BOOK REVIEW

Bread Winner: An Intimate History of the Victorian Economy. By Emma Griffin (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2020, 320 pp. £20 hardback).

Albert Jasper grew up in Hoxton in the early years of the twentieth century. He recalled that his father kept his weekly wages in a money bag under his mattress, occasionally even sleeping with it in his sock, in order to prevent his wife from taking his drinking money for housekeeping. When this money did, accidentally, make it to Albert's mother one week, she used it to buy the children much-needed new shoes. Alice Foley's father would disappear from the family home in Bolton for weeks at a time, usually after periods of heavy drinking that left him incapable of work. During these difficult periods the family was dependant on the meagre wages Alice's mother could earn as a washerwoman. After her mother fell ill, Grace Foakes took over the family housekeeping responsibilities while still a young woman. It was then that she discovered how mean her father was - urging her to be thrifty while he hoarded his wages in a drawer. Louie Stride grew up in Bath in the opening years of the twentieth century, an illegitimate child whose absent father was later replaced by an alcoholic step-father. She experienced severe hunger throughout her childhood, scavenging food where she could, at times even stealing bread from younger children at school.

These are just four of the more than 650 autobiographical accounts that form the basis of Emma Griffin's *Bread Winner*. These accounts, both published and unpublished, from working class men and women born in Britain between 1830 and the early twentieth century, are showcased throughout the book, allowing Griffin to foreground lived experiences of economic change and address the central question: why, despite improvements in wages and the increased prosperity witnessed throughout the nineteenth century, were Victorian and Edwardian families still experiencing desperate poverty and deprivation? Life writing vignettes are woven skilfully throughout the text, but Griffin argues these accounts offer more than just individual experience or anecdote, and when examined collectively they can 'allow us to make sense of the diverse and often idiosyncratic stories they contain' and shed light on the human character of economic life (p. 188).

Bread Winner comprises three overarching sections: work, money, and life, with chapters focusing on the gendered experiences of paid work outside and inside the home; unpaid domestic work; the rights, responsibilities and emotional recollections of wage earning and family life; and political citizenship. Chapter four, an examination of fathers as providers, is where Griffin's work is most revealing; drawing together diverse individual stories and her systematic analysis of these accounts of wage earning and the economics of family life. As she notes, the importance of a father's wage to the well-being of most working-class families means no shortage of reflections on fathers and breadwinning, and the 'quality' of this breadwinning is also relatively easy to discern in the majority of those cases where fathers were present. While a number of autobiographers report that their fathers' wages were indeed starting to improve during this period, Griffin ultimately finds that a quarter of all the writers were raised in a home without the benefit of a full breadwinner's income. In some cases, this was due to unemployment, injury and ill health, but what is perhaps most striking is the number of fathers who did earn a steady wage, but failed to share it; some hoarding their money like Grace Foakes' father, but the majority spending it on their own leisure and

interests. In some cases, these interests might involve the church, chapel or mutual society, but in a significant number drink was involved, and expenditure on alcohol was the single greatest cause of money being diverted away from the family. Through numerous personal recollections of miserly fathers, heavy drinkers, and hungry childhoods, Griffin is able establish that better wages did not automatically lead to a better quality of life for working-class families, forcefully demonstrating the inadequacy of the male breadwinner model.

Throughout the book, Griffin also reminds us that the breadwinner model was dependent on starkly gendered divisions of labour in the home and workplace. In the vast majority of cases, women and children had very little choice but to depend on a husband or father's wage. Low pay for women in the nineteenth century may have been nothing new, but 'the divergence in men and women's earning potential was' (p. 85). Across the 662 autobiographical accounts consulted by Griffin, there is only one example of a wife who was able to earn more than her husband. Molly Morris' mother took a job as the manager of a baking business, and became the breadwinner of the family, her wages slowly rising above what her husband had once brought into the home. However, this reversal in gender roles led to increasing discord between Molly's mother and father – with Molly's father eventually leaving the family home. If fathers failed to provide or, as in the case of Alice Foley's father, recurrently disappeared, mothers may have tried to earn, but poor work opportunities, low wages, and the responsibilities of running a home meant it was impossible for a mother to replace the role of a male breadwinner. In his examination of poverty at the turn of the twentieth century, social investigator B. Seebohm Rowntree described the monotony that characterised the life of most married women of the working class, concluding that 'the conditions which govern the life of the women are gravely unsatisfactory, and are the more serious in their consequences since the character and attractive power of the family life are principally dependant on her … This is a consideration which I venture to think has not received sufficient recognition in the past.[1] In chapter three, 'Real Drudgery', Griffin examines these 'gravely unsatisfactory' conditions and the experiences of married working-class women, highlighting the considerable labour involved in the running and managing of a home, and the heavy and repetitive work involved in turning wages into food, clothing, and a clean and comfortable environment.

In the final chapter, 'I learned to speak', Griffin addresses the gendered differences in political citizenship, arguing that opportunities for social mobility were open to working-class men in a way that was simply not possible for the majority of working-class women. This was because of the leisure time available to men even alongside physically demanding paid work, a respite that was provided by women fulfilling the necessary domestic duties. It is also in this final chapter that Griffin further addresses the character of life-writing, the unrepresentative nature of autobiographical sources, and the very different trajectories recorded by male and female writers. Of Griffin's sample, just over two thirds of the autobiographers were male compared with one third of the accounts written by women, though 'amongst those born after 1890, men and women wrote autobiographies in roughly equal numbers (p. 10). For male autobiographers, it was work which provided the path to political citizenship, and as Griffin reminds us throughout the book, work remained central to male autobiographers' accounts. For working-class women, family connections and support provided the only available route into politics, and motherhood in particular was incompatible with political work.

The most notable contribution of *Bread Winner* is Griffin's examination of how working people made sense of their own lives within the broader social and economic changes of the nineteenth century. Life writing sources are perhaps most valuable as a means of examining expressions of lived experience. Griffin's arguments about the gendered experiences of wage-earning and the economics of working-class family life may not be particularly novel, nor is her use of working-class autobiography, but what the book successfully demonstrates is that life writing can make it possible to explore questions of historical change in illuminating ways. The book generally succeeds in taking a collective approach to the authors and their writings, while also drawing out the complexities of individual lives. *Bread Winner,* therefore, provides a useful companion to existing accounts of gendered experiences of childhood and youth, work, family, and leisure in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The book is also acutely relevant. Louie Stride recounted the continual hunger she experienced in childhood, scavenging food out of the gutter and stealing from other children as she grew up in a relatively wealthy provincial city. On reading this book, it is impossible not to be struck by the question of how it is that a rich nation can fail to feed its children, a question that is once more firmly in our focus as the debate rages about free school meal provision within UK schools.

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[1] B. Seebohm Rowntree, Poverty: A Study of Town Life (London, 1901), 77-78.