

## BOOK REVIEWS

SCHOLLIERS, PETER. *Wages, Manufacturers and Workers in the Nineteenth-Century Factory. The Voortman Cotton Mill in Ghent.* Berg Publishers, Oxford [etc.] 1996. xiv, 256 pp. Ill. Maps. £34.95; \$45.95.

Ghent was one of the centres of the nineteenth-century Belgian textiles and machine industries. For decades, the town was at the forefront of industrialization and proletarianization in Belgium. In the 1970s Peter Scholliers with a group of colleagues amassed data on wages and prices, which they published in Flemish. Among the available data were more than 200 pay books and 100 ledgers of the Voortman cotton factory, covering fully the spinning and weaving departments in the years 1835–1914. Scholliers went on to develop into an expert on wage and price history, real wages and food consumption. With this expertise, he returns in this book to the history of the Ghent textile workers and their factories.

Especially from the 1830s, the Ghent cotton manufacturers faced fierce international competition. They therefore sought to cut their wage costs. Workers fought these cuts and/or sought ways to supplement household income (wage labour by more family members, taking lodgers). In the 1870s, when international competition was once more sharp, new technologies were introduced, the work pace was heightened and employers again tried to lower their wage bill, especially by employing women and children or moving to the countryside.

The Voortman cotton mill, established in the 1820s, was at the forefront of technology until about 1860. Then it lost its position, when family capital was withdrawn from the firm. Although modernized with self-actors in the 1880s, the firm never regained its technological prominence in an industry which moved to ring frames in the 1890s. Whereas most other Ghent cotton manufacturers tried to lower their wage bill by employing cottage labour, Voortman resorted heavily to cheap labour in the form of young women and children. These were found through the family and social networks of Voortman workers. In some cases the Voortman recruiting network could extend even to northern France. Entering the Voortman factory at a young age, workers also left early, for instance when they could get a better paid job elsewhere in Ghent. This policy of paying relatively low wages was started in weaving in the 1830s, during a short spell of poor profits just after huge investments. Voortman extended it to spinning under similar circumstances in the 1880s. Unable to use its productivity by the capital-intensive strategies employed by other firms, Voortman “specialized” in the exploitation of labour. The firm not only paid poor wages, but also fined heavily and measured fraudulently to squeeze the extra franc out of every worker. Falling wages led to declining real wages between 1835 and 1845 and again after 1895, but – thanks to falling prices – not between 1880 and 1895. Overall, there was a modest general increase in real wages. Reconstructed family incomes confirm this trend. Even with women and children employed, the family income of Voortman workers lagged behind those of workers in other firms. Living conditions were even worse than for other Ghent cotton workers, even if there were some

improvements in diet and housing over the century. Strikes were infrequent before 1894, but industrial conflicts were more common after that date.

As so often, historical truth is in the detail, and Scholliers presents a wealth of it. The ability to follow living strategies at individual and household level makes this a welcome contribution to the literature on household strategies. Developments in Ghent are properly compared with the literature on those in the UK, France, the Netherlands or Germany.

If anything is left to be desired, it stems from these riches. In the end, we are left without a full explanation of the coping strategies employed by Voortman workers. We know for which wages they worked, how many family members had to work to make the meagre wages add up to a family income, and what kinds of food and housing that would buy. But why did they accept the low wages Voortman was prepared to offer? In some cases they left after a short while for better paid jobs, but Scholliers also presents the biographies of the Bauters, Cedeyn, Ryckaert and Spailers families, some of which had several family members working at Voortman for decades. Perhaps typically, some of the heads of these families were overseers. Even with many family members being forced to work, they will have not been so near starvation as to have no choices between migrating, finding other work or staying at Voortmans. At times when other Ghent factories and those in northern France offered better wages, why did Voortman workers not shift to one of these? But even if Scholliers does not supply us with an answer to this question, his book supplies us with the material to phrase it – and many others – and to discuss some of the possible answers to them.

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GRAY, ROBERT. *The factory question and industrial England, 1830–1860*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [etc.] 1996. xiv, 253 pp. Ill. £35.00; \$59.95.

Robert Gray's *The factory question and industrial England, 1830–1860* contributes to a growing body of literature that examines as cultural phenomena issues that once had been within the purview of economics and the study of political economy. In doing so he opens new windows through which to view and assess the impact of industrialization on nineteenth-century England. By reading Gray's book, we see in a fresh light the familiar events and debates surrounding the factory question and the passage of the first factory acts. We are also in a better position to assess explanations of how the acts came to be enacted, who benefitted from them and why, which are set forth in the prodigious historiography about the movement for factory reform and the effects of the legislation.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E.g. B.L. Hutchins and A. Harrison, *A History of Factory Legislation* (London, 1911, 2nd ed.); J.T. Ward, *The Factory Movement, 1830–1855* (London, 1962); Howard Marvel, "Factory Regulation: A Reinterpretation of Early English Experience", *The Journal of Law and Economics*, 20 (1979), pp. 379–402; P.W.J. Bartrip, "State Intervention in Mid-Nineteenth Century Britain: Fact or Fiction?", *Journal of British Studies*, 23 (1983), pp. 63–83; Douglas E. Booth, "Karl Marx on the State Regulation of the Labor Process: The English Factory Acts", *Review of Social Economy*, 36 (1978), pp. 137–158; Barbara Harrison and Helen Mockett, "Women in the Factory: The State and