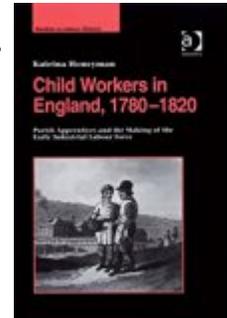


Katrina Honeyman. *Child Workers in England, 1780-1820: Parish Apprentices and the Making of the Early Industrial Labour Force.* Studies in Labour History Series. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007. xii + 340 pp. \$99.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7546-6272-3.



Reviewed by Victor Stater

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Commissioned by David S. Karr (Columbia College)

“Please sir I want some more,” said Oliver Twist to an astonished workhouse master in one of Charles Dickens’s most memorable lines. The boy’s reward was a beating and evermore brutal treatment at the hands of the master coffin maker to whom the guardians of the poor had apprenticed him. Dickens’s picture of the wretched existence of young paupers in the early industrial age is well known, and taken by most as a fair illustration of the age. Katrina Honeyman’s book undergirds the fictional account of authors like Dickens with a dense and painstakingly assembled mass of evidence drawn from the records of both the poor law authorities and the mill owners who took in poor children as apprentice laborers. She skillfully probes these records to test our assumptions about child labor and the early decades of industrialization. She shows that there was a veritable army of Olivers—thousands of children bound as laborers in factories all across England—and her work goes far toward correcting some of our assumptions while never losing sight of the

weary struggle of children working twelve- to sixteen-hour days for no wages.

Many commentators assume that parish apprentices led lives of uniform oppression and degradation, and while Honeyman proves that there was plenty of both, she also demonstrates that the real picture was more complex than Dickens, and some later historians, have allowed. Her focus is on those children bound as apprentices in textile factories from parish workhouses. She does not deal with the others—of whom there were many—bound to “traditional” trades: local shopkeepers or craftsmen like Oliver’s coffin maker. But by looking only at children working in the rapidly developing textile trade, Honeyman is able to offer a detailed look at both child poverty and industrialization in England. In this, she is remarkably successful, creating a richly detailed and rigorously constructed account of a unique period in modern Western history—the beginning of the industrial age.

The apprenticing of poor children in textile factories was common. Declining death rates and increasing birthrates assured an abundance of candidates; indeed, the growing cost of maintaining the poor gave parish authorities every reason to look to newly built industrial enterprises for relief. And mill owners were not slow to offer themselves as the erstwhile masters of the growing throng of poor children. In fact, owners preferred women and children workers--not only were they often cheaper than men, but they also had less difficulty adjusting to the routine of factory work. In theory, at least, such apprenticeships offered a variety of significant advantages for all concerned. Parishes off-loaded the expense of maintaining poor children in workhouses, employers gained cheap labor (apprentices of course earned no wages), and the children learned a trade and received a basic education.

Theory and practice did not always coincide. Earlier accounts of factory apprenticeship have tended to view it as grossly exploitative and cruel. Young children--many under ten years old--left home and family to be bound to masters whose only aim was the extraction of cheap labor. Once gone, local authorities took little interest in their former charges, insisting only that they should never return to further burden the ratepayers. Brutal masters overworked and underfed them, casting them aside once their apprenticeship--which could be as long as a dozen years--ended. These accounts contain important elements of truth, but Honeyman's detailed research suggests that the story is far more complex. She has done a vast amount of work in dozens of parishes and factory record collections to create a far more detailed and nuanced picture than we have ever had of the subject.

The first part of the book investigates the factory apprenticeship system as it was constituted and administered, while the second deals directly with the experience of the children themselves. Contrary to received wisdom, Honeyman shows

that local authorities did not simply export their pauper children indiscriminately in a desperate attempt to be rid of them for good. Most guardians took trouble--some a good deal of trouble--to find places for their wards where conditions would be acceptable. Once placed, most parishes made some effort, with varying degrees of success, to keep track of their children. Some parishes (and some charitable organizations, such as the Foundling Hospital) were exceptionally conscientious, inspecting factories firsthand, requiring them to provide moral and elementary education, and investigating complaints. But she also demonstrates that the system was always open to abuse. Some parishes did little to protect their children, lacking either the resources, or, in some cases, the desire, to fulfill their responsibilities. Complaints about mistreatment were viewed skeptically. Though authorities were particularly sensitive to charges of inadequate diets, they often did not take seriously the inevitable cases of homesickness, overwork, and harsh treatment that made many children miserable.

But abuses of parish apprentices did not go unnoticed; as early as the 1760s, Parliament passed several acts responding to pressure from reformers. Enlightenment attitudes about childhood and the education of the young motivated some to agitate for reform. In 1802, Parliament responded with a comprehensive statute, the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act. The act limited working hours, regulated conditions, and provided for inspections that foreshadowed the later Factory Act. A further act passed in 1816 added to the protections afforded parish apprentices. Despite these laws, however, Honeyman shows that apprentices still suffered significant abuse; inspectors often failed in their duty and mill owners could not always be relied on to act responsibly. Managers at the Peel Mills in Lancashire, for example, treated their apprentices so badly that apprentices were kept barefoot on the job to discourage flight. But she is fair to those owners,

such as John Bott of Tutbury, Staffordshire, who treated their child workers with care.

In addition to describing the reality of child labor and parish apprenticeship, work that makes the book one of great value, *Child Workers* also makes an important contribution to the history of industrialization. It shows, contrary to the assertions of others whose studies are less comprehensive, that parish apprentices were of considerable importance in providing industry with a flexible and easily trained workforce. Without them, she argues, the textile mills that pulled Britain into the industrial age would have been seriously hampered. The practice of factory apprenticeship had its uses—it fostered economic growth and acculturated a generation of children to the demands of industrial labor. At the very least, most factory apprentices avoided the worst aspects of Dickensian poverty. Nevertheless, she never loses sight of the harsh conditions under which many apprentices labored. Through her diligent research, careful scholarship, and persuasive arguments, the long-lost legion of Olivers have gained a voice. This is a fine book, and should certainly take its place as an important contribution to the study of the Industrial Revolution.

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