

## STUDIES IN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL HISTORY

This series, specially commissioned by the Economic History Society, provides a guide to the current interpretations of the key themes of economic and social history in which advances have recently been made or in which there has been significant debate.

Originally launched in 1968 as 'Studies in Economic History', in 1974 the series had its scope extended to include topics in social history, and the new series title 'Studies in Economic and Social History' marked this development. This series was completed in 1995. A new series, published by Cambridge University Press and entitled 'New Studies in Economic and Social History', has now been inaugurated and this includes a number of reissued titles previously published by Macmillan.

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*British Trade Union and  
Labour History  
A Compendium*

*Edited for  
The Economic History Society by*

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British Trade Unions, 1800–1875 by A. E. Musson © The Economic History Society

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The Aristocracy of Labour in Nineteenth Century Britain  
c1850–1900 by Robert Gray © The Economic History Society 1981

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## *Editor's Preface*

WHEN this series was established in 1968 the first editor, the late Professor M. W. Flinn, laid down three guiding principles. The books should be concerned with important fields of economic history; they should be surveys of the current state of scholarship rather than a vehicle for the specialist views of the authors, and above all, they were to be introductions to their subject and not 'a set of pre-packaged conclusions'. These aims were admirably fulfilled by Professor Flinn and by his successor, Professor T. C. Smout, who took over the series in 1977. As it passes to its third editor and approaches its third decade, the principles remain the same.

Nevertheless, times change, even though principles do not. The series was launched when the study of economic history was burgeoning and new findings and fresh interpretations were threatening to overwhelm students – and sometimes their teachers. The series has expanded its scope, particularly in the area of social history – although the distinction between 'economic' and 'social' is sometimes hard to recognize and even more difficult to sustain. It has also extended geographically; its roots remain firmly British, but an increasing number of titles is concerned with the economic and social history of the wider world. However, some of the early titles can no longer claim to be introductions to the current state of scholarship; and the discipline as a whole lacks the heady growth of the 1960s and early 1970s. To overcome the first problem a number of new editions, or entirely new works, have been commissioned – some have already appeared. To deal with the second, the aim remains to publish up-to-date introductions to important areas of debate. If the series can demonstrate to students and their teachers the importance of the discipline of economic and social history and excite its further study, it will continue the task so ably begun by its first two editors.

*The Queen's University of Belfast*

L. A. Clarkson  
*General Editor*

## *Introduction*<sup>1</sup>

Labour history has long been at the heart of British economic and social history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and trade union history at the heart of labour history. The four pamphlets in this compendium, written between 1972 and 1988, reflect the historiography prevailing at the time and which still shapes much of the current approach to the subject. All four authors focus on trade unions but all direct attention to broader questions which form the wider agenda of labour history.

It is clear from Musson and Lovell that the work of the Webbs has held powerful sway over trade union historiography. Although both authors are critical of the Webbs' chronology both use it in their surveys which cover the period 1800–1930. Since Musson and Lovell wrote, however, the chronological span of trade union studies has been considerably extended. For example the eighteenth-century origins of trade unions have been investigated by Coates and Larker, Dobson, and Leeson [7; 12; 23]. In addition there have been recent reconsiderations of early nineteenth-century developments such as the Luddite movement [34; 10]. More importantly, the emphasis has shifted to the period after 1930. As Lovell remarks, whatever the short-term vicissitudes of trade unions over the last half century, they have become an established part of the social, industrial and political system.

It is for this reason that the literature on trade unions displays a constant tendency to spread into the more general arena of social and political history. Since 1980 there have been several comprehensive surveys of labour history placing the development of trade unions within a broad perspective (e.g. Brown [2; 3], Burgess [4], Cronin [9], Hunt [20], Kynaston [22], Lunn [24],

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Professor K. D. Brown for his advice in the preparation of this introduction.

Price [31]). Within the wider approach several discrete themes are discernible. The idea of an aristocracy of labour, for example, discussed by historians such as Hobsbawm [18], Moorhouse [27] and A. Reid [33] as well as by Gray [16], challenges the idea of an homogeneous working class, argued brilliantly by E. P. Thompson in 1963 [36], and raises issues far distant from institutional trade union history. For instance, skilled artisans are usually regarded as the apex of the labour aristocracy. Yet there is a need to define concepts of skill and occupation. Here important work on the relationships between technology, labour, work organization and production processes has been done by Zeitlin and others [40]. At the bottom of the hierarchy a particular section of the labour force meriting special study is women, traditionally ill-paid and decidedly not among the aristocracy. A good deal of work is currently being done on the subject of women in employment, much of it conveniently summarized in Roberts' recent publication included in this compendium.

Among the larger questions that students of labour history have to confront is that of class (see Morris [28] for an introduction to the literature) although the badges of class are much more than those of income (wages rather than salaries, rents or profits), jobs (manual work rather than a professional occupation) and workplace (a factory or workshop rather than an office). They also include the ways in which the working class (or classes) behave when not at work. Thus we have studies of class and leisure (Bailey [1], Walvin [38]) and class and religion (McLeod [25], Cox [8]). Associated with such issues is the even more important subject of the role that the working classes have come to play in the social and political life of the country. Among the more recent studies of this theme are several on the concept of social control (critically but conveniently surveyed by F. L. M. Thompson [37]) and the emergence of organized labour as a political force (e.g. by Howell [19], Brown [2, 3], Middlemas [26], Pimlott and Cook [30], Pugh [32]).

In 1972 Musson commented that the 'ideological interest and excitement [involved] in the broader aspects of working class history . . . have tended to obscure the very evident reality of separate, more limited, trade-union interests and organisation.' Not all scholars, though, have regarded these as 'humdrum



matters' and since 1972 there has been a steady flow of scholarship devoted to general trade union history and the history of particular unions (e.g. Carpenter [5], Clegg [6], Cronin [9], Dix and Williams [11], Fowler and Wyke [14], Phelps Brown [29], Taplin [35], Wrigley [39]). These works deal not only with unions in traditional industrial occupations but also with those in the service sector which is now a much more important part of the economy. There is also a growing body of literature devoted to trade union and labour history within the various regions of the British Isles. Aspects of the Irish labour movement in Belfast and Dublin, for example, have been the subjects of recent studies by John Gray [16] and Keogh [21]; the history of the South Wales miners' union has been written by Francis and Smith [13], and the origins of Scottish trade unions by Hamish Fraser [15].

Trade union and labour history thus remains a rich and fertile field. Students interested in advancing their knowledge will find the detailed bibliographies published in the annual *Bulletin* of the Society for the Study of Labour History indispensable guides. For those just commencing their studies, the four pamphlets collected here remain the ideal beginning.

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