

# H-Net Reviews

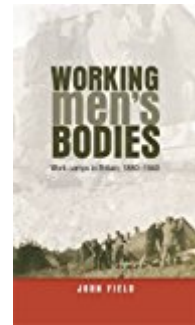
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**John Field.** *Working Men's Bodies: Work Camps in Britain, 1880-1940.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013. 272 pp. \$100.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-8768-4.

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*Working Men's Bodies: Work Camps in Britain, 1880-1940* is an exhaustive exploration of the role of work camps and camp movements in modern British history. These work camps are conceptualized as a broad range of sites and colonies that were used to enforce work and discipline of various and diverse bodies, including the poor and unemployed, disabled people, and ideologues who saw work as a fundamental and important communal activity. Some camps were coercive in nature and aimed at idle bodies, while others were voluntary and tied to ideologies, such as escape from urban centers, the building of communal groups, and anarchism. The sheer scope of John Field's analysis is impressive. Care is taken to meticulously explore and detail a wide range of issues related to the policies, public discourse, and various movements associated with the development, implementation, and running of these labor sites. One of the aspects that stands out is that, while this is indeed a definitive history of work camps, with a specific emphasis on how they shaped men's bodies, the author also includes parallel strands within labor policies and their influence on work experiences of women, the poor, and the disabled, to name but a few. Thus, there is a real sense that Field's attention to detail and examination of various historical threads paints a comprehensive portrait of the reach and impact of labor policies and camps. While the emphasis in this book is certainly on men's bodies and their experiences, how women experienced camps and related labor is not ignored. This may seem out of place for a book where the title is explicitly about men, but women's presence serves to strengthen notions about masculinity and

the work that helped shape these sites, the ways men's labor was understood, and the gendered nature of work.

Divided into ten chapters, the book leads the reader through a comprehensive investigation of labor policies and experiences. Included are the processes of settling the land; ideologies that shaped this process, such as the role of nationalism; the medicalization of work; questions related to notions of public health that situate work as both a cure and an integral part of broader eugenics campaigns; the role of work where citizenship and migration were concerned; ideas of masculinity and how labor helps shape these notions; an examination of British work camps alongside other international examples; and the important interplay between government, policymakers, faith, the voluntary sector, and employers. While the book will be of interest to readers seeking a comprehensive history of work camps, each of the ten chapters is so rich in content that many stand alone for readers seeking a glimpse into a specific theme. For example, chapter 3, on labor colonies and public health, will be of interest and value to scholars interested in the history of disability and the role of labor in shaping and managing impaired bodies. On this note, while the book is not always as explicit about impairment as some readers grounded in a disability studies perspective may seek, it complements the work of disability historians who have sought to better understand the importance of labor to the social construction of the body, as well as lived experience of working under segregated conditions.

Of specific note is how the author pulls together various historical fragments, including media coverage of labor sites, to create a complex portrait of their origin, but also, and more crucially, insight into the lived experience of the people who occupied the camps. Field presents many detailed descriptions of life across six decades and in different locations and environments. These include the gendered nature of work; compensation; voluntary versus conscripted participation, including how citizens may have been persuaded; regimes and routines; details of living arrangements; levels of freedom; and the role of sport and leisure. Field's analyses support the reader's understanding of the laborers' lives and give the reader a sense of the conditions and rhythms of work. The book fills important and neglected historical territory with its critical insight into specific aspects of labor under the controlled environment of work camps.

Among the issues explored are the roles of such organizations as the Salvation Army, the links between work and migration, and the government's and employers' support of their own needs through directed training and employment of work camp inmates. For example, work

camp labor was used in the construction of the Piccadilly underground railway extension and to prepare land at London University. Reflection on other academic disciplines is offered, for example, the role of the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-84) within disability studies and notions around disciplinary power and inmate bodies. The author suggests the necessity of understanding work camps within their own unique contexts.

The book discusses important strands concerning the meaning of work and constructions of male bodies, and it will be of interest to a broad and interdisciplinary audience. It not only provides a rich and thorough history of work camps but also highlights the experiences of those living and working within them and the impact of policy decisions and labor practices. Field illustrates public understanding across space and time, the role of training, and the influence of labor policies. It is an important contribution to shared understandings of how bodies are shaped and managed through public discourse and policy interventions. *Working Men's Bodies* will therefore also appeal to readers interested in sociology, labor policy, and the gendered nature of work.

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