

Working-class autobiography in the nineteenth century

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The earliest recorded use of the term that defines this volume is by a writer from a humble background. Ann Yearsley, the ‘Bristol Milkwoman and Poetess’, attached an ‘Autobiographical Memoir’ to the fourth edition of poems published in 1786 (Falke 2013, 12–3). By the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century the genre of working-class autobiography had become sufficiently established to attract the attention of the literary establishment. In 1827 John Lockhart introduced the readers of *The Quarterly Review* to the new voice:

The classics of the *papier mâché* age of our drama have taken up the salutary belief that England expects every driveller to do his Memorabilia. Modern primer-makers must needs leave *confessions* behind them, as if they were so many Rousseaus. Our weakest mob-orators think it a hard case if they cannot spout to posterity. Cabin-boys and drummers are busy with their commentaries *de bello Gallico*; the John Gilpins of ‘the nineteenth century’ are historians of their own *anabases*; and, thanks to ‘the march of intellect’, we are already rich in the autobiography of pickpockets. ([Lockhart] 1827, 149)

The authors ranged from the obscure to the outcast. Amongst the ten texts arraigned for Lockhart’s censure were *The Adventures of a Ship-Boy*; *The Memoirs of John Nicol, Mariner*; and *The Life of David Haggart, alias John Wilson, Alias John Morison, alias Barney M’coul, alias John M’Colgan, alias Daniel O’Brien, alias the Switcher. Written by Himself, while under Sentence of Death*. The blame for this corruption of English letters lay not just with the writers but with the marketplace. An epochal change was taking place in the realm of written intercourse. ‘There was . . . little danger of our having too much autobiography’, wrote Lockhart, ‘as long as no book had much chance of popularity which was not written with some considerable portion of talent, or at least by a person of some considerable celebrity in one way or another. But the circle of readers has widened strangely in these times . . . It seems as if the ear of that grand impersonation, “the Reading

Public,” had become as filthily prurient as that of an eaves-dropping lackey’ ([Lockhart] 1827, 164). The wrong lives were attracting the wrong kind of popular interest.

Partly as a consequence of the disdain of the emerging profession of letters, working-class autobiography failed to establish itself as a recognised literary form for the remainder of the century and the first two-thirds of the twentieth. As late as 1984 an authoritative survey could claim that only 175 autobiographies of any kind were written in the nineteenth century (Buckley 1984, 19). A handful of books, such as Samuel Bamford’s *Early Days* (London 1848–1849) and Charles Manby Smith’s *The Working-Man’s Way in the World: being the Autobiography of a Journeyman Printer* (Smith [1853]), were issued by reputable publishers and found a readership amongst those curious about the political challenge from below and the culture from which it emerged. But right through to the emergence of ‘history from below’ in the 1960s, the known works were limited in number and scattered in form. Around fifty texts supplied occasional anecdotes to illustrate generalisations drawn from more comprehensive and authoritative sources such as government blue books. Eventually, a growing interest in popular literature more generally intersected with an increasing search for the voice of the dispossessed. John Burnett edited a series of widely read anthologies (Burnett 1974, 1982) and I wrote the first systematic study of the genre based on an enlarged group of 142 memoirs (Vincent 1979). These works made possible the funding of a large-scale research project which set about collecting, annotating, and indexing every extant autobiography written by working men and women between 1790 and 1945 (Burnett, Vincent, and Mayall, 1984, 1987, 1989. See also Hackett 1985). Every effort was made to locate not just the texts in the catalogues of national and local libraries and the columns of political and trade union journals, but unpublished manuscripts still in the private possession of descendants. The appearance of one of the editors on BBC’s *Woman’s Hour* generated the largest single trove of hitherto unknown material.

What had once been a marginal collection of writings was transformed into a major archive comprising more than a thousand works written before the end of the nineteenth century and a similar number from the first half of the following century. Taken together they constituted by far the largest commentary by working men and women on their experiences and aspirations before the era of the recorded interview. The oral history movement which emerged at this time could only reach back as far as men and women born in the early years of the twentieth century. Beyond lay the written word or silence. Through the bibliographic research it became

possible to take a more comprehensive view of the nature of the genre and its value to historians and literary critics. The initial conclusion to be drawn is that working-class autobiography was an immensely diverse event, nowhere more so than in its physical existence. Just over a third of the discovered texts were issued by London firms, ranging from general interest publishers to those specialising in niche markets such as spiritual or temperance writings. A further quarter was produced for local audiences by small provincial enterprises. One in ten was to be found in the multitude of nineteenth-century periodicals dedicated to particular interests and objectives. This left more than a quarter of the material that was either self-published, or survived as hand-written (or latterly typed) texts circulating at best amongst the writer's immediate family. These were documents handed down to descendants whose significance only became apparent once historians and the media began to draw attention to their value. Whilst it may be assumed that just about all the mainstream published material has been located, the tail of printed ephemera and unpublished reminiscences has no ending. As academic and popular interest grows, fuelled by the bibliographies and the research they generated, so more texts continue to emerge. A fifth of the autobiographies brought together for the most recent large-scale study, Emma Griffin's *Liberty's Dawn*, are additional to the collections that were compiled more than a quarter of a century ago (Griffin 2014, 4).

The association of the genre with the disordered and disregarded fringes of literary expression contrasts with many other categories of autobiography, particularly the nineteenth-century canon of intellectual and professional memoirs written by those, as Lockhart put it, with recognised 'talent' or 'celebrity' and subject to full-length examination by generations of academic commentators. The existence of the form is a consequence of much toil in the archival back streets and this is reflected in its overall character. The most important consequence of the bibliographical research has been to divest the genre of the sense that it was the product of a narrow, educated elite within the working class. Signature literacy was already virtually universal amongst male artisans by the early decades of the nineteenth century, and every neighbourhood and village possessed at least a scattering of unskilled labourers familiar with the printed word (Vincent 1989, 96–104). Female literacy was only ten points lower than male, and increased even more rapidly during the Victorian period as the proportion unable to inscribe their names fell to single figures. The cost of paper, steel pens, correspondence, newspapers, and eventually full-length books came within the penny economy of the labouring poor. Whilst

extended composition remained unusual, it was sufficiently feasible to attract a diverse range of practitioners. The cohort of autobiographers included, as might be expected, teachers, poets, preachers, and journalists, but the occupations experienced or described in the texts encompass errand boys, domestic servants, farm labourers, soldiers and sailors, navvies and hawkers, and a host of trades in the by-ways of the nineteenth-century economy such as coal trammer, docks hobbler, rivet carrier, and slope-dresser. In spatial terms, the sample is equally comprehensive. There are dense clusters in the period's major conurbations, but lives were led and written about in every corner of the British Isles, from Stromness in the Orkneys to Newlyn in Cornwall and Amlwch on Anglesey. The discovery of the scale of the archive has moved the genre into the centre of studies of the culture and economy of the era, such as the sophisticated quantitative analysis of accounts of working-class childhood recently conducted by Jane Humphries, which is based on 617 texts containing accounts of the first phase of occupational labour across the economy (Humphries 2010).

The major continuing imbalance in the form is that of gender. In the early research on working-class autobiographies there were so few written by women as to discourage any substantive discussion of their work. The subsequent enlargement of the genre located a richer seam of accounts and has permitted some preliminary analysis of their contents (Swindells 1985, 116–35). Nonetheless they remain a minority presence, accounting for less than ten per cent of the surviving texts, despite the further discovery of unpublished material. The disparity is not a simple reflection of signature literacy. The differential in the marriage register scores was never large and narrowed consistently through the period, a consequence in part of the relative equality of basic instruction in the elementary schools. It is likely that the explanation lies in the distinction between nominal and functional literacy. Few working-class children emerged from their schooling as capable writers. What was termed 'composition' was only taught to the very brightest children from 1871 onwards, and even then only covered simple letter-writing. Following the introduction of the Penny Post in 1840, correspondence became more accessible as a mode of transmitting sentiment and summaries of past experience, but the use of the mails by the labouring poor remained relatively infrequent until the appearance of the picture postcard at the end of the nineteenth century. The journey to the level of skill and confidence required to attempt a sustained life history required practice and this was most often available in the range of occupational or organisational settings from which women were largely excluded for much of the period. The humdrum tasks of providing accounts for

customers or preparing minutes of meetings or notes for nonconformist sermons generated a familiarity with pen and ink which could be applied when the occasion arose to the task of attempting longer prose narratives. Only in the closing years of the nineteenth century were women able to play leading roles in organised protest movements, or to find employment as typists, teachers, or nurses where the use of literacy was a requirement.

Even amongst the more prolific male autobiographies there was a general sense of making do with scarce resources and limited expectations. Such was the case with Benjamin Shaw's life history, which was edited for publication in 1991. In their original manuscript form the two volumes of the autobiography were literally home-made. The cheap soft paper was sewn and bound by the author, who used his skills as a mechanic to fashion his own steel-nibbed pen. He had taught himself to write at the age of twenty in order to maintain a correspondence with his literate sweetheart, and his command over written language remained partial. A wide vocabulary, derived at least in part from extensive reading, was set down with inconsistent spelling and idiosyncratic punctuation. Nothing was fixed in the account. Shaw struggled with the conventions of formal discourse as he had battled with material and emotional circumstances in the life he sought to describe. Movement and compromise characterised both the form and the content of the text. The overriding commitment was not to a single drama or outcome, but rather to a pact with the truth. In his preface, Shaw described the essence of his project:

in the following Pages, I have put down a few broken, and imperfect hints, from memory partly, & partly from a few notes kept by me, for my own use, mostly of the latest dates, mentioned, &c – I have not attempted to deceive any that may read this account, by falsehoods or by selecting those circumstances that might make the most favourable appearance – but I have simply attempted to state facts, whether honourable or shameful – as I consider truth the most valueable ingredient in any History or Biographical account. (Shaw 1991, 1)

The more restricted the audience for the text, the more compelling the need for accuracy (Howard 2012, 172). The bulk of the works were written for a local market, whether or not they were printed, and would thus be read by an audience far more informed about the detail of conditions and experiences than any historian can hope to be. In a handful of cases, such as the edition of Shaw or the republication of James Dawson Burn's *The Autobiography of a Beggar Boy* (Burn 1978), it has been possible to check the circumstantial evidence in the texts. There are occasional

instances of confused recall, or of misquoting texts lodged in the memory, but these fall short of deliberate misrepresentation. It mattered to the autobiographers that they were not writing fiction, and indeed one of the stimulants to the proliferation of the genre in the Victorian era was the need to counter the increasing representation of working-class lives in the novels of Dickens and other middle-class writers (Vincent 1979, 23). However limited their expected circulation, the autobiographies were never entirely private documents. The emphasis varies from work to work, but the most complacently didactic conducted some inward search, and the most intensely introspective had a sense of a wider readership, even if it never came into being. Shaw set down his 'Family Records', as his title page stated, 'Partly for his own use & Partly for his Children' (Shaw 1991, 1). Another contemporary semi-literate autobiographer, the Northumbrian waggonway-wright Anthony Errington, explained at the commencement of his account that 'the reason of my wrighting the particulars of my life and Transactions are to inform my famely and the world' (Errington 1988, 26). In the more sophisticated work the perceived audience might fracture still further, but in the least ambitious autobiographies there was a constant shifting of perspective, as the narrators wrote in order to read themselves and to be read by others who were in some way expert in the world that was being recalled.

As Shaw recognised, however, he was free to select and give weight to the events he chose to write about. The conventional distinction between an autobiography and a diary is that the former is subject to a shaping perspective at a single point of composition as distinct from a multiple series of short-term records that are completed only when the writer dies or abandons the task. Recent scholarship has argued that diaries themselves are influenced by one or more overarching conceptions of a developing life (Millim 2013, 12–25). They can be seen as part of a broader autobiographical project, conducted, as in the case of the weaver and Peterloo veteran Samuel Bamford, through two volumes of memoirs, extensive correspondence in the press defending his role in radical politics, and the maintenance of a daily record which itself included cuttings from newspapers (Hewitt 2006, 21–39). In either case, the author has choices in composing the account of the interaction over time between the self and its surroundings. This is not to oppose literary form to fact, merely to recognise that like any source material, life-histories are conditioned by the narrative assumptions that have called them into being (Thomson 2012, 102–4). Amongst historians seeking to use large collections of working-class autobiographies to illuminate specific issues there remains a resistance to the

notion of reading them as complete texts. The first major use of the expanded genre, Jonathan Rose's study of working-class reading practices, ignored the broader question of form altogether (Rose 2001). In Emma Griffin's recent study, the generally optimistic account of the industrial revolution extends to the challenges posed by her source material, where, she notes, 'some have gloomily concluded that autobiographies are a form of literature – even fiction' (Griffin 2014, 9). They are the first, not the second, and as Carolyn Steedman has argued, we need to develop further a sociology of literary forms if we are fully to comprehend the nature of the enterprise in which the writers were engaged, and how we might best deploy the texts to comprehend how lives were lived and understood in the past (Steedman 1992, 15).

There were two models of temporal self-analysis available to working men and women at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The tradition of spiritual memoirs stretched back to the Reformation (Delany 1969, 6–104; Morris 1966, chs. 2 and 3), as Molly Murray (see Chapter 4) and Tessa Whitehouse (see Chapter 8) explore in the present collection. Their function was not the celebration of the autonomous self but rather its transcendence through the discovery of Christ's purpose for the penitent sinner (Mascuch 1997, 55–96; Peterson 1986, 2–28). Fulfilment of this task emphasised the movement of the soul through time and the discovery of its destination through a range of social interactions and physical experiences. It was increasingly seen to be necessary to engage not just in prayer and preaching but in writing for a wider audience. And from the Puritan revolution onwards, humble birth was no disqualification from setting pen to paper. Thus in 1705 the tiler and plasterer's son Thomas Tryon, who had begun working at the age of six, felt the need to write his life story 'to encourage others, by the Example of God's gracious dealing with me' (Tryon 1705, 4). His acquisition of the tools of communication during his teens was far from straightforward. He struggled for a while with a primer he had bought, and then struck a bargain with his only available resources: 'At last I bethought my self of a lame young Man who taught some poor Peoples Children to Read and Write; and having by this time got two Sheep of my own, I applied my self to him, and agreed with him to give him one of my Sheep to teach me to make the Letters, and Joyn them together' (Tryon 1705, 14–5). By this means he was able to embark on the real journey of his life until the point at which 'I had an inward Instigation to Write and Publish something to the World' (Tryon 1705, 54). During the eighteenth century nonconformist sects, particularly the Wesleyans, institutionalised the practice, commissioning and publishing

exemplary lives as a means of educating and inspiring their congregations (Rivers 1978, 189–203).

Alongside these relentlessly purposeful accounts was a more relaxed and less visible tradition of oral story-telling. Parents spoke of their forebears to their children; neighbours gossiped about the deeds and misdeeds of others; fellow drinkers told tales of high adventure and low behaviour. By its nature, such practices left little record for historians and literary critics to examine, but the presence throughout the genre of working-class autobiography of inconsequential anecdotes and diverting characters is testament to the continuing pleasure of narration for the sake of general entertainment and occasional instruction. The late-twentieth-century memoir of George Hewins was driven by 'the sheer delight of his story-telling' (Hewins 1982, 139). During the eighteenth century some categories of reminiscence had begun to assume specific forms in the publishing market place, particularly thieves' tales and gallows confessions. The nation at arms during the Napoleonic Wars created a demand for the life-histories not just of generals but of the common soldiers who had left their homes to fight for their country (Fitchett 1900). From the 1790s onwards, the radical movement began to generate its own temporal identity, recounting its struggles and victories in various forms of public gathering and increasingly in fragmentary or full-length autobiographies (Vincent 1977). It was no longer enough to speak of the past. Written history became a contested arena to which the personal memoir could make an immediate contribution (Hackett 1989, 211).

The traditions of spiritual and oral memoir were at once a resource and a limitation for working people attempting the task of a written life-history. The travails of the soul endowed the genre with a pervasive sense of moral purpose but were increasingly unable to frame the drive to a secular understanding of personal improvement (Falke 2013, xv–xvi). Tales continued to be told in every kind of social context, but the forms of organised protest that embodied the growing sense of collective identity were now infused with the printed or hand-written word in the shape of manifestos, correspondence, journalism, and institutional bureaucracy. Men and sometimes women set out on an unfamiliar project lacking confidence in any single model of temporal self-analysis. The consequence was a plural and provisional approach to the task of shaping the narratives. Inexperienced writers responded to their own and their audience's demands by attempting various approaches to explaining a life, sometimes reviving fading structures, elsewhere contributing to emerging literary sub-categories or trying different models within the boundary of a single account.

Benjamin Shaw's *Family Records* is a case in point. As the title suggests, he began with the basic model of the genealogical tree which might be contained in the family Bible, presenting a sequence of brief pen portraits of 'my parents and my relations' (Shaw 1991, 2–21). When, after twenty or so pages he reached his own history, he was faced with at least three alternative narrative structures. The first was the well-rehearsed drama of the spiritual journey. Shaw had himself experienced a classic Baptist conversion in his late twenties. He recalled that after a period of religious crisis, 'god was Mercifull, & spoke Peace to my Soul, & now I found that Peace with god which Passeth all understanding, & rejoiced all the day long, & saw every thing in a new light, I wondered that I never saw them before, my heart was Chainged, & my life was Chainged of course' (Ibid., 39–40). However, he had many years of intense hardship ahead of him in which his moment of grace seemed of diminishing relevance. Gradually the turning point became just another corner.

Shaw's faith never left him completely, and traces of the standard spiritual progression can be discerned in the subsequent narrative, including a number of providential escapes from death. But now there was a competing narrative structure. His amorous acquisition of literacy had been put to use during a long convalescence following amputation of a leg. He became a classic case of the literate mentality, fascinated with printed learning in all its aspects, and with the organising power of writing. His memoir was not only structured but fully indexed, as were the collections of aphorisms and medical cures he made in separate notebooks. Once he was back on his foot, the pursuit of knowledge under difficulties became the main business of his leisure until the moment when he took up his home-made pen to turn himself into an autobiographer.

But here again, the form was not dominant. Components of the emerging genre of the self-improving life are clearly visible, including the distancing from the community, the mutual assistance of fellow readers, the long, unfinished road of mental growth. In the end, however, it proved impossible to smooth the jagged edges of his life into a standard account of intellectual development. A third narrative framework had to be called into being to help organise the account. Shaw's epistolary courtship had been consummated during one thoughtless night in Preston in February 1793, when he was just twenty-one. The subsequent enforced marriage, which produced a total of eight children, of whom seven survived infancy, was very difficult. He spent the first few months hoping, as he later admitted, that his new wife might die in childbirth, and despite occasional periods of harmony, notably after the religious conversion in which his wife shared,

he never found his way to a satisfactory relationship. His deeply self-disciplined nature was endlessly offended by the more happy-go-lucky nature of his household manager, who was too generous with the neighbours and too spendthrift with the shopkeepers. Eventually, on 8 August 1826, his wife, now ill with consumption, 'being afrunted at my grumbling at being disturbed with her, left my bed & went into the other Room, & we never Slept together after' (Ibid., 97). She died on 4 February 1828, Shaw recording with typical precision that she was 'aged 54 years 14 weeks & 1 day had been married 34 years 22 week 2 days &c' (Ibid., 100).

By the close of the account the narrative had adopted the form of a long, anguished love letter. In retrospect, the night in Preston was seen as the 'Creitical time' (Ibid., 29) and the narrative reached its climax with his wife's death. His courtship had been sustained by learning to write, and at the end of the marriage his literacy made possible one last communication. The main part of the autobiography concluded with a valedictory poem, 'on Betty Shaw wife of Benjⁿ. Shaw':

The time is past that I should her condemn,
Child of caprice, and to her will the slave,
She had her virtues let me think of them,
Her faults be Buried with her in the Grave. (Ibid., 100)

The account of past time had, however, exhumed all her faults as well as her less persuasive virtues. It was evident that Shaw could not forgive his wife her failings, nor himself for failing to forgive her. The lack of resolution in his text reflected both Shaw's personal dilemma and the more general condition of nineteenth-century working-class autobiography. The fading paradigm of the spiritual journey had provided an authoritative means of overcoming the divisions inherent in the practice of life history. Through a transcendence of the self the author could be united with the life that had been lived and the life hereafter. Once the hair shirt of the Puritan confessional tradition had been discarded, no other single model could reliably answer all the needs of temporal self-analysis, especially for men and women who felt their lives in some sense marginal to the received central history of their society.

The deployment of multiple narratives of the self, within or between texts, was not confined to a particular group of writers. It has been argued that in different national contexts, working-class autobiographers negotiated with available versions of selfhood, often bequeathed from earlier eras (Fulbrook and Rublack 2010, 264–7; Maynes 1995, 4–6). The contrast between the multiple personality of the postmodern era and the assumed

singularity of past identities has been challenged (Gagnier 1990, 101). The essentialism of categories such as women's autobiography has dissolved into a range of self-presentations, some of which were common to other periods and groups of writers (Dentith and Dodd 2005, 6; Peterson 1999, 15). The spiritual narrative, for instance, was appropriated by well-born and low-born, male and female, over several centuries. If the emerging genre of nineteenth-century working-class autobiography had a distinct dilemma it was not so much in the range of choices available for constructing a life, but rather in fitting the intractable data of their lives into any one narrative structure. Just as the family economies of the poor subsisted on a basis of make do and mend, so their autobiographies were a matter of improvisation and patchwork.

James Dawson Burn turned to the epistolary form in his *Autobiography of a Beggar Boy*, first published in 1855. He set out to present 'an honest history of my life' by means of a series of letters to his son, each of which would contain a lesson that would guide his footsteps and by extension the rising generation at large. However, by the third letter the enterprise was already in deep trouble. Burn was finding it increasingly difficult to relate his inner self to the series of occupational and political reversals he was required to encompass. The framework of the exemplary narrative could not cope with the sheer scale of the material and ideological challenges he had endured, and he was forced to confess that, 'amid the universal transformation of things in the moral and physical world, my own condition has been like a dissolving view, and I have been so tossed in the rough blanket of fate, that my identity, if at any time a reality, must have been one which few could venture to swear to' (Burn 1978, 56). His dilemma, for which he could find no final solution, was that of how to negotiate between his private and public selves in an essentially secular universe. He wanted to give an account of his disaster-strewn life as a beggar, hatter, and commercial traveller, and as a self-improving reader, radical politician, and Oddfellow, but was deeply uncertain about the interchange between external structural processes and inner moral development.

The working-class autobiographers were embarked on a search for purpose in a world that persistently denied it. 'For working-class autobiographers', notes Regenia Gagnier, 'subjectivity – being a significant agent worthy of the regard of others, a human subject, as well as an individuated "ego" for oneself – was not a given. In conditions of long work hours, crowded housing, and inadequate light, it was difficult enough for them to contemplate themselves, but they also had to justify themselves as writers worthy of the attention of others' (Gagnier 1991, 141). Their attempts to

pattern what was constantly fragmented, to assume responsibility for forces largely out of their control, were the common, continuing experiences of the excluded groups in society. A contrast may be drawn with the emerging genre of the self-made businessman's memoir. James Lackington, author of the prototype text in 1791, was confident that his narrative would demonstrate his personal responsibility for his success as a London bookseller: 'Should my memoirs be attended with no other benefit to society', he wrote, 'they will at least tend to shew what may be effected by a persevering habit of industry' (Lackington 1791, xvii). In her broader survey of nineteenth-century middle-class autobiographies, Donna Loftus has argued that the individual self of the male writer was constituted through a range of social relations. The upwardly mobile figure formed economic, political, and recreational networks with other local figures as a means of securing commercial and social advancement, and in turn addressed that community in the written summation of his life (Loftus 2006, 68). The issue was one of agency. Newly educated working men depended on formal and informal connections as they sought to improve themselves through the use of the written word. But for the most part their networks served merely to pool the impotence of their members. Their lives as they were endured and subsequently committed to paper remained a search for coherence that was rarely attainable.

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