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Book Review of Chris Helme's 'What Brass Bands Did For Me' (The History Press, 2009)

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Book Review By Stephen Etheridge (Copyright Stephen Etheridge)

Chris Helme, *What Brass Bands Did For Me* (The History Press, Stroud, 2009)

One of the defining aspects of the brass band movement is the continuation of traditions. Everything a brass band does, from competitions to caroling, can be traced back to the roots of the brass band movement from the 1830s onwards. The cultural identity of the brass band is made up of individuals who practice traditions that have been passed from generation to generation.

For some commentators, however, until recently, much of the writing about brass bands has been colloquial, relying heavily upon the larger personalities of the movement. 'The analysis of the social relations of brass banding has been sacrificed to a narrative strung out on the 'heroic' characters'.¹ In other words the brass bands had too much to offer social history than a popular chronological history could cover. However, it is ordinary people that make history. For some historians, to ignore these people would be to ignore the essence of social history. This is why Chris Helme's new book is an important contribution to the canon of brass band writing.

Written in a clear and engaging way, the writing avoids the over romantic style, and many exclamation marks, that can be common in local history books. The book is a collection of biographies of the key players, conductors, families and composers in the modern brass band movement. It is a mixture of personal recollections, sprinkled regularly with peoples' memories of the bands and personalities. The positive aspect of this kind of history is that these recollections bring social history alive. The reader can get close to the day-to-day life of brass bands. However, the danger is, any personal memories can be over romanticized

¹ Bernard Waites, 'Brass Bands,' by Arthur Taylor, *Popular Music*, Volume 1 (1981), p. 210.

with the passage of time. The striking aspect of these recollections is the effect brass bands had on people who were not fans or players. The idea of office workers at the CWS office in Manchester listening to Derek Garside's cornet solos coming from the band practice in the nearby building stressed the importance of brass bands to local people.

The key feature of all the people featured is the continuation of tradition. The book has some stories from early bands and players, which strengthens the importance of tradition on the modern movement. Willie Barr's grandfather was one of the founding members of the Creetown Silver Band in the 1880s. Derek Garside had his first cornet lessons on an instrument that was loaned to him from the Brighthouse and Rastrick Band. The cornet player Willie Lang watched the Norland Prize Band practice at the bottom of a quarry. Willie Lang stressed the importance of sitting amongst more experienced players to learn the instrument.

The book provides a wide selection of source material that is important to recent historical debate about modern brass bands: how the brass band performance style has influenced orchestral brass playing, the increase in the role of women, the influence of original compositions and the transition from amateur to professional player. The nature of the material means that a researcher will have access to new and informative source material, and the general reader will not be overwhelmed by over romantic prose.

The book is over reliant on the northern mill towns for its material. The modern brass band is a national movement, and it would be nice to have more features about brass bands from other parts of the country. Nevertheless, the brass band movement is currently in the public eye once again. Twenty five years after brass bands marched with miners in the strike of 1984-1985, eleven colliery bands have released a compilation album, *The Music Lives on Now the Mines have Gone*.² The BBC launched *A Band For Britain*, played on the cloth cap 'Oop North' image

² *The Times*, 26 February, 2010.

that bands have.³ This book sheds some light on the traditions and customs that make up this world. The brass band movement did turn ordinary people into heroic characters, and in many ways that is the point of this book. It is an ideal starting point for anyone who wants to learn more about brass bands.

³ *The Times*, 26 February, 2010.