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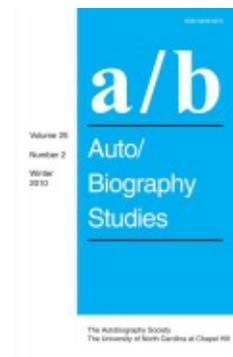
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"Unlike Actors, Politicians or Eminent Military Men": The Meaning of Hard Work in Working Class Autobiography

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“Unlike Actors, Politicians or Eminent Military Men”: The Meaning of Hard Work in Working Class Autobiography

By Claire Lynch

Context and Methodology

THE TITLE of this paper is drawn from the unpublished *Memoirs of a Bricklayer* written by Charles Lewis Hansford (b. 1902). The preface is written by Hansford's son who notes that, unlike the other professions listed, “bricklayers have not made it their practice to leave memoirs”; nonetheless, numerous working class authors have written their autobiographies “secure in the knowledge that in different ways and in different contexts the common people had always been historians of their own lives” (Burnett, Vincent, and Mayall xiii). Looking beyond the lives of “eminent” men might now be considered the norm for life-writing theorists, yet as recently as the 1980s, social historians still felt obliged to defend their considerations of “common people” while arguing that “we identify more easily or comfortably with ordinary people than with kings and prime ministers” (Harrison 13). In more recent life writing scholarship, the representative power of autobiography has been emphasized so that it “can become the ‘text of the oppressed’; articulating through one person's experience, experiences which may be representative of a particular marginalised group,” and as such, arguably more suited to bricklayers than politicians (Anderson 104). Renowned subjects of life writing such as “actors, politicians or eminent military men” are commonly admired for their exceptional, untypical lives. Their autobiographies narrate an initial attainment of individual fame and professional success which elevates them above family and community, followed by additional achievements which mark them out as significant in an already admired group: award-winning actors, prime ministers, war heroes.

In contrast, working class autobiography, as Hansford's preface suggests, is more frequently concerned not with who people are but what they are. This distinction is tightly bound up with historical concepts of work where for the last ten centuries "as many as 90 per cent of the population have been ordinary (common) people who had to work to make a living and who were ruled by a small minority who lived off the labour of the majority" (Harrison 13). An approach to life writing in which occupation is not a marker of individuality or status but rather evidence of conformity and a self-effacing sense of identity provides the area of enquiry here.

The examples considered below represent a sample of unpublished autobiographical manuscripts held in the *Burnett Archive of Working Class Autobiography* at Brunel University in West London. The archive contains over 230 autobiographies and was compiled by John Burnett, David Vincent, and David Mayall, whose work led to a series of significant publications, notably, *The Autobiography of the Working Class: An Annotated, Critical Bibliography* published in three volumes between 1984 and 1989. Prior academic inattention to working class lives had often been justified by a lack of available sources. This project sought to question the assumptions that illiteracy prevented self-reflection or that an unpublished narrative necessarily meant an unpublishable one. In identifying previously unknown autobiographies, Burnett, Vincent, and Mayall were able to contribute to a change in perceptions of working class autobiographies in part because they had "deliberately gone out to look for them" (Harrison 16). Earlier studies of labour history which focused on the minority group of activists and trade union leaders had been equally guilty of overlooking the majority of working class people who, despite leading unremittingly difficult lives, continued to live and work within established structures. In identifying the narratives of these people, *The Autobiography of the Working Class* is an unquestionably useful resource for socio-cultural historians. However, the organization of the lives of men and women using the 1911 census categories of occupation has inevitably converted the life narratives of individuals into occupational categories. Lives become simplified to jobs in the introduction to the first volume which accounts for "90 soldiers, 43 errand boys, 66 domestic servants, 93 farm labourers and 52 farm boys and bird scarers" amongst many others (Burnett, Vincent, and Mayall xix). The purpose of this paper will be to return to the origins of this seminal research completed over twenty years ago to reconsider the lives which became such useful examples and statistics. By returning to the original autobiographical manuscripts, the intention is to excavate not what an autobiography can tell us about bricklaying

or train driving but rather what it meant to that individual to be a bricklayer or a train driver in the context of his own life.

Work, or indeed the lack of it, dominates the daily lives of most adults; in its modern form, work makes an “extraordinary claim to be able to provide us, alongside love, with the principal source of life’s meaning” (De Botton 30). Work is more often than not what we are doing and where we are for the majority of our time. Consequently, whether our work is a matter of choice or chance has a major impact on how we conceive of ourselves. The comprehensive impact of work on an individual’s financial stability, housing conditions, standards of health and well-being, family life, leisure time, status in the community, values, and ambitions, makes it “difficult to overestimate the importance of work in working-class life” (Benson 9). Although the category “working class” is frequently written about in social, historical, and literary contexts it is rarely defined since it is “difficult to decide whether class should be defined by economic criteria (such as occupation and income); by social or cultural criteria (such as behaviour, status, power, attitudes and relationships with other groups); or by some elusive combination of them all” (Benson 3–4). Recognizing this lack of a universal definition, Burnett proposes that “occupation is one of the major— perhaps the major—determinant of social class”, as exemplified in his use of occupational classifications (Burnett, *Cost* 292). Indeed, one of the principal strengths of the archive considered here is the accounts of various occupations which it includes, detailing the conditions in which people worked and the technical processes by which particular tasks were completed. Proportionately, it is the central component of many of the manuscripts, as Burnett explains: “autobiographers devote more space to their working experiences than to their family relationships, being particularly reticent about emotional and sexual matters” (Burnett, Vincent, and Mayall xxviii). In this sense, the archive might easily be considered to be a record of working patterns and processes rather than the people who facilitated them. But can these texts be more than historical source material? Self-evidently the answer to this is linked to the disciplinary lenses and methodological filters we employ.

In his introduction to the annotated bibliography, Burnett acknowledges one of the disciplinary doubts at the root of the study of autobiography, explaining that “in the bosom of the historian, doubts will arise” when reading these narratives (Burnett, Vincent, and Mayall xvii). Concerns about accuracy, representation, and subjectivity are then dispelled in a way now familiar to autobiographical theorists, including the idea that “very few critics would demand that autobiographical truth should be literally verifiable” due to the

implicit complexity of the “truth of the self” (Marcus 3). Burnett’s annotated bibliography, however, is very clearly concerned with the wider meanings the narratives provide on their social and historical context. As a consequence, their accuracy and veracity are crucial. The editors present the extracts through a lens of social and political history since each life story is taken to be indicative of others of the same occupation or circumstance. This paper will consider the manuscripts from an alternative viewpoint, looking at each text not as a piece of evidence which contributes to an historical tableau but as an interpretation of an individual life constructed by the person who lived it.

Before drilling down into the individual lives of these writers, it is useful to review the grounds on which they have been previously merged, including through the use of the category “working class,” which defines the scope of the archive and, therefore, invites interrogation. The already imprecise meaning, shifting across historical and geographical contexts, seems oddly untouched by contemporary political correctness, having not been updated to something like “socio-economically disadvantaged.” Following “the collapse of communism, the rise of Thatcherism and the dominance of the new right” the concept of class as an assumed category has itself become strongly contested (Benson 2). Frequently discussed in the past tense, literary and cultural representations of the working class occupy a temporal limbo not distant enough to feel strictly historical but alien enough to be marked as the stuff of nostalgia “cup-finals, fish-and-chip-shops, palais-de-danse and Labour with a capital L” (Hobsbawm 194). For the Burnett Archive at least, working class remains the appropriate categorization because for all of its vague implications about income, values, and attitude, it keeps a clear sense of work as its central concern. Work is shown to be the significant influence in many of these texts from childhood onwards. From first jobs or apprenticeships, authors shape their narratives around work events including sporadic unemployment, gruesome building site accidents, and family traditions of working in the same trade. The extent to which work dominates in these texts and the implications on the authorial sense of personal history are examined here in a series of short case studies.

The four authors considered here were selected due to the reference to work in the titles of their unpublished autobiographies: Charles Lewis Hansford (b.1902), *Memoirs of a Bricklayer*; Frank Prevett (b.1904), *Memoirs of a Railwayman*; Eric Wadman (b.1923), *Eight Hours Savage Amusement, or, All in a Day’s Work*; and Percy Vere (b.1913), *The Autobiography of a Working Man*. The desire

shared by these authors to link identity and occupation in their titles stands in contrast to the otherwise repetitive and generic titles widespread in the archive, invariably containing the words: "Memories," "I Remember," "Reminiscence" and so on. Nostalgic titles or untitled works are occasionally joined by a rare pun, for example, Wally Ward's (b. 1914) *Fit for Anything*, the life of an epileptic. Far from being incidental, the lack of variation in these titles is evidence of the central paradox of working class autobiography. In the very act of life writing, working class authors significantly undermine their capacity to be representative. Working with the brain rather than the hands is frequently perceived as evidence that the subject has moved into a state of class limbo, no longer restricted to the experiences of the working class, yet still too bound up in working class concerns to be considered anything else. Necessarily now "of no class," individuals are left with a "sense of no longer really belonging to any group" creating a dislocation which defines the narrative (Hoggart 292). In some sense then, the *Memoirs of a Railwayman* is a contradiction in terms; the author has effectively ceased to be a railwayman and becomes identified as a writer both in his actions and through the reader's relationship with the text. All of these autobiographies are, by necessity, written during periods of retirement, convalescence, or unemployment. As writing and working are considered mutually exclusive activities for these individuals, their texts come to describe an identity crisis which can only be observed when analysis is taken beyond the remit of social history.

The central concern of this paper is to consider the discrepancy between the physical work recalled in the text and the intellectual work completed by the author in creating it. For these authors, the creation of the text itself was also an act of physical labor; in order to reinforce this I will not only extract language from the texts but also consider samples of the original source material. These autobiographies have not been edited and formatted by a publisher; they are handwritten or produced on a manual typewriter with corrections in ink clearly visible. Each autobiography's entry in the index to the archive is provided in the notes of this article so that the abridged version of the life, limited to place names, dates, and jobs can be expanded by looking again at the content of the text. In some cases, extracts of the manuscript have been reproduced with annotations and notes overlaid. The purpose of this is to substantiate the idea that the manuscripts are evidence of the physical labor which went into the production of the autobiography. Whether the author has corrected a mistake or omitted to, for example, may reveal more about the way in which he approached the work of writing than a published text could.

Case Studies

*Case Study I: Hansford, Charles Lewis, Memoirs of a Bricklayer [2-360] ©. 52,000 words)*¹

Despite the necessarily dry outline provided in the index to the archive, the events recalled in Hansford’s memoirs are relatively interesting, including accounts of practical jokes and grisly accidents on building sites. Regrettably, however, none are recounted in a way which bridges the gap between source material and narrative technique. The bricklayer does not know how to build a story, or, one might equally argue, is not restricted or overly influenced by standardized literary tropes. As a result, the extra-textual elements of this narrative such as the preface provide greater access to the subject than the main body of the text (see Fig. 1).

This reproduction of the first page of the manuscript highlights a lack of attention to detail as the crucial error which leaves the word “life” as “like” has not been corrected. However, the possible pun of bricklayers seeking to “fill the gap” is followed on the next page by Charles Hansford’s poem “The Bricklayers” in which the “secret legion” of fellow workers form a “camaraderie of cold,” implying that artistic expression takes priority over close proof-reading. Through these elements Hansford appears to deliberately contradict the expectation of bricklayers to be practical rather than thoughtful, physical rather than emotional. While his autobiography could not

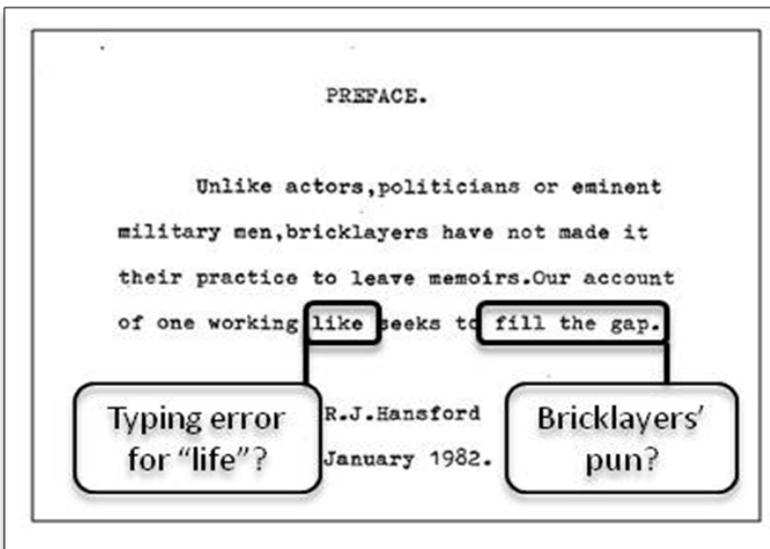


Fig. 1. Annotated Preface, Hansford, Charles [2-360]

be described as sophisticated or emotionally complex, it does act as an indicator that considering and evaluating one's own experience is a universal practice. Such an approach is characteristic of an allegedly optimistic working-class attitude to work, as Willis explains: "despite the dispossession, despite the bad conditions, despite the external directions, despite the subjective ravages, people do look for meaning, they do impose frameworks, they do seek enjoyment in the activity, they do exercise their abilities. . . . They do, paradoxically, thread through the dead experience of work a living culture which isn't simply a reflex of defeat" (Willis 188).

Case Study II: Prevett, Frank, Memoirs of a Railwayman [2-638] ©. 150,000 words²

Unlike Hansford who fails to knit his memories into a narrative, Frank Prevett is self-consciously aware of the standard elements of working class autobiography and manages to include many in his brief preface (highlighted in shaded boxes; see Fig. 2). He points to his limited education, to the family tradition, and, most significantly, to the opportunity to write rather than "work" that the task demands. In addition to these commonplace introductions to his narrative, Prevett highlights the relevance of work to his life (highlighted with broken lines; see Fig. 2). From the title of his autobiography onwards he expounds in detail his assertion in the Preface: "my whole life has been spent in the service of the Railway."

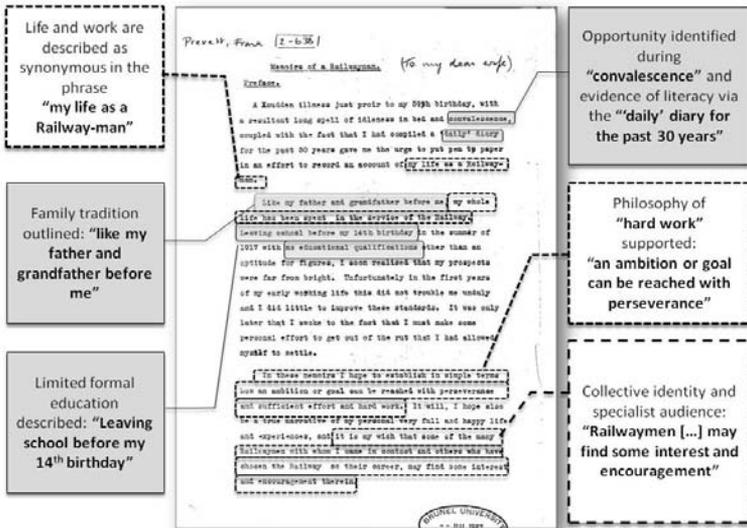


Fig. 2. Annotated Preface, Prevett, Frank [2-638]

in

I was born ~~at~~ Brighton at the beginning of the 20th century, in the year 1904. At that time my father was employed as a 'Booking clerk' in the main Brighton ticket office. His father had also lived at Brighton for many years and during the last years of his working days on the Brighton line he was employed as a Passenger Guard on the Brighton to Plymouth run, an important assignment and a position of some standing in those early days when the Railway was the only real form of transport.

Fig.3. Extract Prevett, Frank [2-638] (1)

Memoirs of a Railwayman is a lengthy manuscript. Its origin, drawn from thirty years of diary-keeping is made apparent in what seems to be very little editing. In this sense it directly represents the life of a successful railway clerk in which punctilious details are preserved despite their potential to be wearing for the reader. Details of the train lines, administration, the running of the station, and so on are not uncommon. As this extract demonstrates (see Fig. 3), family tradition and legacy are woven through the railway so that it becomes in itself a member of the family.

Prevett's understandable pride in a family tradition of shared occupations is repeated in texts throughout the archive, yet his particularly intense focus on the details of railway work makes his account conspicuous. On the last three pages of the manuscript, describing the death of his wife, it becomes apparent that Prevett's laborious recitation of his working life has in fact been an exercise in overcoming grief (see Fig. 4).

Prevett completes his life writing task at the request of his sons as if following the orders of an employer, suggesting awareness on their

There is much more I could write and the shock, the sorrow and loneliness has been very hard to bear at times, but I realise that this is something that most have to suffer at some time, and here I will close my memoirs which I have struggled to complete at the request of our sons and others.

Fig. 4. Extract, Prevett, Frank [2-638] (347)

part that a man so defined by work might only seek solace in working harder. More significantly, writing allows for the psychological “working-through” of the loss of his “dear sweet companion” (346). Throughout Prevelt’s narrative she is a shadowy presence, occupying an off-stage role, but always acknowledged as the source of his working success through her love and support. The final paragraphs list his wife’s venerable qualities, her “unselfish and loving devotion, her quiet patience and sweet contentment” and his regret that he “took so much for granted and had relied so much” on her “guidance and council” (346). As a consequence of this emotional conclusion, the autobiography ends with quite different results than those set out in the preface. While remaining the record of a working life, the act of writing alerts the author to the idea that such work was made possible by the unacknowledged work of his wife. Her overall significance is underlined in a short phrase marked in parentheses in the top right-hand corner of the preface reproduced above. After completing the typed manuscript Prevelt has returned to the first page to add the dedication “To my dear wife” in his own writing.

*Case Study III: Wadman, Eric, Eight Hours Savage Amusement, or, All in a Day’s Work [2-789] ©. 88, 000 words*³

Eric Wadman’s handwritten manuscript stands out amongst the sample here due to the inclusion of a series of drawings. These

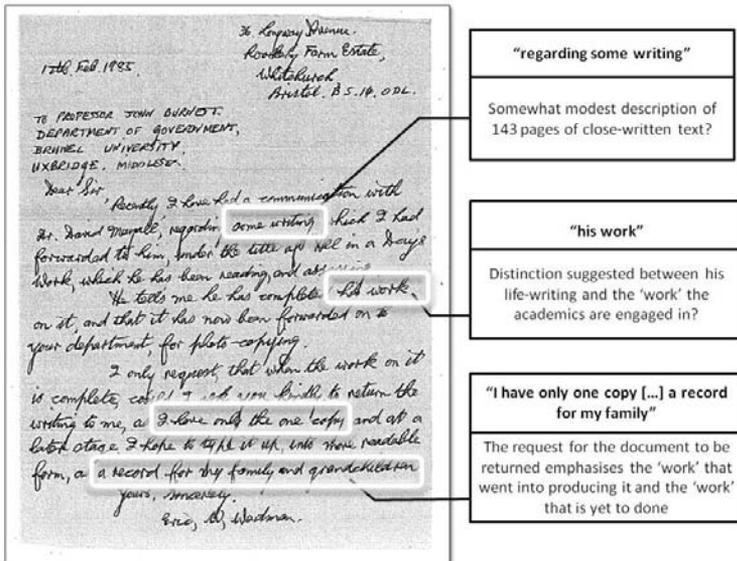


Fig. 5. Letter, February 1985, Wadman, Eric [2-789]

drawings and the negligible corrections to the text are confirmation of the physical act of writing and concentration which went into its production. More so than any of the writers considered here, Wadman prioritizes work as the central aspect of his life making the “long period of employment” noted in the index seem rather modest in comparison with what transpires to be a complete obsession with his work. Notably, this only applies to his practical work; in his correspondence with Burnett, Wadman undermines the value of his writing. Categorizing it modestly as “some writing” as opposed to the “work” of the academics, he states an implicit difference between those who officially work at thinking and writing and the supposed amateurs who engage in self-reflection between shifts (see Fig. 5).

Such diffidence in relation to his autobiographical work seems all the more implausible when his drawings are considered. This detailed sketch of the “Shoe & Slipper Sales Area,” for example, emphasises the significance awarded to his workplace, not only in the detail used, but in the very effort to produce and include it within the manuscript (see Fig. 6).

While photos of the subject as a child or significant family members are commonplace in contemporary life writing, drawings constitute a quite different addition to the text. Why has Wadman chosen to draw rather than describe this? Is it an act of concentrated hard work, sitting in the corner of the shop long after the customers have left, or drawn from memory like the familiar landscape of home? The detail suggests that his place of work is literally imprinted on his memory.

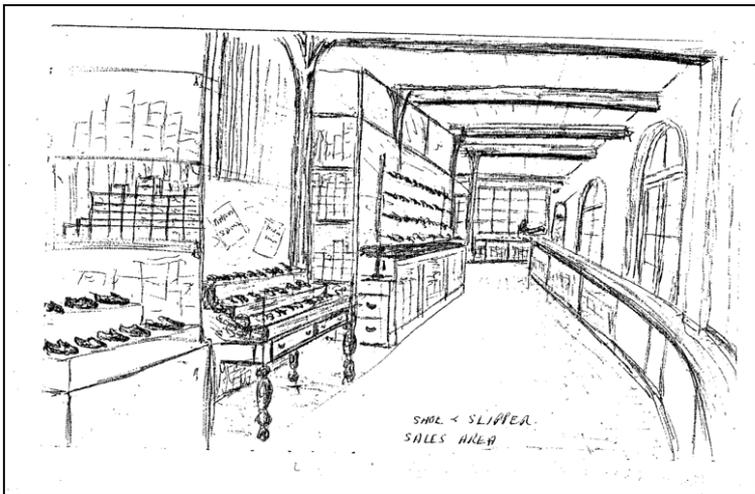


Fig.6. Shoe & Slipper Sales Area.

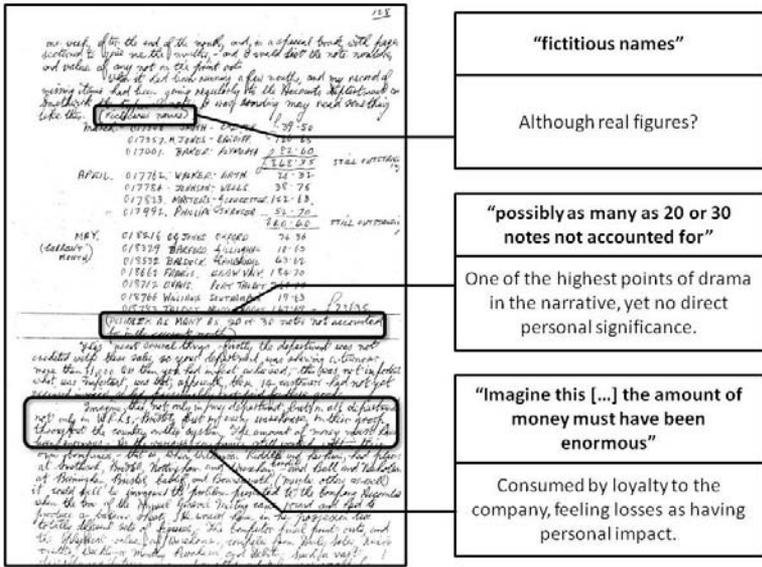


Fig. 8. Extract, Wadman, Eric [2-789] (128)

intellectual error, is really life itself coursing through us” (324). The details Wadman provides in his diagrams are mirrored if not exceeded in his writing. What remains unclear, however, is whether such detail is evidence of an admirable dedication to work or confirmation of a misplaced sense that the material is relevant or interesting to any reader other than himself.

Wadman describes the problem of unpaid accounts using “fictitious names” to protect the identities of his customers, but (one assumes) real figures to reinforce the detail of his argument (see Fig. 8). From the correspondence with Burnett it is clear that the express purpose of this text is to be a resource for his children and grandchildren—yet the content is so rarefied, so technically specific, that it reads more like a manual for new employees than an autobiography. Again, as with Prettet, the explanation for such an insular approach to writing becomes apparent at the very end. In this case, an event of equivalent loss for the work-obsessed man, Wadman is made redundant.

Wadman’s account of unemployment conforms to the standard stages identified by Eisenberg and Lazarsfeld, similar to those used to describe the stages of grief. Initially suffering “shock,” followed by an “active hunt” for a new job, subsequent “pessimism” at the failure leading to a “fatalistic” approach which leaves the subject with a “broken attitude” (378). Unemployment, however, only seeks to make Wadman’s next period of employment more intense. His

description of “work as a friend,” both for himself and other men of his generation who lack alternative means by which to construct an identity, serves to explain the lack of more personal information in the narrative (143). For Wadman, life and work are indivisible, he approaches a philosophy of work by asking “what is work anyway,” finally leading him into an almost hysterical apocalyptic conclusion. He completes the autobiography by calling for the destruction of the industrialized world, thereby creating “jobs for all” as it is restructured afresh (143).

Case Study IV: Vere, Percy, The Autobiography of a Working Man [2-783] (c. 6,500 words)⁴

The Autobiography of a Working Man is held in the Burnett archive as two copies of yellowed typescript, unbound, with corrections made in biro. The description of it given in the archive index is one of the most accurate as the narrative recalls a lifetime of jobs punctuated by illnesses, or perhaps the reverse. What is apparent is that this is a life measured through the author’s capacity to work and his inability to do so. Vere’s adult life is sketched through work-related milestones; following his marriage in 1936, he recalls being “out of work for the first 12 weeks of married life” and subsequently lists a series of manual jobs and the industrial accidents and illnesses which interrupt them (5).

Whereas Wadman seems to take his work in the shoe factory to the point of obsessive absorption, allowing it to dominate his wider life, Vere underplays the impact of work on his personal life in a way which is equally striking. In doing so he paradoxically suggests the importance of work to an even greater extent. For Vere, work is so encompassing, so omniscient, that its impact is too assumed to be questioned. Burnett’s analysis seems to bear this out when he argues that: “For many, work was to be endured rather than enjoyed; most were glad enough to have it, but brought to it few expectations beyond the receipt of a wage which would keep their family in food, clothing and shelter” (Burnett, Vincent and Mayall xxvii).

As is typical of the genre, Vere’s personal life is presented as secondary to his working one; he allocates a greater number of words to describe the components and measurements of a brick, for example, than he does to the birth of his son. This application of priorities is crystallized when he describes a fall which leaves him “cased in plaster from under my armpits to my knees” (Vere 8). The accident leaves Vere with spinal damage but an unremitting concern for his work. He recalls the recovery process: “After lying flat in bed for about a month, I asked the doctor, what about my job? The reply was, never

mind your job, Mr S. you'll be lucky if you ever walk again" (Vere 19). Their conversation suggests opposing definitions of work's importance between the doctor and patient, highlighting both a personal difference and a wider distinction between the notions of occupation and profession which the two men represent.

The concept of the "working class" assumes a relationship with work in which effort and time are deployed to the utmost while choice and independence remains minimal. Consequently, the work itself is often seen, as Burnett describes, as a "means to an end, not an end in itself," rewards were the focus, not the work which led to them (Burnett xvi). Corroborating this, Vere proudly describes saving enough to buy his "lovely bright red Mark 1 Capri. Never did I dream I would own such a lovely car. Hard work and perseverance paid off in the end and it was worth it" (20). When compared to the great achievements recalled in what might be considered canonical or "classic" literary autobiographies, Vere's accomplishment might seem insignificant. Yet in this life narrative, the car is the height of ambition realized; to undermine that would be to reject the variety which is not only accepted but expected in life writing.

As Vere's narrative continues, he suffers a series of strokes, encounters numerous difficulties finding employment due to ill-health and increasing age, and as one might expect in a life so dominated by work, comes to consider retirement a form of fantasy dénouement to his life story. He concludes the narrative, reflecting: "We have both worked hard but when I look out of our very large picture window and watch the blue tits going into their nest-box, I think it has been worth it" (25). It is an uncharacteristically poetic and emotional note on which to end, and for that also the greatest insight into his personality. Notably, it is not the common association of birds with freedom, but rather the unassuming drudgery of their team work and homemaking that causes him to create an image that mirrors his own existence. Vere admires the industrious nature of the birds, working hard, as he did.

Summary Discussion

This paper began with the hypothesis that the previous approach taken to works in the Burnett Archive of Working Class Autobiography in which lives had been refined to dates and facts by a bibliographic approach had in some way reduced their capacity to represent life. A literary perspective was applied as a method of resuscitating the use of the archive and provided a "conversation" between the original research and a new research project of which this paper is the first part. After returning to the manuscripts, there is some evidence to

suggest accuracy in the original approach as the narratives themselves reinforce the idea that identities are sculpted around what not who individuals are. Although only referring to a small sample of the works collected in the archive, the examples here are indicative of a collection which might force us to reconsider some of the expectations and priorities with which we approach life writing. The authors considered here are part of a tradition in which “for at least the last three hundred years very many people have, for various reasons, considered that their life histories were worth recording” (Burnett, Vincent, and Mayall viii). Whether they are “worth” reading, however, is quite a different question. Lacking many of the commonly admired qualities found in both canonical and contemporary life writing, the value of these texts as other than historical or sociological source material requires unpicking. Yet one might equally argue that by getting to the root of the lived experience, these writers produce work which can most accurately be considered life writing. Rather than debating the nature of the self or considering the meaning of existence, they contemplate the day-to-day concerns which have occupied them for the majority of their lives, writing, therefore, about life.

One of the central aims of this paper has been to consider whether, in writing their own lives, these men are somehow separated from their working class status. If this is the case, what impact might such a dislocation have on the sense of self they project through their autobiographies? Need writing and working be conceived of as distinct? In their different ways, these authors present life narratives inextricably woven into work, not just as an element of life, but as the means by which life is given structure and meaning. The working lives of the men discussed above should not be romanticized as a result of their autobiographies. Like many, their jobs were “boring, repetitive, mindless” often resulting in “a numbing sense of boredom and meaninglessness: sheer unhappiness if you like” (Willis 188). Nevertheless, they were equally motivated to record the importance of their existence as numerous “actors, politicians, or eminent military men” have done, making them a precious if underexplored resource. Since the establishment of the archive as one of Brunel University’s special collections, the autobiographies, letters, photographs and associated documents which comprise the Burnett archive have provided information and inspiration to novelists, students, academics, and family historians. The start of a new decade represents a new phase in the archive’s own autobiography with digitization planned to begin in mid-2010 alongside a series of projects designed to share these life stories across and beyond the campus. These new projects will endeavor to contradict earlier neglect of working class autobiographers by those who have been guilty of “a refusal to take their ideas

and actions seriously” (Harrison 17), so that their hard work, whether conducted on building sites or at typewriters, is justly acknowledged.

Brunel University

Notes

1. Biographical Details listed in Archive Index: “b. Brockenhurst (1902); Southampton. 50 years in construction industry, life in different towns, pubs, trade unionism, London lockout of 1914, unemployment.”

2. Biographical Details listed in Archive Index: “b. Brighton (1904); Withyam; Berwick; Glynde; Berwick; Woldingham; Sauderstead; Addiscombe; Mitcham; Tulse Hill; Redhill. Written from Diaries, includes childhood, married life, 45 years in railway service.”

3. Biographical Details listed in Archive Index: “b. 1923. Bristol. Happy home life and long period of employment in footwear wholesale company.”

4. Biographical Details listed in Archive Index: “b. London (1913); Lingfield; Godstone. Reflections on poor childhood, leisure, transport, work life, army experiences, old age and illness.”

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