

USEFUL TOIL

AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF
WORKING PEOPLE FROM
THE 1820S TO THE 1920S



EDITED BY
John Burnett



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ALLEN LANE

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Let not ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;
Nor grandeur hear with a disdainful smile
The short and simple annals of the poor.

'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,'
Thomas Gray

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PREFACE

AUTOBIOGRAPHIES AS HISTORY

'If one should desire to know what life in England was like a hundred years ago, he could scarcely do better than make a study of the contemporary diarists. There are plenty of them, and variety enough to suit all tastes.'¹ Few social historians would quarrel with James Aitken's first statement, though they might doubt his second. The remarkable thing about his edited extracts from twenty-two published English diaries is that they contain only one from anyone who might remotely be considered 'working-class', and that from the well-known *Rural Rides* of William Cobbett, himself the son of a small farmer. Similarly, when Arthur Ponsonby published his *English Diaries* in 1922 he felt compelled to admit that 'no diary of a professional manual worker was discoverable',² though in a second volume published a few years later he was able to include one extract from the diary of a foreman rivetter working on the Uganda Railway between 1898 and 1901.³

The almost total absence of published working-men's diaries applies nearly, but not quite, as much to autobiographical material. For many years historians have made use of a handful of autobiographies of working men,⁴ the majority of whom played some important part in the development of trade unions or the labour movement, and more recently these have been added to by as many again which have come to light subsequently.⁵ But it remains true that the direct, personal records of working people have not so far been regarded as a major historical source, and that the whole area of such material remains largely unexplored territory.

It has too readily been assumed that working people of the nineteenth century left too few accounts for any meaningful picture to be drawn. The most usual explanation for this is that until the advances in elementary education after 1870 the great majority of the working classes were too illiterate and inarticulate to leave behind written records: their main medium of communication, it has been supposed, was an oral one, in which folklore and personal memories were handed on to succeeding generations in the harvest-field or around the winter fireside. These assumptions ignore the important effects of 'self-help' agencies of education long before 1870, and the growth of literacy among large sections of the working classes, from at least the 1820s onwards, if not before. The

volume and quality of working-class literary remains in the early and mid-nineteenth century suggest major cultural changes outside the mainstream of formal education, which probably had its greatest effects on the children of unskilled workers who had been beyond the reach of self-help or voluntary agencies. Again, it has been supposed that the lives of ordinary men and women were too dull and of insufficient importance to merit recording, or that they had too little time or energy left after a long working day for literary exertions. The last may well account for the relative scarcity of regularly kept, day-by-day diaries of working people, though intermittent journals, and autobiographies written over a period of years and, often, towards the end of life, are common enough. In the main, working people who wished to write found time and energy to do so – late at night, on their Sundays and rare holidays, in periods of unemployment and in old age.

For such reasons, real or imagined, social historians interested in working life and conditions in the last century have drawn their evidence very largely from two sources: first, the Parliamentary Papers, Reports of Royal Commissions, and Committees of Inquiry in which the period is so rich, and, second, the surveys of private investigators and researchers of which a long and distinguished line extends from David Davies and Sir Frederic Eden at the end of the eighteenth century to Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree at the end of the nineteenth. The mass of detailed evidence which these inquiries threw up must remain among the social historian's major sources, but it is important to recognize that they are at a stage removed from the individuals with whom they deal. They necessarily represent a bias, one way or the other, of the investigator who decided what questions were to be asked, and framed them in his own way; witnesses were led – sometimes consciously, more often unconsciously – to make responses to particular, selected questions which were the most important to the observer but not necessarily to the witness.

The chief value of autobiographies and diaries is, therefore, that they are direct records of the person involved in the situation from which he or she writes at first hand. There is no intermediary reporter or observer to change the situation. The writer himself and alone selects the facts, incidents and events which are to him most important, and in doing so he also unconsciously reveals something about his own attitudes, values and beliefs. These may not be what the historian, sociologist or psychologist expects, or even 'wants' to find, but they will have a personal integrity and authenticity which responses to prepared questions may lack, especially when, as is

usual, the questioner has very different cultural, educational and social-class origins. The same comment will apply to the recent technique of tape-recording the memories of old people born at or before the beginning of this century. However skilful the interrogator, he necessarily places the respondent in the position of an actor playing out a role, and being led and prompted along particular lines of thought or recollection which may not be those the witness would have chosen.

What, then, are the difficulties in the use of such material? Not its scarcity. The careful researches of W. Matthews have revealed some 6,500 published British autobiographies and over 2,000 diaries covering the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries⁶ and he would be the last to claim completeness for his inquiries; to the published works must be added a huge but quite incalculable mass of unpublished material, some of it in the form of treasured family papers, much of it possibly unregarded attic lumber. It is, of course, true that working people have not been among the most numerous autobiographers. In the nineteenth century the list was headed by politicians and statesmen, followed by the clergy (especially the non-conformist clergy), missionaries, doctors and soldiers, while in more recent times authors and journalists and stage and screen personalities have joined the ranks. But the records of working people of many kinds – skilled men, factory workers, domestic servants, farm labourers, navvies and even tramps – are still sufficiently numerous to constitute perhaps not a sociological ‘sample’ but at least a cross-section of many different occupations, geographical regions and standards of living.

Yet the chief defect of the use of diaries and autobiographies as a source must be the self-selectivity of the ‘sample’. To keep a daily journal or to write the story of one’s life is, and was, at once atypical, especially for working people to whom writing did not usually come easily. Often there was a particular motivation behind such memoirs, most commonly the author’s belief that he had some important message for others which it was his duty to communicate. In the Victorian age this was often his personal triumph over difficulties and misfortunes, the classic account of a rise from humble origins to a position of honour and respectability through hard work, self-education, thrift and a concern for the betterment of mankind. Equally commonly it was the story of redemption from early sin, profligacy or drunkenness by divine grace, often experienced as a sudden act of conversion or salvation at a revivalist or temperance meeting. More recently, a main motivation has been to leave for one’s children or grandchildren a record of a different age and

society which, despite its material privations, had compensations which contemporary society seems to lack. Whatever his reasons, it is necessary to recognize that the autobiographer or diarist was engaging in an activity which set him apart from the majority of his fellow men, and that to this extent he was not a strictly representative figure.

Similarly, although the extent of working-class literacy in the mid-nineteenth century was clearly greater than has sometimes been supposed, literacy was still differential, and varied widely between different occupations and strata within the working classes. This is reflected in the surviving literary remains. There are more memoirs of skilled workers than of unskilled, more of upper domestic servants than of lower, more of school-teachers than of farm labourers, for the obvious reasons that they had not only more education, but more leisure and more opportunity to think of things other than the daily struggle to survive. Occupation also tended to determine literary involvement in that people who worked at dull, repetitive jobs were less likely to write about them than those who did unusual, exciting or dangerous things; thus, there are more accounts of miners, sailors, soldiers and steel-workers than of labourers, factory workers, house-maids or dress-makers.

A further question has to be asked about the trustworthiness of this kind of evidence. It could be argued that diaries, which are kept daily or, at least, at fairly regular intervals, provide a much more reliable record than autobiographies written after the events, and often towards the end of life. All human memory has its failings: it may forget events, sequences or whole periods of time, it may unconsciously edit and refine, it may erase particularly unhappy memories so that in the distance of time life seems to bear a mellower complexion than when first experienced. There are certainly suggestions of such editing in some autobiographical accounts, though in general it seems that it is the highlights of life that are best remembered – the especially bad as well as the especially good times – and that memory tends to sift out the merely uninteresting rather than the unpalatable. Whether in old age there can be ‘total recall’ of early life is a debatable theory, but it is certainly the case that a great many autobiographers write in vivid detail of their childhood, school-days, and their first entry to work and the adult world which was evidently for many a traumatic experience. Selectivity there must be in any autobiography, but the unconscious selection by the author may itself be a signal to the historian about the aspects of life which, in retrospect, the author thought most significant. More serious are the deliberate omissions or ‘improve-

ments' which may creep into an autobiography intended for publication or for the edification of future family generations; the tone and style of the writing may sometimes suggest such treatment, though there can be no guarantee that the reader will not be deceived.

For these reasons it would be a mistake to rely too heavily or exclusively on this kind of material as a historical source. Its importance is as a valuable supplement to existing contemporary records, which can offer direct evidence not only of life and work but of the attitudes and aspirations of the author. These may modify in important respects some of the received views about working-class life in the nineteenth century.

The first and most obvious characteristic of working-class autobiographies and diaries is the generally high quality of the writing itself, especially when it is remembered that most of it comes from largely self-educated men and women or, in the later nineteenth century, from the products of the often-maligned elementary schools where children typically had three or four years of formal grounding in 'the three Rs', often at the hands of a young pupil-teacher. The language they employ is usually simple, direct and unadorned, and has a limited vocabulary, but it makes its points well, clearly and concisely: even when it is ungrammatical (as in Emanuel Lovekin) the meaning is not in doubt. Evidently there existed a working-class literary form, which was quite distinct from 'polite' literature. What its origins were, how it was transmitted and how widely it diverged from vernacular speech can only be guessed at. Occasionally it is partly derivative – as in the mannered style of John Robinson, the butler, or William Lanceley, the house-steward, where these upper servants reflect the language as well as the attitudes of their employers; in the diary of John O'Neil his avid reading of the daily press is clearly a major stylistic influence, while Lucy Luck has to some extent modelled hers on the penny novelettes she must have read. For others, the Bible, the Prayer Book and the English Hymnal were major influences on thought, imagery and vocabulary (Emanuel Lovekin) and the language of scripture becomes the language of everyday affairs as it did for some Chartists, trade unionists and socialists. But obviously derivative writing is exceptional. Most of the authors use a form which is their own, which has been cultivated (sometimes, as in William Tayler, the keeping of a journal is explicitly part of the process of self-improvement), but which bears so close a resemblance to writings from quite different regions and occupations as to suggest common cultural roots. There are no undiscovered literary gems in such

writing, nor would one expect them, but not uncommonly it is deeply felt and moving, if only because of its naïveté. Occasionally it is poetic, as in Thomas Jordan's description of his mining village; in one instance – that of George Sturt, the wheelwright – it is pure idyll, though Sturt was being educated for a profession before he inherited the family business and became a practising craftsman.

One of the most remarkable characteristics in much of the writing is the uncomplaining acceptance of conditions of life and work which to the modern reader seem brutal, degrading and almost unimaginable – of near-poverty and, sometimes, extreme poverty, of over-crowded and inadequate housing accommodation, of bad working conditions, periodic unemployment and generally restricted opportunities, and of the high incidence of disease, disablement and death. Yet most of those who experienced such conditions are not, in their writings at least, consciously discontented, let alone in a state of revolt. There is a sense of patient resignation to the facts of life, the feeling that human existence is a struggle and that survival is an end in itself. Especially is this so in relation to the early death of wives or children – a fatalistic attitude that 'God gives and God takes away', and that although one may mourn, one does not inveigh against the Fates which, to us, seem to have treated some so cruelly. Such resignation was, in part, the product of a long history of deprivation and suffering by which, for generations past, working people had been accustomed to poverty, personal tragedy and limited expectations; for some it was reinforced by the religious teaching that this world was, in any case, a vale of tears, and that happiness could only be expected in the life to come. These attitudes are true of the great majority, though not of all. In a few who are politically motivated or involved in trade union activities (the 'old potter', John O'Neil, Winifred Griffiths, Rosina Whyatt) the resentment against misery and exploitation is open and expressed, and it is noticeable that a more critical tone develops over time, the writings of the early twentieth century (T. R. Dennis, Jean Rennie) being more outspoken than those of the mid-nineteenth. But even here, the dislike is turned against particular individuals rather than against the system itself, and on the evidence of this admittedly very small sample one is led to conclude that working-class discontent was not only much less widely diffused than might be supposed, but that it was almost always limited to demands for improvement within the existing system rather than attempts to overthrow it.

Such attitudes on the part of the British working class are well known to students of labour history, and need cause no surprise.

What is more remarkable is that workers wrote so little about their work. The twenty-seven autobiographical extracts which follow have been selected principally in order to illustrate working conditions and attitudes towards work in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, yet they have been chosen from five or six times as many which pay little or no attention to the subject. Work, it seems, was not a central life-interest of the working classes. For most it was taken as given, like life itself, to be endured rather than enjoyed; most were probably glad enough to have it at all, and to expect to derive satisfaction or happiness from it was an irrelevant consideration.

It is true and predictable that this attitude varies with different types of occupation and work-task, and that skilled workers were able to derive notably more satisfaction from their work than semi-skilled and unskilled. Thus George Sturt can write lovingly about his work with timber, Arthur Gill about his very different, but creative, sign-writing; T. R. Dennis has evident pride in the way that, as an apprentice cabinet-maker, he was able to make a kidney dressing-table from 'a sweep of [the employer's] hands, a swear-word or two to impress', while the stonemason, Henry Broadhurst, takes a self-effacing pleasure in the fact that remains of his carving are still to be seen in Westminster Abbey, the Albert Hall and the Guildhall. Where craftsmen were fashioning and creating things which were satisfying and perhaps beautiful, such emotions are easily comprehensible; they appear to extend also to less skilled workers who had charge of their work-situation and discretion over the way the task was done, such as B. L. Coombes, the miner at the coal-face, or Winifred Griffiths, the 'first hand' shop assistant. But these were the minority of workers in the nineteenth century, as now; the factory hands and workers in sweated trades, the domestic servants, farm workers, navvies and labourers did not, if their writings are to be trusted, either think very much about their work or derive a sense of fulfilment from it. Work was a means to an end, not an end in itself, and the end was survival in a hostile world which often seemed to deny even this modest ambition. In this, there seems to be some parallel with the attitudes of the contemporary car-workers analysed by Goldthorpe, who also see their work primarily as a means to an end and regard having satisfying work-tasks as low on their list of priorities;⁷ the supposed alienative nature of assembly-line work has little significance for them, and probably had little for their nineteenth-century counterparts, because work itself was not a central, dominating influence.

Although the actual details of work seem to have been of relatively small importance to most autobiographers, the search for it was often a major concern, and the writings of nineteenth-century working people suggest that occupational and geographical mobility was much greater than has sometimes been supposed. The 'tramping' of skilled workers has already been well-documented by Professor E. J. Hobsbawm,⁸ but frequent movement between jobs was by no means limited to them, or impelled by the driving force of unemployment. Some skilled workers, like the compositor Paul Evett, clearly chose to spend at least their earlier years on the move, broadening their professional experience and at the same time enjoying the variety of fresh places and faces; Thomas Wood, the engineer, and Henry Broadhurst, the stonemason, both covered considerable distances in the search for work, while Charles Newnham, the carpenter, and Emanuel Lovekin, the mining butty, were constantly moving within more restricted areas. At the other end of the scale, the anonymous navvy had no settled occupation until middle life, and even after his marriage was always travelling, combining farm work at harvest time with railway labouring and tunnelling, as did Patrick MacGill at a later date.⁹ Again, upper domestic servants frequently moved for promotion or change of scene, while many women servants regarded the occupation as almost casual, and migrated easily into sweated trades, shopwork or, later, factory work. Clearly, some occupations were much less mobile than others, coal-mining perhaps being the extreme instance of a hereditary expectation to follow one's father, while Lancashire millwork, at any rate for men, offered few alternative employments. But the massive overseas emigration of the later nineteenth century, and the relative ease with which a ribbon-weaver like William Andrews left Coventry to search for work in Cologne, Heidelberg, Baden, Basle, Saint-Étienne, Lyons and Paris in 1860-61¹⁰ suggest that many English workers did not regard themselves as being tied down to their native towns and villages. Perhaps the most highly skilled, and therefore sought-after, workers moved less and even regarded tramping as not quite respectable, while at the other end of the scale, some farm workers were imprisoned by their own ignorance and shiftlessness, but between the two extremes large numbers of working people were frequently moving, changing jobs, being promoted, becoming unemployed, seeking their fortune in London or Manchester, periodically returning home and settling temporarily or permanently elsewhere. Only a few, like Lucy Luck, were blown hither and thither by the wind of circumstances; most made conscious choices based, often enough, on inadequate or false infor-