



# WORKING men's BODIES

Work camps in Britain, 1880–1940



JOHN FIELD

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For Annie

# Abbreviations

AD	Arbeitsdienst
<i>BJN</i>	<i>British Journal of Nursing</i>
BLPES	British Library of Political and Economic Science
BMA	British Medical Association
<i>BMJ</i>	<i>British Medical Journal</i>
BUF	British Union of Fascists
BWTA	British Women's Temperance Association
CCC	Civilian Conservation Corps
CCWTE	Central Committee for Women's Training and Employment
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CSC	Community Service Council
CUA	Cambridge University Archives
CUB	Central (Unemployed) Body for London
CUSS	Christian Union for Social Service
<i>DM</i>	<i>Daily Mirror</i>
<i>DW</i>	<i>Daily Worker</i>
ELCS	English Land Colonization Society
FAD	Freiwilliger Arbeitsdienst
GF	Grith Fyrd
<i>GH</i>	<i>Glasgow Herald</i>
GPO	General Post Office
GTC	Government Training Centre
HHC	Hull History Centre
HMSO	Her/His Majesty's Stationery Office
HTC	Home Training Centre
IC	Instructional Centre
ILP	Independent Labour Party
ITB	Industrial Transference Board
IVS	International Voluntary Service
<i>JC</i>	<i>Jewish Chronicle</i>
LCC	London County Council
LEA	Local Education Authority

LGB	Local Government Board
MP	Member of Parliament
NA	National Archives
NAS	National Archives of Scotland
NCSS	National Council for Social Service
NSB	North Sea and Baltic
NSDAP	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei
NSEE	National Society for the Employment of Epileptics
NUWM	National Unemployed Workers' Movement
OSC	Oversea Settlement Committee
OSD	Oversea Settlement Department
OWC	Order of Woodcraft Chivalry
PAC	Public Assistance Committee
PRONI	Public Records Office of Northern Ireland
RAD	Reichsarbeitsdienst
RCPL	Royal Commission on the Poor Laws
RCUI	Royal Commission on Unemployment Insurance
SLCA	Scottish Labour Colony Association
SOSBW	Society for the Overseas Settlement of British Women
TIC	Transfer Instructional Centre
TUC	Trades Union Congress
UAB	Unemployment Assistance Board
UCUC	Universities Council for Unemployed Camps
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WTC	Women's Training Colony
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

## Acknowledgements

Despite its intrinsic interest, as well as its wider significance, I stumbled across this topic almost by accident. While greatly admiring Gareth Stedman Jones' monumental study of *Outcast London* when it first appeared, only much later did I pay any attention to his occasional references to labour colonies.<sup>1</sup> What triggered my interest was a reminiscence by Len Edmondson, a trade union militant and Independent Labour Party member who had been active in the National Unemployed Worker's Movement during the 1930s. Edmondson briefly mentioned that one of his brothers had been sent to a work camp at Kielder, while he himself spent time in a camp at Brandon.<sup>2</sup> At the time, I was teaching a course on interwar Britain, and drew on both Edmondson's memoirs and a chapter from another contemporary account, Wal Hannington's *Problems of the Distressed Areas*. Subsequently, one of my students decided to tackle the Ministry of Labour's camps for his diploma dissertation; Dave Colledge was determined and systematic in tracing men who had worked in the camps, and published his findings in a study that has too long been out of print.<sup>3</sup> I disagree with his interpretation of the period, which seems to me heavily reliant on the Marxist views and language of Wal Hannington (of whom more later on), but I have drawn on the oral and written testimony that Dave gathered, some of which is available in his book.

I have benefited enormously from the help of friends, colleagues and archivists. Several people helped me by passing on source material. They include Reevel Alderson, of BBC Scotland; Allen Bordoley, whose uncle Shalom trained at the David Eder Farm; Dr Georgina Brewis, of the Institute of Education; Dr Cathy Burke, University of Cambridge; Wilma Burns, Stirling Central Library; Dr Mark Freeman, University of Glasgow; Professor Martha Friedenthal-Haase, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena; Dr William Lancaster, University of Northumbria; Professor Keith Laybourn, University of Huddersfield; Gerry Moore, Weeting History Group; Dr Ian Roberts, Bellingham Heritage Trust; Dr Kevin Ryan, National University of Ireland, Galway; Ann Shrive of Brigstock Historical Society; Brian Walker of the Forestry Commission; David Wilson, of Kettering; and the members

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### Notes

- 1 Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A study in the relationship between classes in Victorian society*, Penguin, London, 1970.
- 2 In K. Armstrong and H. Benyon (eds), *Hello, are you Working? Memories of the thirties in the North East of England*, Strong Words, Durham, 1977, 66.
- 3 D. Colledge, *Labour Camps: The British experience*, Sheffield Popular Publishing, Sheffield, 1989.



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# Introduction

Work does you good. A whole mountain of social and psychological research confirms the importance of our job to our identity (who we think we are), how we feel about our lives (our well-being), and our sense of community (our social capital). Generally, we get paid for work, which in turn lets us do other things as a result, though interestingly researchers have found that many of the benefits of working also apply to voluntary work.<sup>1</sup> And it shapes how we see others, particularly those who do not work, especially if we see the workless as parasites who are failing to shoulder their duty to the community. Marie Jahoda, a pioneer in the social science of well-being, identified five factors that she believed were fundamental to how we feel about ourselves: time structure, social contact, collective effort or purpose, social identity or status, and regular activity. All of these, Jahoda argued, were provided for most people by their jobs, but were often absent from the lives of people who were unemployed.<sup>2</sup> More recent research has underlined Jahoda's argument, showing that unemployment strips people of their social networks, and reduces their sense of value and worth, in tangible and measurable ways.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, much of this may now be changing in our fast moving world. While Karl Marx famously defined work as the core of what distinguishes humanity from other species, the environmental thinker André Gorz argued that work's central place in socialist thinking was an ideological burden, a hangover from the industrial past.<sup>4</sup> As Gorz noted, more and more people found themselves in precarious work, or moving ever more rapidly between jobs, so that ideas of an identity rooted in one's job were increasingly tenuous. The steady feminisation of paid work, as well as the ever more porous borders between work and retirement, are also reshaping

the terms of debate. Whether or not work will continue to hold its central place in our culture and lives for much longer is therefore a matter for debate. But it is hard to ignore its continuing importance, symbolically and culturally as well as financially and practically, to our lives.

Krishan Kumar traces the modern primacy of work to the early industrial period.<sup>5</sup> In pre-industrial Britain, he argues, ordinary people earned their living from labour, to be sure, but did not depend solely on their ability to sell their labour to others. Employment only became the sole precarious base of one's living during the nineteenth century. Hence, Kumar argues, the importance of the New Poor Law after 1834 was less as an attempt to underpin a victorious and ruthless capitalism than the last attempt of the old order to distinguish between the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving', with its imposition of the workhouse test on the 'able-bodied' male poor.<sup>6</sup> In many ways, early British work camps – the labour colonies of the 1880s and early 1890s – were both a reaction against the New Poor Law and an acknowledgement that the workhouse system had failed. By this time, Britain was a fully-fledged industrial and urban society, and most of the male population were employed by others, while most of the adult female population were working without a wage in the family home. Britain's industrial cities, and the rhythms of the trade cycle, stretched the New Poor Law to breaking point and beyond. It is fitting that the two decades which witnessed the first labour colonies also produced a new term – 'unemployment'.<sup>7</sup> By the time that the language of unemployment was in common use, and hesitant steps were being taken to understand and reduce it, the German sociologist Max Weber was writing his first essays on the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. Among other concerns, Weber noted that the religious sense of a calling to work was fading away, and being replaced by a Franklinesque rationale for hard work and thrift as strategies for producing an independent citizenry.<sup>8</sup> Work, in short, was a duty to God as well as to one's fellow men; not only was it an obligation to others to work if one could, but it was also necessary to ensure that others could fully share in its benefits. For over fifty years, then, it seemed perfectly reasonable to pack at least some of one's fellow citizens off into the countryside, where they would live and work, at least for as long as it took for labour to heal their ills.

Work camps may seem strange to us, but before 1939 they were a normal part of the landscape. In one of her *Just William* stories,

published in May 1940, Richmal Crompton described how William and his gang were driven to seek revenge on a 'band of toughs' from a nearby 'unemployed camp'. The Outlaws come out on top in the end, thanks to the intervention of a short man who turns out to be the former British lightweight boxing champion.<sup>9</sup> In William's seemingly timeless Home Counties commuter village, Crompton thought it quite unremarkable that someone should open an unemployed camp. Before the Second World War, work camps were scattered across Britain, though not many were close enough to the suburbs to spark off ill-will and anxiety among the middle class. In general, work camps – whether for the unemployed, for epileptics, for alcoholics, for former prostitutes, or for utopian visionaries in search of a better world – were placed in remote country communities, far away from the rest of the world.

This book examines the story of those camps, the men and women who created them, as well as those who inhabited them. It starts in the mid-nineteenth century, just after the Chartist and Owenite communities had come to an end, and when the debate over the failures of the 'new poor law' was under way. By the 1880s, the idea had emerged of the labour colony – an organised settlement, where people (usually men) worked the land, often in order to prove their willingness to take work or to improve their ability to perform it, and sometimes as a preparation for a life on the soil as a peasant farmer. At the outset, most of these ventures were voluntary initiatives, associated with the churches or with reform movements. Increasingly though, local government became involved, initially through poor law boards dominated by radical politicians who believed that progressive policies on unemployment could easily be reconciled with land reform, and subsequently by agencies interested in labour colonies as a treatment for conditions as various as learning disability and tuberculosis. After the Great War, there were work camps for veterans and work camps for peace-builders, as well as work camps for nationalists of various kinds. By 1939, government was playing a far more central and strategic role, directly through its national system of work camps for unemployed men, and indirectly through a range of partnerships with voluntary organisations.

Why have we heard so little about these ventures? The main reason is simple: work camps have had a pretty bad press. Ever since British soldiers walked into Bergen-Belsen on 15 April 1945,

and sent home photographs and films of what they found there, people have tended to see Nazi Germany's labour camps, concentration camps and extermination camps as a more or less equally oppressive and murderous. Of course, this gross oversimplification is easily understandable, but it jumbles together a gamut of different types of institution, from those designed to eradicate undesirables to those that were intended to build healthy National Socialist manhood. The images of Auschwitz also tend to overwhelm earlier work camp systems, including the plethora of voluntary work camp systems that sprang up in response to unemployment in the final years of the Weimar Republic. In the United States, it is perhaps easier to escape from this flattened view of the work camp: faced with record unemployment levels, along with a series of environmental disasters, President Barack Obama turned straight to the Roosevelt era and its Civilian Conservation Corps for inspiration.<sup>10</sup> In Europe, however, it is all too easy to dismiss all work camp systems as variants on a Nazi theme.<sup>11</sup>

If the language of the work camp is likely to provoke immediate and negative reactions, the language of the labour colony probably sounds archaic. In our post-colonial culture, it is easy to forget that the word can mean a land settlement (deriving from the Latin *colonus*, a farmer or husbandman). Radical Owenite cooperators happily adopted the Roman habit of calling their communities 'colony', as did housing reformers when building groups of homes for skilled workers in Victorian cities.<sup>12</sup> As well as the borrowed splendours of ancient (civic) Rome, the term offered radicals an opportunity of lampooning the inequalities of modern Britain. As early as 1827, the Owenite, Quaker and scientist William Allen published a pamphlet called *Colonies at Home*, proposing villages of small farmers as an alternative to emigration.<sup>13</sup>

The dream of re-establishing the peasantry – or, in England, a yeomanry – presents an exceptionally clear version of the idea that people are improved by living and working on the land. Most of the work camp systems featured in this book were less ambitious, and were mainly intended to develop men's bodies, and only secondarily their minds, with little thought at all of their contribution to a more equal and community-minded way of living. Our bodies are at the centre of who we think we are. Each of us, of course, has more than one body. There is the material flesh, weighed and examined as it is, not least by ourselves: we prod our midriffs, stroke our

hair, ponder our reflections, and exclaim in surprise at the stranger staring back in our photographs. There is the equally material but unseen muscle that is the brain, whose workings constitute, store and process what we think we know. Then there is the imagined body, the one that we would like to have, the self-portrait against which we judge the alien in the mirror. There is also the body we imagine we will have in the future. For most of us, this will simply be an older body, though it is more likely that many of us will at least entertain the hope that one day, soon, we will look a bit more trim and muscular, lithe and attractive. To achieve this, a lot of us invest serious money in products, services and behaviour that are supposed to help reshape our body.

Why does the body matter so much? Partly, it is because we all see the body as a way of making judgements about one another – and therefore intuitively know that others are making similar judgements about us. In our reflexive and consumerist world, as Susie Orbach says, ‘Looking after oneself’ has become ‘a moral value’, a ‘worthy personal project’.<sup>14</sup> In 2011, a survey found that four out of every five British men wanted to be more muscular. All but a handful said they had heard demeaning comments about men’s bodies, built around unrealistic dreams of a lean and muscular ideal, but many were frightened to go to a gym, while one in eight had considered taking steroids.<sup>15</sup> Little wonder, then, that sociologists are studying ‘body work’ with renewed interest. While much of their research concerns the effort people put into their own body and its appearance, some people have been looking more closely at the relationship between the body and work.

Men’s bodies have entertained and fascinated people for countless generations. Of course, they come in different shapes and sizes, and in the twentieth century one particular category came to the fore: the bodies of the male working class. In the early years of the century, and especially after the catastrophic military set-backs of the Boer Wars, the sport-playing middle and upper classes of Britain gazed with concern on the puny bodies of industrial Britain, fearful that these unhealthy slum-dwellers might hinder what they called ‘national efficiency’.<sup>16</sup> By the 1920s, an ideal workman’s body was starting to take shape: brawny, muscular, upright workers became symbolic figures, whether representing the international proletariat in Communist iconography or the healthy Aryan people in Nazi propaganda. By the 1970s, the working man’s body had emerged

as a gay archetype, epitomised by the hard-hatted Construction Worker in the popular disco band, the Village People. At the end of the century, the gym-joining middle and upper classes gazed anxiously at the flabby, obese, waddling bodies of people poorer than they.

For academics, this is a relatively new interest. Sociologists mostly followed Marx and Weber in seeing work and employment as something that happened increasingly in large organisations, run on impersonal lines, and taking it for granted that male working bodies were, physically at any rate, fit. Male working-class muscularity can partly be understood, according to Pierre Bourdieu, as an instrumental investment in the body that in part seeks to compensate for the lack of other resources, such as social connections and educational credentials, which demand at most an 'essentially hygienic' approach to sport and exercise.<sup>17</sup> Thanks to feminist debates over women's bodies and their contested meanings, these widely held assumptions are now being questioned and explored. Carol Wolkowitz writes of three broad approaches to the sociology of embodiment: the everyday work we do to keep ourselves going, or 'reproductive work', such as washing and feeding; the activities we engage in to make ourselves culturally acceptable, from dieting and dressing smartly to body building and piercing; and job-related body work, undertaken by ourselves or others to maintain our viability as workers.<sup>18</sup> While these are not hard-and-fast distinctions, the third type of body work is what chiefly interests me here, and especially the development of institutions that are deliberately designed to work on other people's bodies. Work camps are, of course, a great example.

For a historian, the work camp movement is also unusual – though not unique – in the amount of information that survives about the experiences of some of our most marginalised fellow citizens. Alcoholic women, epileptics, vagrants and the unemployed do not stand at the centre of our thoughts, and they do not fill too many shelves in our official archives. Most of the records relating to labour colonies, instructional centres and other work camps were compiled by their administrators or by official observers of some kind. J. D. Clarke, a clerical worker, was unusual in recording his impressions of a three-week stay in Lingfield Labour Colony in 1899. Writing afterwards to thank the Charity Organisation Society, who had funded his stay, the Londoner reassured his sponsors that he had not been on holiday:

The heat is intense & we are out in it all day, hoeing, haying (finished), fruit & pea picking – we rise at 6, I wouldn't mind if it were 4, for I am an easy early riser. Breakfast at 7 out till 12 back at 1 & work till 5.30 ... We are allowed 6d a week to pay for washing collars &c, get thread, cotton, stamps, notepaper &c.

Desperate to return to office work, Clarke stressed that he was not complaining, simply expressing gratitude for its support.<sup>19</sup> His letter provides the first account by an inmate of this new type of institution – new for Britain, at any rate – dedicated to making men stronger and more employable by living together and working on the land. It is part of a much wider and diverse collection of material that allows us to explore attitudes to different types of bodies – mostly male, often unemployed, sometimes addicted or sick – and to their treatment. This is a largely neglected story, and one which has considerable wider significance for our understanding of social policy, masculinity and the many meanings of work in the development of modern Britain.

### Notes

- 1 For example, M. Musick and J. Wilson, 'Volunteering and Depression: The role of psychological and social resources in different age groups', *Social Science and Medicine*, 56, 2, 2009, 259–69.
- 2 M. Jahoda, *Employment and Unemployment: A social-psychological analysis*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982.
- 3 C. Wanberg, 'Individual Experiences of Unemployment', *Annual Review of Psychology*, 63, 2012, 369–96.
- 4 A. Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class: An essay on post-industrial socialism*, Pluto Press, London, 1982.
- 5 K. Kumar, 'From Work to Employment and Unemployment: the English experience', in R. Pahl, *On Work: Historical, comparative and theoretical approaches*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1988, 146–8.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 151.
- 7 Kumar notes that 'unemployment' in its modern usage first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary in the late 1880s: 'From Work', 164.
- 8 M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Routledge, 1992, 14–16.
- 9 R. Crompton, *William and the Evacuees*, George Newnes, London, 1940, 160–88.
- 10 [http://articles.cnn.com/2011-02-16/politics/obama.conservation\\_1\\_land-and-water-conservation-action-plan-president-barack-obama?](http://articles.cnn.com/2011-02-16/politics/obama.conservation_1_land-and-water-conservation-action-plan-president-barack-obama?) (accessed on 11 October 2011).



- 11 For an extreme example, see <http://libcom.org/library/concentration-camps-in-england-1929-39> (accessed on 29 August 2012).
- 12 R. Rodger, *Housing the People: The colonies of Edinburgh: A history of the Edinburgh Co-operative Building Company*, Edinburgh City Council, 1999.
- 13 W. H. G. Armytage, *Heavens Below: Utopian experiments in England, 1560-1960*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1961, 88.
- 14 S. Orbach, *Bodies*, Profile, London, 4.
- 15 Central YMCA, 'Body confidence – not just a women's issue', [www.ymca.co.uk/bodyconfidence/campaign/men](http://www.ymca.co.uk/bodyconfidence/campaign/men) (accessed on 29 February 2012).
- 16 G. R. Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency: A study in British politics and political thought, 1899-1914*, Ashfield, London, 1990, 34-53.
- 17 P. Bourdieu, 'Sport and social class', in C Mukerji and M Schudson (eds), *Popular Culture: contemporary perspectives in cultural studies*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991, 369.
- 18 C. Wolkowicz, 'The organizational contours of "body work"', in E. Jeanes, D. Knights and P. Martin (eds), *Handbook of Gender, Work & Organization*, Wiley, Chichester, 2011, 178-9.
- 19 J. D. Clarke to COS 30/7/99, London Metropolitan Archives, A/FWA/C/D254/1.