

John Burnett (ed), *Useful Toil*. Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s, Penguin Books, London 1984, pp. 364, Pb., £ 19.95.

John Burnett (ed), *Destiny Obscure*. Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family from the 1820s to the 1920s, Penguin Books, London 1984, pp. 345, Pb., £ 6.95.

The ample evidence that was available in the nineteenth century concerning the condition of the industrial and rural workers in England and was published in official reports and private surveys was, to a very large extent, gathered by members of the middle class. Only a few memoirs or diaries of working people – such as those of Francis Place, Samuel Bamford and William Lovett – appeared in print. Now John Burnett has brought together 27 working class autobiographies, 11 of which are published in *Useful Toil* for the first time.

The book is divided into three sections, each with a very useful introduction. The first contains the memoirs of a variety of workers including two coalminers, a navy, a farm labourer and a shop assistant. The second section is devoted to domestic servants who comprised the second largest group of workers in England in the nineteenth century. The third section is on skilled workers such as a potter, an engineer, a stonemason, a wheelwright, a printer and a cabinet maker.

It is curious that only four of the memoirs brought together in this volume were written by factory workers. They were a compositor, a power-loom weaver, an engineer and a woman engaged in making munitions during the first World War. The rest of the writers worked in mines, in shops, on farms or were independent craftsmen.

The autobiographies and diaries collected by John Burnett are by no means without interest but they throw little new light on the condition of the working class in England in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Contemporaries and later historians have shown that a great many workers were exploited by their employers and worked long hours for very poor wages. The detailed description that Friedrich Engels gave of the English workers in 1844 was only one of many similar accounts. In the past historians have devoted a good deal of attention to factory workers and miners and have perhaps tended to neglect other types of workers. If so this collection of memoirs and diaries has the merit of drawing attention to the lives of skilled and unskilled men and women who were not to be found in textile mills or engineering plants.

*Destiny Obscure*, a sequel to the author's *Useful Toil*, contains extracts from 28 memoirs, mainly from the pens of members of the working class. They cover the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century and nearly all are published for the first time. It is clear from these extracts, which deal largely with early childhood, schooldays and family life that even at the end of the nineteenth century important social groups – such as farm labourers, casual workers, domestic servants and those who worked in their own homes – were grossly exploited by their employers. These workers received no protection from the laws which regulated hours and conditions of work in mines, factories and workshops. Nor were they in a position to form trade unions to safeguard their interests. The sufferings of farm workers, casual labourers and domestic servants are vividly portrayed in the memoirs collected in this volume. Social historians are indebted to Dr Burnett for bringing to light so many interesting recollections of working class family life in England in the industrial age.

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