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Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives

JOAN ALLEN, ALAN CAMPBELL & JOHN McILROY (Eds)

London, Merlin Press, 2010

410 pp., ISBN: 978085036, £50.00 (cloth)

Making History: Organizations of Labour Historians in Britain since 1960

JOHN McILROY, ALAN CAMPBELL, JOHN HALSTEAD & DAVID MARTIN (Eds)

Leeds, Labour History Review Fiftieth Anniversary Supplement, Maney Publishing, 2010

158pp., ISBN: 9781906540920. £10.00 (paper)

The year 2010 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the formation of the Society for the Study of Labour History (SSLH). This is celebrated by the appearance of these two collections, *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives* and *Making History: Organisations of Labour Historians in Britain*. Both these impressive publications creatively reflect upon the evolution of the SSLH over the last fifty years and place it firmly at the front of the historiography of labour in Britain, and partly within that of seven other countries. These two volumes are therefore vital if we are to understand the ebb and flow of labour history and how it has evolved to meet the challenges of the past, present, and future.

Histories of Labour is a truly monumental compendium of historiography and debate. In his Preface, Eric Hobsbawm, one of the original founders of the SSLH, stresses that it was formed under the guidance of Asa Briggs, Royden Harrison, Edward Thompson, and many other historians who had largely developed their interest in labour politics through political agitation or via the Communist Party Historians' Group. The centrality of labour in the post-war world of Britain was its driving force and Hobsbawm reminds us that: 'Almost all the British labour historians in 1960 were self-educated in the subject, since official teaching had little place for it' (p. 3). Some were from the working class and many defined their interest through the Workers' Educational Association and Adult Education, some of which was clearly

within a university context, an interesting development that was almost paralleled in Australia. The editors, in their wide-ranging introduction, and John McIlroy, in an impeccably researched first chapter, expand upon these points, outlining the history of the Society from the 1960s to the 1980s when the institutional history of trade unionism and Marxist debate shaped, though did not dominate, the SSLH. Thereafter, they argue that it was not so much the fall of the Soviet Union that caused the decline in labour history as the fact that the university financing policy and intellectual climate of the Thatcher era did much to reduce the emphasis placed upon the field at a time when gender, ethnicity, and postmodernism became vital forces within British historiography. Nevertheless, from its formation at Birkbeck College on 6 May 1960 the objective of the SSLH has been ‘to encourage study, teaching and research into the field of labour history and to safeguard the preservation of labour archives’ (p. 30). For fifty years it has effectively acted as a forum for different shades of opinion and has consistently offered a broad church and ‘tools of the trade’ approach to labour history. These were developed through the Society’s *Bulletin* for the first three decades, until the launch of *Labour History Review* in 1990 paved the way to its development into a conventional journal in 1997, the ‘tools of the trade’ purpose being revived by the *Newsletter* in 2002. The SSLH expanded rapidly at first from 71 members in 1960 to more than 1,000 in 1980 but has now declined to around 200 members and 150 institutional subscriptions. Its impact, however, has extended through a wide variety of regional, national and international organisations, the British-Dutch Conference, and its Archives Committee formed in the 1960s.

The History Workshop Movement and *Social History* both defined themselves against orthodox labour history and the SSLH. The survival of labour history was questioned by David Howell in the mid-1990s but the spring conference of 1997

concluded that the subject was ‘neither in crisis nor moribund but continued to be reformulated’ (p. 43). The future will be difficult but several contributors agree that it lies in international comparisons and the development of transnational historiography. Globalisation, in particular, will be an issue that needs to be addressed.

In addition to these opening essays, there are ten chapters concerned with labour historiography around the world. Joan Allen and Malcolm Chase deal with British labour history from 1750 to 1900 – particularly examining the debates on Chartism and its aftermath. Alan Campbell and John McIlroy assess the literature on twentieth-century Britain. The historiographies of Ireland (Emmet O’Connor and Conor McCabe), the United States (Elizabeth Faue), Canada (Bryan D. Palmer), Australia (Greg Patmore), Germany (Klaus Tenfelde), India (Rana P. Behal, Chitra Joshi and Prabhu P. Mohopatra), and Japan (Takao Matsumura, John McIlroy and Alan Campbell) are also explored. It is impossible to do justice to this literature and to debates about it in a short review, especially since the experiences of all these countries vary enormously. Yet what emerges is that the historiographical controversies emanating from the SSLH have permeated writing about the working-class in other countries in north America and Europe, and in particular that of Japan, where British labour history has been closely studied for many years. It is also evident that the lack of critical mass means that in countries such as Japan and Canada the debates take on a personal dimension. Yet there is a commonality of topics and this is examined by Marcel van der Linden in a final chapter entitled ‘Labour History Beyond Borders’. This reveals how Eurocentrism has given way to more global history, how international networks are developing, and how transnational history can lead to the re-examination of the specific experiences of different geographical areas within their international context.

The contributions to *Making History: Organizations of Labour Historians in Britain since 1960* are similarly rich in text and substance. It is good to see David Martin and John Halstead, doyens of the SSLH, contributing, along with Campbell and McIlroy, to an iconoclastic assessment of the growth, development and future of the SSLH which offers optimism for a declining membership which has largely rejected the postmodernist cul-de sac, reiterated the need to examine history from below and the history of oppression, whether of class or race, in the increasingly fragmented world of academic history. This introduction to the volume is followed by a perceptive and critical essay on the early history of the SSLH by McIlroy, which particularly examines the changes in university history in the 1980s. Thereafter there are chapters by Robert Duncan, Deian Hopkin and Emmet O'Connor which deal with the Scottish society (established 1966), the Welsh society, Llafur (1971) and the Irish one (1973). These are informed histories of these national organizations which might have been complemented with a brief attempt to examine some of the regional bodies, such as those in Yorkshire and the North West, which also produced publications.

Together, these two publications explain the rich tapestry of labour history over the last fifty years and go some way to revealing how it has changed and modified and why it will survive as a subject. The immediate world of the SSLH and labour history may have shrunk, but its impact on the study of political, social and cultural history persists and prospers. It continues to represent a significant current within historiographical debate in a now segmented academia. These publications are therefore timely reminders of the influence of the SSLH in Britain and beyond. They should be read by all those interested in the processes of historical research and scholarly debate.

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