THE HUMAN TRADITION IN AMERICAN LABOR HISTORY

EDITED BY
ERIC ARNESEN

The Human Tradition in American Labor History

No. 19
The Human Tradition in America

Edited by
Eric Arnesen

SR BOOKS
A Scholarly Resources Inc. Imprint
Wilmington, Delaware

First published 2004
Printed and bound in the United States of America

Scholarly Resources Inc.
104 Greenhill Avenue
Wilmington, DE 19805-1897
www.scholarly.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The human tradition in American labor history / edited by Eric Arnesen.
p. cm. — (The human tradition in America ; no. 19)
ISBN 0-8420-2986-9 (alk. paper) — ISBN 0-8420-2987-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Labor leaders—United States—Biography. 2. Social reformers—United States—Biography. 3. Labor—United States—History. 4. United States—Biography. I. Arnesen, Eric. II. Series.
HD8073.A1 H86 2004
331.88'092'273—dc21

2003009145

♾ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for permanence of paper for printed library materials, Z39.48, 1984.

Volumes in the Human Tradition in America series:

Ian K. Steele and Nancy L. Rhoden, eds., *The Human Tradition in Colonial America* (1999). Cloth ISBN 0-8420-2697-5 Paper ISBN 0-8420-2700-9

Nancy L. Rhoden and Ian K. Steele, eds., *The Human Tradition in the American Revolution* (2000). Cloth ISBN 0-8420-2747-5 Paper ISBN 0-8420-2748-3

Ballard C. Campbell, ed., *The Human Tradition in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* (2000). Cloth ISBN 0-8420-2734-3 Paper ISBN 0-8420-2735-1

Steven E. Woodworth, ed., *The Human Tradition in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (2000). Cloth ISBN 0-8420-2726-2 Paper ISBN 0-8420-2727-0

David L. Anderson, ed., *The Human Tradition in the Vietnam Era* (2000). Cloth ISBN 0-8420-2762-9 Paper ISBN 0-8420-2763-7

Kriste Lindenmeyer, ed., *Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Lives: Women in American History* (2000). Cloth ISBN 0-8420-2752-1 Paper ISBN 0-8420-2754-8

Michael A. Morrison, ed., *The Human Tradition in Antebellum America* (2000). Cloth ISBN 0-8420-2834-X Paper ISBN 0-8420-2835-8

Malcolm Muir Jr., ed., *The Human Tradition in the World War II Era* (2001). Cloth ISBN 0-8420-2785-8 Paper ISBN 0-8420-2786-6

Ty Cashion and Jesús F. de la Teja, eds., *The Human Tradition in Texas* (2001). Cloth ISBN 0-8420-2905-2 Paper ISBN 0-8420-2906-0

Benson Tong and Regan A. Lutz, eds., *The Human Tradition in the American West* (2002). Cloth ISBN 0-8420-2860-9 Paper ISBN 0-8420-2861-7

Charles W. Calhoun, ed., *The Human Tradition in America from the Colonial Era through Reconstruction* (2002). Cloth ISBN 0-8420-5030-2 Paper ISBN 0-8420-5031-0

Donald W. Whisenhunt, ed., *The Human Tradition in America between the Wars, 1920–1945* (2002). Cloth ISBN 0-8420-5011-6 Paper ISBN 0-8420-5012-4

Roger Biles, ed., *The Human Tradition in Urban America* (2002). Cloth ISBN 0-8420-2992-3 Paper ISBN 0-8420-2993-1

Clark Davis and David Igler, eds., *The Human Tradition in California* (2002). Cloth ISBN 0-8420-5026-4 Paper ISBN 0-8420-5027-2

James C. Klotter, ed., *The Human Tradition in the Old South* (2003). Cloth ISBN 0-8420-2977-X Paper ISBN 0-8420-2978-8

Nina Mjagkij, ed., *Portraits of African American Life since 1865* (2003). Cloth ISBN 0-8420-2966-4 Paper ISBN 0-8420-2967-2

Charles W. Calhoun, ed., *The Human Tradition in America: 1865 to the Present* (2003). Cloth ISBN 0-8420-5128-7 Paper ISBN 0-8420-5129-5

The Human Tradition in America

CHARLES W. CALHOUN
Series Editor
Department of History, East Carolina University

The nineteenth-century English author Thomas Carlyle once remarked that "the history of the world is but the biography of great men." This approach to the study of the human past had existed for centuries before Carlyle wrote, and it continued to hold sway among many scholars well into the twentieth century. In more recent times, however, historians have recognized and examined the impact of large, seemingly impersonal forces in the evolution of human history—social and economic developments such as industrialization and urbanization as well as political movements such as nationalism, militarism, and socialism. Yet even as modern scholars seek to explain these wider currents, they have come more and more to realize that such phenomena represent the composite result of countless actions and decisions by untold numbers of individual actors. On another occasion, Carlyle said that "history is the essence of innumerable biographies." In this conception of the past, Carlyle came closer to modern notions that see the lives of all kinds of people, high and low, powerful and weak, known and unknown, as part of the mosaic of human history, each contributing in a large or small way to the unfolding of the human tradition.

This latter idea forms the foundation for this series of books on the human tradition in America. Each volume is devoted to a particular period or topic in American history and each consists of minibiographies of persons whose lives shed light on that period or topic. Well-known figures are not altogether absent, but more often the chapters explore a variety of individuals who may be less conspicuous but whose stories, nonetheless, offer us a window on some aspect of the nation's past.

By bringing the study of history down to the level of the individual, these sketches reveal not only the diversity of the American people and the complexity of their interaction but also some of the commonalities of sentiment and experience that Americans have shared in the evolution of their culture. Our hope is that these explorations of the lives of "real people" will give readers a deeper understanding of the human tradition in America.

The Human Tradition in American Labor History

About the Editor

Eric Arnesen is professor of history and African American studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where he is also chair of the Department of History. He received his B.A. from Wesleyan University in 1980, an M.A. in Afro-American studies from Yale in 1984, and his Ph.D. in history from Yale in 1986. He specializes in the history of race and labor in the United States. He is the author, most recently, of *Black Protest and the Great Migration: A Brief History with Documents* (2003). His *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (2001) received the 2001 Wesley-Logan Prize in Diaspora History from the American Historical Association and the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History; his first book, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863–1923* (1991), won the 1991 John H. Dunning Prize in American History from the American Historical Association. He is also coeditor (with Julie Greene and Bruce Laurie) of *Labor Histories: Class, Politics, and the Working-Class Experience* (1998). His articles and review essays have appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*, *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, *American Historical Review*, *Labor History*, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, and other journals; he is also a frequent contributor to *Footsteps: African-American History*, a magazine for elementary school students.

Introduction

Eric Arnesen

> Labor develops physical power and intellectual ability. . . . Labor is always ennobling, and he who regards it otherwise is devoid of proper conceptions of his well-being. . . . Labor, either mental or physical, is in accordance with wisdom with the will of God. . . . Oh, how ennobling is labor, when we consider that without its efforts we would remain unclad, unfed and unsheltered in this chilly and wintry clime, exposed to nakedness and shame. But by it we may be pleasantly and comfortably clad; may possess beautiful, lovely homes; may enjoy not only the fruits of this plentiful land, but the products of every zone; may run by steam and talk by lightning; may send our messages even beneath old ocean's dark and stormy wave from shore to shore; may smile at distance and laugh at seeming impossibilities. Labor inspires hope in every laudable pursuit, "in idleness alone is there perpetual despair." It was the efforts of labor that trained the lightning to run at will and utilize the elements to make power to plough the mighty ocean wave. Labor fathomed and explored subterranean caverns and collected pearls and rubies from their wasting abyss. Labor polished the rough diamond into dazzling beauty. . . . Every grand and noble art and every principle of science is the result of earnest effort, actual toil.—L. D., "The Knights of Labor," *Journal of United Labor*, March 25, 1886

Throughout the course of the nation's history, Americans have held a range of views about labor and the people who perform it. The dignity and even nobility of labor, captured in the words quoted above by a member of the Knights of Labor in 1886, has been an ideal advanced by diverse groups of Americans. Many generations of labor activists have insisted that workers, more than any other group, not only constituted the source of all wealth but also were the driving force behind economic and technological advancement. Whether or not their contributions were recognized by their employers, they argued, labor "makes civilization possible."* Moreover, in a national mythology celebrated by the political elite, captains of industry, and workers alike, the notion that social and economic mobility comes to those who work

*George E. McNeill, "The Problem of Today," in *The Labor Movement: The Problem of Today*, ed. George E. McNeill (Boston: A. M. Bridgeman and Company, 1887), 455.

hard and exhibit a strong, moral character has endured over several centuries.

Not everyone took so sanguine a view of labor and those who performed it, however. Some, such as mid-nineteenth-century Free Soilers and Republican Party members, argued that labor might be noble, but workers' goals should be to escape from the ranks of those who work for others and instead strive to achieve a modicum of economic independence. Earlier, in the late eighteenth century, Thomas Jefferson exhibited a deep suspicion of urban, propertyless workers, preferring the development of a country populated by virtuous, small, independent farmers. And a century later, by the 1870s, still others came to fear what appeared to them to be a permanent, immigrant working class with dangerous designs on private property. The view of work as a necessary evil or the biblical view of work as a curse had--and continues to have—its adherents. But regardless of the views held, the simple reality has been that since the European colonization of North America in the seventeenth century, the vast majority of men and women--both native-born and immigrant—have "worked for a living."

Any history of American labor today must begin with the recognition of the sheer diversity of the working class or, as nineteenth-century observers put it, America's "working classes." From the outset, that category was ethnically and racially heterogeneous: colonists from England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and Germany; slaves from Africa; immigrants from northern and, later, eastern and southern Europe, Mexico, and Asia and, later still, Latin America and Africa all composed the "working classes" of the United States. Labor included within its ranks the unfree—indentured white laborers, African and African American slaves, and convict laborers—whose legal rights and protections were few, whose incentive to work consisted of coercion and brutality, and who, in the case of slaves, legally were property. It also included those whose work fell outside the realm of wage labor—that is, women who took in boarders and engaged in part- or full-time child care and housekeeping, and southern black sharecroppers whose remuneration (such as it was) consisted not of cash wages but of a portion of the crops they raised on land owned by whites. Female textile operatives, free white farmers and urban artisans, black coal miners and agricultural laborers, Jewish immigrant garment workers, Chinese and Japanese contract laborers and factory workers, native-born white skilled and African American unskilled railroad workers, European immigrant factory operatives, immigrant Mexican farmworkers, and second-generation white automobile

workers all composed the ranks of the wage-earning working classes. Differences in places of origin, language, ethnicity and race, gender, and skill, as well as the vastly different kinds of work they performed, often divided workers from one another, and those differences constituted formidable barriers that proved difficult or often impossible to breach. What they shared was the goal of providing sustenance for themselves, their families, and sometimes their communities.

The work they performed and the conditions under which they performed it varied dramatically. Both before and after the European colonization of North America, Native Americans engaged in a variety of subsistence practices, including fishing, hunting, and agriculture. The European colonists who arrived in growing numbers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries came as both free men and women and indentured servants; some engaged in small-scale subsistence farming, but many increasingly turned toward the raising of agricultural staples—tobacco, rice, wheat—for sale on local or international markets. African slaves, whose descendants eventually numbered almost four million on the eve of the Civil War, came not of their own choosing but as involuntary immigrants who were violently captured and forcibly transported across the Atlantic Ocean to labor on plantations and in mines in the Western Hemisphere. In the rapidly expanding American towns and cities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, male artisans (and often their female relatives) took significant pride in their skilled craft production and exercised significant control over the pace and organization of their work. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, they were joined by literally millions of immigrants in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who found jobs in countless factories.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the expansion of white-collar employment in the clerical and sales sectors of the economy opened large numbers of jobs to native-born or second-generation immigrant women; by the end of the twentieth century, capital flight and deindustrialization had reduced the number of high-paying manufacturing jobs, while the rise of the "information economy" generated significant, if sometimes contingent, employment for highly educated workers. Economic growth, technological change, and managerial desires, especially from the nineteenth century to the present, have produced a continual restructuring and transformation of economic sectors and work itself.

Unquestionably, the United States offered countless immigrant and native-born workers (if not slaves, sharecroppers, and convict laborers)

considerable opportunity to acquire property and advance up the economic and social ladder. With no hereditary class or caste of aristocrats in the United States, class lines were anything but fixed. The ubiquity of social mobility was one of the nation's core beliefs. It was assumed and asserted that through initiative, effort, skill, and character, any individual could improve his or her station in life. For many, this improvement was indeed a reality, and for even more, generational mobility ensured that their children would lead economically better and more secure lives. Those core beliefs still persist: the individual is held accountable for his or her own success. In explanations of social mobility or its absence, structural barriers to mobility—including racial or ethnic discrimination and low educational levels—hold a distant second place in many people's minds behind individual responsibility. The deserving rise; the undeserving do not.

If social myths are often built on a plausible foundation, they also distort or overlook the forces that give shape to individual beliefs and actions. The world of work has often been a harsh one whose conditions were challenged by those who performed the labor. On the job, in their communities, and in the realm of politics, American workers have persistently sought to voice their distinctive aspirations and visions for a better society. Take the case of American slaves.

Although enslaved men and women differed from most other American workers in innumerable ways—they received no wages for their labor, were deprived of most legal rights, and were themselves human property—as artisans, laborers, domestic servants, and agricultural field hands they challenged their conditions of labor and the system that kept them in bondage. They carved out for themselves, their families, and their communities a distinctive cultural world that sought to preserve body and spirit in the face of tremendous obstacles. They also engaged in a running battle—sometimes visible but often just below the surface—with slaveholders to define the pace of work, protect customary rights, and ensure a modicum of autonomy. On rare occasions they rose up—or attempted to rise up—against the institution of slavery itself, always with severe and bloody consequences. Even in failure they illustrated the fallacy of the planters' myth of the contented slave and signaled to their legal white owners and the larger white society the precariousness of the "peculiar institution."

In the face of a growing market economy and industrialization in the nineteenth century, free workers sought to place their imprint on the trajectory of American political, social, and economic development.

Indeed, labor's organized challenges to workplace inequities and economic inequality accompanied the development of an industrializing capitalist economy. Some struggled to maintain their artisanal or other skills and autonomy before the sweep of mechanization, the increased division of labor, and the spread of factory production; others engaged in campaigns in the workplace and in the political realm to limit the hours of the working day or to secure recognition of trade unions designed to protect workers' rights and improve their wages and working conditions. Still others put forth radical critiques of capitalist industrialization in the United States, insisting that corporate monopoly threatened to reduce labor to a pauper status and imperiled the health of American democracy as well. Whether their views were grounded in nineteenth-century republican principles, in socialism, or in communism, these workers advanced visions of America's future that were profoundly at odds with prevailing doctrines of acquisitive individualism. The challenges and the visions that inspired them at times profoundly altered the nature of labor relations in the United States.

Workers' struggles could be dramatic and at times even heroic, but the labor movement and related movements for radical social change were imperfect vehicles for the realization of workers' goals. Rarely did any such movement view the entirety of America's working classes as its domain. Unions of skilled craft workers, aiming to protect their own members at all costs, consciously excluded the unskilled. Divisions along lines of skill often overlapped with lines of gender, race, and ethnicity, with associations of native-born white craftsmen viewing women, new immigrants, and especially African American workers as threats to their livelihood and security. The Knights of Labor in the 1880s and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the 1910s consciously and impressively preached the unity of labor and encouraged the organization of all workers, regardless of sex, race, or country of origin (although the Knights decidedly did *not* extend their welcome to the Chinese); in practice, however, both organizations were relatively short-lived and ultimately unsuccessful in achieving their goals. The American Federation of Labor, which was formed in 1886 and had become the predominant labor association in the nation by the 1890s, proved both more enduring and more exclusionary; even the Congress of Industrial Organizations, which, like the Knights and the IWW, recruited all workers, was unable to eliminate racial and gender discrimination from its ranks. Whether exclusionary or imperfectly inclusionary, trade unions' goals sometimes coincided with those of nonwhite workers, who conducted

their own battles within the labor movement to force it to live up to its own ideals.

The thirteen essays in this volume speak to the racial, ethnic, and gender heterogeneity of the American working class. The experiences of women are explored in studies of Mary Hale and Ann Edmonds, Sarah Bagley, Pauline Newman, and Dolores Huerta; those of nonwhite workers are addressed in chapters on Gabriel, William R. Riley, A. Philip Randolph, Vernon Lawhorn, Thomas James Buchner, and the Green Brothers, and Huerta. The majority of the essays deal with individuals who were, in varying degrees, involved in the labor movements of their day. Although most of these men and women (such as Riley, James Evans, Beeswax Taylor, Karl Yoneda, and Bagley) were known locally or regionally by contemporaries but did not achieve lasting national recognition, several—Eugene V. Debs, Randolph, and Walter Reuther—did rise to international prominence as leaders of large, visible, and important organizations or unions.

This volume adopts a broad definition of labor itself. Female medical practitioners in colonial New England, slave artisans, textile, garment, and other factory operatives, coal miners, railroaders, autoworkers, iron and steel workers, and nominally free plantation laborers all performed labor, and all made up the working classes of the nation. Despite the considerable differences in their experiences and the tremendous diversity in their outlooks, occupations, and backgrounds, the stories of these men and women collectively suggest that what they shared was an ongoing but never resolved struggle for dignity in their jobs, communities, and lives.

Contents

1

Mary Hale and Ann Edmonds
Gender, Women's Work, and Health in Colonial Massachusetts

Rebecca J. Tannenbaum

The world of full-blown wage labor had yet to develop in the colonial era. A large majority of seventeenth-century colonists toiled in agriculture, either as independent farmers (or members of farm families), indentured servants, or slaves. In colonial New England, as Rebecca Tannenbaum points out, work roles, gender definitions, and religion were closely intertwined. A gendered division of labor, justified by tradition and particular understandings of the Christian Bible, assigned white women the responsibility for proper household management—growing and preparing food, caring for children and other family members, and making household necessities such as clothing—and with serving as their husbands' "helpmeets." A very small number of women participated in labor outside the household domain, though many were confined to a sex-segregated labor market that rewarded their work with pay lower than men's. But women such as Mary Hale and Ann Edmonds found rewarding outlets in medicine. They served as midwives, cared for the sick, and made basic medicines, activities that allowed them a measure of authority and skill denied to most working women at the time.

Rebecca J. Tannenbaum received her Ph.D. from Yale University and is the author of *The Healer's Calling: Women and Medicine in Early New England* (2002). She currently teaches history at Yale University.

If a person developed smallpox in seventeenth-century Boston, he or she might well have been sent to Mary Hale, who ran a smallpox hospital in her house. There she isolated contagious patients and attempted to cure them of the dangerous disease. In Lynn, Massachusetts, a few miles north of Boston, Ann Edmonds also took patients into her home to treat their chronic illnesses or lingering injuries. The methods these women used to care for their patients were similar to those of their male counterparts, and both women charged fees for their services roughly equivalent to what male physicians charged their patients.

Most Euro-American women practiced some sort of medicine during the Colonial period—whether they were housewives making herbal infusions for sick children or midwives delivering babies for their neighbors. Women such as Hale and Edmonds, however, called themselves "doctoresses," or "doctor women," and took patients into their homes for long-term care and cures. They used the skills that women learned in childhood and parlayed them into paid employment. The difference between them and the ordinary housewife was one of degree, not kind.

There were limits to women's medical practice, of course; housewives and midwives practiced within accepted gender boundaries. But Hale and Edmonds challenged those boundaries, and thus, although both women had what seem to have been successful practices, they also had troubled careers. A careful look at their experiences reveals much about how paid labor, women's work, and women's place were defined in seventeenth-century America.

Work roles and gender definitions were inextricably intertwined. Early New Englanders defined masculinity, in part, by usefulness to the community and financial independence. Usefulness came from finding one's proper "calling," a religious term. God "called" a man to work in a particular field, and it was up to each individual to discover what kind of work God intended for him. A man could be called to serve God and the community as a farmer, a minister, a merchant, or an artisan. Work also provided the financial means for independence. An income was necessary if a man was to achieve that second determinant of masculinity. Without the financial means and respectability that paid work provided, family life—status as a husband, father, and patriarch of a household—would remain out of reach.[1]

Adult womanhood was defined by marriage and the role of a wife. Being a wife, however, was as much a kind of work as an emotional relationship. Wives were in charge of managing the household and the domestic economy, and their role as partners to their husbands was defined by the work they did. Like men's occupations, women's work was part of a religiously defined calling. Women were called to serve both God and human society by being their husbands' partners and "helpmeets" in running a household. This definition was further reinforced by biblical definitions of the "virtuous woman," which rated a woman's skills as a household manager as highly as her piety.[2]

Much of women's work revolved around growing and processing food. Although port cities supported a population of merchants and artisans, most New Englanders worked as farmers, and most urban house-