in the 1920s, Molly 'was a full-time housewife bringing up their son'.⁵³ It was only once their son had reached an age where Molly felt able to entrust him to other care-givers that she re-entered the political sphere, though always in a supportive, and unpaid, capacity and never in a way that rivalled that of her husband. As children of late Victorian Britain, there was much that Jack and Molly had in common; but as adults attempting to engage in the political sphere, the role of gender ensured sharply divergent experiences.

Jack and Molly Murphy were but one married couple, but the advantage of the *Bibliography* is that it allows us to consider a sample of over 600 working-class men and women and to question whether their experiences speak to wider truths about the gendered nature of political opportunities. A careful examination of the larger sample confirms that they do. Consider first the 450 autobiographies written by men. Of this group, fifty-seven had become MPs. A further forty had played a significant role in national, as opposed to local, organisations. This group of forty includes men such as Joseph Burgess, a founding member of the Labour Party;⁵⁴ Tom Mann, leader of the London Dock Strike of 1889 and secretary of the Independent Labour Party;⁵⁵ and Harry Pollitt, leader of the Communist Party of Great Britain – as well of course as Jack Murphy, another leader of the British Communist Party.⁵⁶ Most of these men held paid positions in the organisations they were involved in; and a majority have entries in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Aggregating these forty and the fifty-seven MPs, it is seen that almost 100 male autobiographers held formal positions of political power, whether inside or outside the Houses of Parliament. Alongside these men were many more who testified to engagement on a more local level.⁵⁷

The global picture of political engagement for our 200 women autobiographers is dissimilar in several respects. Only thirty-four of the female writers mentioned any kind of engagement with a political organisation at all, and

⁵¹ Murphy, *Molly Murphy*, 5–63.

⁵² See Ralph Darlington's editorial introduction to Murphy, *Molly Murphy*, ii. See also his biography: Ralph Darlington, *The Political Trajectory of J.T. Murphy* (Liverpool, 1998).

⁵³ Murphy, *Molly Murphy*, iii.

⁵⁴ Joseph Burgess, *A Potential Poet? His Autobiography and Verse* (Ilford, 1927)

⁵⁵ Tom Mann, *Tom Mann's Memoirs* (1932).

⁵⁶ Harry Pollitt, *Serving My Time: An Apprenticeship in Politics* (1940).

⁵⁷ Griffin, *Breadwinner*, 264–7.

these women described very different patterns of involvement. Just four of the female autobiographers had become MPs: Margaret Bondfield,⁵⁸ Bessie Braddock,⁵⁹ Jennie Lee⁶⁰ and Ellen Wilkinson, all of them representing the Labour Party.⁶¹ A further twelve, whilst never serving as MPs, nonetheless made a sustained contribution to political life on the national stage. These twelve include women like Helen Crawford, suffragette, pacifist and prominent figure in the Communist Party; Elizabeth Andrews, suffragist, leading figure in the women's branch of the Labour Party; and Jessie Stephen, militant suffragette, union organiser for domestic workers and political agent for the Labour Party. All received national recognition for their work and are honoured with an entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. The remaining cohort were women like Molly, who had engaged with politics but on a smaller, more local scale, and in ways that did not earn them either an income or national recognition.⁶²

It is also significant that this generation of female writers was born many decades after the industrial revolution. This generation of female autobiographers was born a full century after working-class men first started describing their forays into the political sphere, and yet the women were still largely unable to make meaningful inroads into the nation's political life. Their experiences reinforce once again that the social history of the industrial revolution is deeply gendered and suggest a new way of thinking about the limits of autobiographical evidence. For the most part, historians have fretted that autobiographers tend to have achieved success in life and that this success makes them poor witnesses of the lives and experiences of working people more broadly. Yet across the whole of the autobiographical canon, around 1,000 items in all, and spanning the period during and after the industrial revolution, there is strong evidence of a positive correlation between industrial work and male autonomy. The problem with the autobiographical archive is both simpler and more complex than historians have imagined. The major drawback with these records is that prior to around 1870, autobiographical writing was produced almost exclusively by men, and men cannot speak for women.

This central problem – that women's and men's experiences are distinct – is even manifest in the creation of the autobiographical archive. We have already observed that men began writing autobiographies many decades before women and that the generation of women born around the turn of the nineteenth century was the first to produce autobiographies in any number. Even at this point, however, significant differences between the sexes persist. Consider again the production of the autobiographies of our married couple, Molly and Jack Murphy. Jack wrote his autobiography when he was in his

⁵⁸ Margaret Grace Bondfield, *A Life's Work* ([1949]).

⁵⁹ Jack and Bessie Braddock, *The Braddocks* (1963).

⁶⁰ Jennie Lee, *To-morrow Is a New Day* (1939). See also Patricia Hollis, *Jennie Lee: A Life* (2014).

⁶¹ Ellen Wilkinson, untitled, in *Myself When Young* by *Famous Women of Today*, ed. Margot Asquith, Countess of Oxford (1938), 399–416. See also Laura Beers, *Red Ellen: The Life of Ellen Wilkinson, Socialist, Feminist, Internationalist* (Boston, 2016).

⁶² See also, Griffin, *Breadwinner*, 264–7.

early fifties. It was published by Bodley Head in 1941 and reprinted the following year. It is listed in the *Bibliography*, available in several libraries and for sale on various bookselling sites. By contrast, Molly's autobiography was written towards the end of her life – it has even been suggested that Jack ghostwrote it for her. At any rate, no publisher was found for it during her lifetime, and it is only thanks to the efforts of her son and the historian Ralph Darlington that it was ever published at all. It is not listed in Burnett *et al.*'s *Bibliography* and is not easy to find. It was a pure stroke of luck that I spotted it whilst browsing the local studies shelves of Sheffield Central Library, and I only managed to locate a copy by contacting Ralph Darlington and buying it from him personally as it was not for sale on Amazon or any other bookseller's site.⁶³ For a host of reasons, therefore, it is far easier to get hold of a copy of Jack's autobiography than it is Molly's.⁶⁴

And like so many of Jack and Molly's stories, what is true for them is true for many others too. The permanency and findability of Jack's writing compared to the fragility of Molly's were not quirks unique to them. There are more general features of the entire autobiographical archive.⁶⁵ Well over half of the autobiographies written by men were published by a national press during the author's lifetime. They have been catalogued, recorded in the *Bibliography* and are relatively easy to obtain from libraries and second-hand booksellers. By contrast, fewer than 20 per cent of the women's autobiographies were published by commercial presses. Even where female autobiographies were published, they were often printed by a small, local history society, sometimes as a stapled pamphlet rather than a bound book, and although such records are more likely to survive than handwritten documents, they are still difficult to locate.⁶⁶ 'Amateur' history of this nature does not generally end up in academic libraries or bibliographies, and although some have been deposited at the British Library, they have never been catalogued or recorded as female autobiography, and can therefore be virtually impossible to find. It is little surprise then that men's stories have so long dominated our understanding of working-class life. It is not simply that men wrote more autobiography; their writing was also more likely to be published and catalogued, and it is therefore much easier for historians to find. In effect, the dominance of male voices is a structural feature of the archive just as it was a structural feature of British society throughout this period. As a result, we work with an archive that disposes us to provide universalising accounts of human experience on the basis of work written by men.

⁶³ A particularly serendipitous discovery given that Sheffield is the only public library in the UK that has the book sitting on its open shelves.

⁶⁴ Compare also with the experiences of Philip and Ethel Snowden; though both were politically active, only Philip wrote an autobiography: Philip Viscount Snowden, *An Autobiography* (2 vols., 1934).

⁶⁵ Griffin, *Breadwinner*, 8–23.

⁶⁶ For a few examples, see Ada Matthews, *Recollections of Life in Shepherds Bush* (c. 1989); Gertie Mellor, *Gertie's Story: Memories of a Moorland Octogenarian*, ed. Betty Gouldstone (Hollinsclough, 1994); Edith Pratt, *As If It Were Yesterday* (Huntingdon, 1978).

In drawing attention to the limitations of the autobiographical archive, my intention is not to dismiss its use, but rather to encourage more careful reflection on the consequences of its limitations. Certainly, inserting the writing of working-class men into debates about the social consequences of the industrial revolution has enhanced our understanding. Over a period of many years, this debate has spawned a very large literature and tended towards a pessimistic interpretation, but discussion has proceeded without the inclusion of the considerable body of autobiographical material written by working men. The insertion of that material provides a rather different account of the industrial revolution, and teaches us that working men who lived through industrialisation viewed the period as one of optimism and opportunity. This may jar with our preconceptions, but it is nonetheless a perspective that requires serious engagement.

At the same time, however, using women's life-writing provides a very different account again, and turns us back once more to more pessimistic terrain. It is not that women's writing disputes the gains that were made by men. In fact, their writing powerfully confirms that industrial employment did offer men higher wages, and that that in turn offered them greater power and autonomy in their non-working lives. It is rather that in a world in which work, wealth and resources are shared unequally by men and women, gains made by men cannot be straightforwardly presumed to have also been beneficial for women. Bringing in women's stories does not just add depth and colour to our understanding of the social impact of the industrial revolution; it fundamentally changes it. Above all, the inclusion of women's writing teaches us that whilst male voices may be dominant, the male experiences they describe are not universal. And this is a lesson for all historians. Omissions in the archive are a hazard for all; grasping the nature and consequences of those omissions is the pathway to the historical pasts we seek to understand.

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