Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution

This is a unique account of working-class childhood during the British industrial revolution. Using more than 600 autobiographies written by working men of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Jane Humphries illuminates working-class childhood in contexts untouched by conventional sources and facilitates estimates of age at starting work, social mobility, the extent of apprenticeship and the duration of schooling. The classic era of industrialization, 1790–1850, apparently saw an upsurge in child labour. While the memoirs implicate mechanization and the division of labour in this increase, they also show that fatherlessness and large sibsets, common in these turbulent, high-mortality and high-fertility times, often cast children as partners and supports for mothers struggling to hold families together. The book offers unprecedented insights into child labour, family life, careers and schooling. Its images of suffering, stoicism and occasional childish pleasures put the humanity back into economic history and the trauma back into the industrial revolution.

Jane Humphries is Professor of Economic History, Oxford University, and Fellow of All Souls College.

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When I was a young man the term 'to have been through the mill' had a grim meaning ... it described a mill worker whose childhood had been ruined by hard labour and little sleep, and who, in manhood, looked shrunken and white-faced.

J.R. Clynes, *Memoirs 1869–1924* (1937)

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Preface

This book has been a long time in the writing. One reason is that it began life as something else. I wanted to investigate the age at which children started work in the era of industrialization, and searching for a source of information that could track back into the eighteenth century, I stumbled on writings by working men in which they reminisced about their first jobs and the reasons for their entry into the labour force. I decided to search the now extensive body of known working-class autobiography and extract quantitative information on age at starting work, first jobs and so on, a laborious task to be sure but using a source which promised to provide information about individuals and span the now elongated era of industrialization and therefore of great value. A deeper interest has always been the interface between the family and the economy: how the family both responds to economic opportunities and moulds economic development. Children stand side by side with women at this margin. This ambiguous position has governed children's meaning and importance as they have made the transition from contributors to family resources and social insurance for parents to the expensive luxury consumption goods that they constitute today. Historians have neglected children's metamorphosis yet it is surely one of the social and economic revolutions of modern times, though here again, as the dismal catalogue of recent cases of appalling abuse makes clear, even in rich economies with well-developed welfare states not all children have managed to become the 'priceless' possessions that modernity promises. Perhaps attention to children's experiences in the past might illuminate the terms and conditions of this transition and the reasons why not all children have been included.

As the research progressed, I realized that an explanation of child labour impinged upon the broader question of children's position in family and society. Moreover my source, the working-class memoirs, underlined this point. While my long-dead informants were willing to provide me with the information I solicited, simultaneously they insisted on telling me more, contextualizing and nuancing the simple

relationships between starting work and economic, family and community explanatory variables that I sought to model. They led me by the hand into their worlds and insisted I take a broader and a deeper view.

New topics were included in the study: family life; relationships with wider kin; occupational inheritance; apprenticeship; and schooling. The autobiographies have a contribution to make to historians' understanding of these topics, and child labour cannot be separated from these aspects of children's lives. As the book broadened out, of necessity the methodology too became less narrow and the original quantitative focus was softened and melded with qualitative material. The quantitative information would never have been sufficiently extensive or reliable to have tested anything but a basic set of relationships or convinced many readers. Side by side with supporting qualitative evidence, it may prove more persuasive.

Time was also lost along the way by my involvement with other research projects, with teaching and with professional activities. Nevertheless, the autobiographies continued to haunt me and so although progress was sometimes slow I always returned to them.

My long-suffering family has had to share me with the autobiographers for far too long, and for this I apologize to Michael, Lydia, Lawrence and my dear older girls. I thank them too for their help in addition to their tolerance, for all have heard (probably too many times) snippets of the stories with which this book is crammed, which brings me to the long list of people whom I need to thank.

Several colleagues read drafts of chapters and provided valuable feedback. I thank Victoria Bateman, Nigel Goose, Bernard Harris, Sara Horrell, Joel Mokyr, Patrick O'Brien and Len Schwarz. I have benefited from discussions on related topics with Michael Best, Knick Harley, Carol Heim, Tim Leunig, Avner Offer, Deborah Oxley and Patrick Wallis. Michael Anderson, David Mitch, Leigh Shaw-Taylor and Keith Snell provided detailed advice on chapters dealing with topics on which they are expert, and Bob Allen thought more about working-class autobiography than he perhaps cared to! Stan Engerman read several chapters and provided gentle criticism. For this and for his kindness and support over many years, he deserves particular recognition. I have presented background papers based on the research in many places, and the finished product has undoubtedly benefited from the comments of members of the audiences. Ian Moss provided me with valuable research assistance early on in the project and helped me keep it going at a time when it might have ground to a halt. My students in Oxford, especially those who have taken the advanced paper on Child Labour, have also helped in the formation of my ideas and in recent years have

read draft chapters, providing me with helpful feedback. Thanks here go particularly to William Johnson, Caroline Withall and Liz Woolley. Finally, I thank the many archivists who have helped locate the materials used in my study, Michael Watson at Cambridge University Press (not least for his patience!) and Timothy Bartel and Christopher Feeney for copy editing.

Early in my career, I was fortunate enough to encounter several wonderful economic and social historians. George Owen, who managed to combine working at the academic coalface of Mexborough Grammar School with a serious intellectual commitment to the subject, set me on my way. As an undergraduate, I benefited from the supervision of Phyllis Deane, Brian Mitchell and Charles Feinstein. Phyllis was also my Director of Studies and a friend and mentor thereafter. Charles later encouraged me come to Oxford, where I have enjoyed the outstanding community of economic and social historians that the university and my college both support. These scholars taught me well and gave me my long-standing interest in the subject.

However, in the end, it is the men whose stories underlie the research reported here to whom I owe the greatest debt of gratitude, and it is to these working men, the unsung heroes of the industrial revolution, that this book is dedicated.