

BOOK REVIEWS

HONEYMAN, KATRINA. *Child Workers in England, 1780–1820. Parish Apprentices and the Making of the Early Industrial Labour Force.* [Studies in Labour History.] Ashgate, Aldershot [etc.] 2007. xii, 340 pp. £60.00; doi:10.1017/S0020859009990095

In recent years, the history of child labour in industrializing Britain seems to have experienced a revival with the work of, among others, Hugh Cunningham, Jane Humphries, Sara Horrell, and Peter Kirby. *Child Workers in England, 1780–1820* by Katrina Honeyman focuses on a very specific form of child labour in this period: parish apprenticeship in early industrial enterprises. Honeyman has collected and researched an impressive collection of contemporary reports and archival sources, which she perhaps too modestly claims contain information on “only” 164 parishes and 75 companies. That research has clearly been carried out thoroughly and meticulously, and leads to a number of interesting conclusions about the practice of parish apprenticeship in industrializing England.

One of these conclusions is that the practice of parish apprenticeship was more widespread than previously thought by historians, and also that it did not necessarily decline linearly during the first phase of industrialization. Rather, the system showed a more complex development, at least until the 1830s, and it continued well into the 1840s and 1850s. A second important finding is that parish apprenticeship in this period appears to have been carefully registered and controlled in a more or less (or at least more than the historiography suggests) orderly fashion. It would be interesting to know to what extent this “professional” approach towards the monitoring of parish apprentices stemmed from the age-old tradition of parish apprenticeship and apprenticeship more generally in the pre-industrial era, or whether it was a novelty that originated with the scaling-up induced by industrialization. Unfortunately, the author does not address this question in her book. A third interesting phenomenon extensively described by Honeyman is the practice of labour intermediation by agents and through advertisements. This enlightens the workings of labour recruitment in the early industrial period. Finally, and very importantly, this is one of the few studies actually to give a voice to children themselves. In order to do this, the author has eloquently utilized a unique body of archival material and documents, as the system controlling parish apprenticeship as well as parliamentary reports gave a relatively robust “voice” to the complaints of *and* utterances of gratitude by parish apprentices.

Despite the value of the great level of detail in her analysis, her book might at times have benefited from some general conclusions. This is very clear, for instance, in chapter 4, in which the number of apprentices in different factories in a number of years is listed in eighteen separate tables, one per parish. Although these tables may well reflect the diversity and complexity of historical reality, they would probably have been more appropriately placed in an additional appendix to the book. In the text itself, one or two “overview” tables would have sufficed, each presenting a more general picture of parish apprenticeship, such as average use of apprentices by type of factory and by region,

percentages of boy parish apprentices compared with girl parish apprentices over a longer period of time, or figures on parish apprentices as a percentage of the total child labour force and of the labour force as a whole. The detailed presentation she has opted for prevents the reader from actually seeing the more general trends. The author does not really elaborate on these trends, though she does offer some general statements about the geographical spread of parish apprentices.

Honeyman's reluctance to generalize her findings prompts me to remark on a discrepancy which is inherent in the title of her book. Although the main title refers to "child workers" in England, it is clear that the book is mainly about parish apprentices and their experiences, a distinction more accurately made in the subtitle. I believe that her book could have gained by more systematically integrating the subjects mentioned in the main title, child labour, and subtitle, parish apprenticeship. In her introduction, Honeyman does consider the historiography on child labour, but she fails to make clear how the parish apprenticeship system related to the issue of child labour in general and factory child labour in particular. She tends to place her findings in the context of what earlier historians have assumed about parish apprenticeship, but, though she makes some interesting comments about those assumptions, the wider implications for the history of child labour in general (or, viewed from another angle, for the general system of poor relief in England) remain in the background.

Occasionally, Honeyman distinguishes her parish apprentices from "free" child workers, but she makes no systematic comparison. While the erratic source material might not allow historians to do this at the level of the labour market as a whole, Honeyman's impressive sample of parishes and factories would probably have enabled her to compare parish apprentices and other child workers at the local or company level. It remains desirable to know, for instance, what proportion of the entire youth labour force was accounted for by parish apprentices. Furthermore, to what extent did those parish apprentices, as a group, have an age and gender structure similar to that of other child workers? Also, comparative questions of a more qualitative nature spring to mind. Did parish apprentices do the same kinds of work as their "free" counterparts, or were they hired for specific tasks? How similar were their experiences to those of other working children, and were they treated any differently? For one thing, unlike "free" children they do not seem to have received wages.

With regard to their experiences and treatment, Honeyman herself notes on p. 213 that parish apprentices probably had more opportunities to voice their gratitude or misery than other children. But is that not merely a matter of representation in the available source material? Probably at least some of the "free" children were to some extent able to voice their complaints and negotiate with their parents about their working conditions, and perhaps even about whether they would be required to do factory work in the first place. Except perhaps for some rare autobiographies, historical sources are usually silent about these forms of agency of "free" children. Although we should not exaggerate the freedom of ordinary working-class children, it is clear that a more systematic comparison between them and parish apprentices in this matter, as well as in other respects, would greatly enhance our knowledge of and insights into child labour in an industrializing society. Honeyman has produced a valuable and attractively written study. It is to be hoped that in the future it will be an important ingredient in such a comparison.

Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk