

The Tide of Democracy: Shipyard Workers and Social Relations in Britain 1870-1950

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Jo McBride

I was looking forward to reading this book very much, mainly because the study of the shipbuilding industry, on Tyneside in particular, has been a personal interest for ten years, providing the subject for a PhD thesis as well as other works. Furthermore, I was brought up in a shipbuilding community and lived there most of my life, with family and friends being involved in many different trades in the industry, so it is topic fairly close to my heart. When I began to read it, I certainly was not disappointed.

This book begins with a wonderful historical review and detailed examination of shipyard workers and social relations in Britain, the major focus being between the years of 1870 and 1950. Although its major area is labour history, it spans other disciplines such as industrial sociology, human geography, industrial relations the sociology of work and politics. It is also written in such a style as to be open to anyone, not solely academics, which is also a positive aspect of this book.

The first six chapters are totally dedicated to the organisation of craft production and are an excellent read. Important explanations are made very early on, for instance in terms of pluralism versus Marxism or of the various interpretations of a 'united working class movement' in necessary opposition to capitalism or sectional interests. However, I do feel that there is an overreliance on Clegg *et al* in this section and the mention of pluralism tends to disappear later in the book. Nonetheless, it does demonstrate very early in the book how the industry's work relationship is inherently sectional. It then continues to describe and explain how and why this is of significance.

The first section of the book concentrates on the development of modern economies surrounding the

industry accompanied by an increase in the division of labour and increasing use of machinery and how these did not necessarily lead to reductions in the level of skill required from the industry's workforce. Reid explores why this is the case and begins by breaking down the definition of 'skill' in the industry. He finds that the machinery that was introduced *did* produce anxieties in the workforce, which would be expected. However, most of the machinery that was introduced needed semiskilled or even skilled labour, and the author states that, 'We ought to be cautious in assuming that the introduction of new machinery automatically produces low levels of skill on the part of its operators, and instead make more careful investigations of each specific case' (p. 111), which he certainly does in this section. He concludes from his investigation that, '... it would seem that, contrary to deeply rooted assumptions, the application of machinery and the development of labour did not reduce the skills workers in the British shipbuilding industry in this period and, if anything had a tendency to increase them' (p. 114). He then makes the very significant statement that, 'Given this account of the organisation of the shipbuilding industry in Britain in this period, it is clear that the occupational organisation of its key workers to protect their job territories remained a highly appropriate response to changing conditions' (p. 114). Indeed, although this book only covers the period up to 1950, this still remains the situation today on Tyneside in the sense of the protection of the job through occupational organisation.⁽¹⁾ Nonetheless, the first part of this book is indeed a very interesting exploration of the activities of different groups of workers and the strength of shipyard workers' self organisation which gave them a major influence and control over their work. Yet there were a few issues that did raise some queries.

Firstly, this section of the book tends to mix accounts of the Clyde and the Tyne and does not take into account the very different work cultures that existed, and still exist, in these different areas. Even in the North East yards alone, Teesside, Tyneside and Sunderland have very different work cultures ⁽²⁾ and I feel that it is important to differentiate or at least mention these. I was also uncomfortable with the discussion of 'restrictive practices' on p. 41. I felt that this concept was not thoroughly explained, and that workers were made to appear unnecessarily militant and as though they disliked one another. A final small query of this section might be made where it is suggested that there were '... rather passive attitudes towards the gradual influx of new trades in most localities' (p. 48). I am aware this refers to technical workers, but would stress that it is certainly untrue that this was the attitude of the whole workforce, particularly on the Tyne where there were massive demarcation disputes regarding the introduction of new trades as the following quotes illustrate,

'Within the space of thirty five months ... there were no fewer than thirty five weeks in which one or other of the four most important sections of skilled men on Tyneside were idle because work to which they laid claim was being done by others'.

'On one occasion, indeed, a great shipbuilder on the Tyne, finding his whole establishment laid idle by such a quarrel, and utterly unable to bring the men to reason, finally took off his coat and did the disputed work with his own hands'.⁽³⁾

Nonetheless, these small issues aside, the following chapter on 'Skills and trade unions' is an inspiring one. It follows the development of the skills in the yards, the unique control the workers had over the production process and how this was not necessarily favoured by Marxist activists who preferred the notion of a 'homogenous united working class'. However, the shipyard workers' divisions in their skills/trade importantly gave them power within the employment relationship. This chapter (chapter three) is a very thorough analysis of these issues and is a real pleasure to read as is the following chapter (four) on the impact of machinery on the hull-builders, which discusses the introduction of technological advancements to the sector. These technological changes led to new distinct phases, from design to fitting out, all of which required a wider range of skills, new working methods, new machinery, new trades and new trade unions made a huge impact on the industry. Chapter five relates to the impact of machinery and the outfitters. These

chapters are much more detailed than any other piece of literature I have read in terms of the precise machines that were introduced to the outfitters. My only personal comments would again focus on the lack of attention paid to the different cultures in the different yards/regions. For example, the author neglects the differences, not only between trades in one yard, but also between regional industries. For example, in Sunderland, Teesside and Tyneside, management had an agreement with the workers through their shop stewards *not* to employ any workers from other areas until their local labour supply is exhausted. When they are mixed, there tend to be industrial relations issues, usually around how the work is done in that particular yard, or sectionalism issues. It is also a pity that the book neglects other perspectives and wider social relations with the community. Even small points can be instructive, for instance, the riveters were cursed daily by the Tyneside communities, especially those living on the quayside, due to the clamour they made in their work. It would also have been interesting to explore how much the workers were involved in the community, for instance through their charitable work with local voluntary institutions. It is also disappointing to see only a brief mention of women entering the industry during the war years on pages 86 and 88. I might have liked to read more about women's input and experiences of this work as this was an important period, especially in terms of the beginning of the current distinctions between 'men's work' and 'women's work'. There is a lot of material relating to this in AEEU (now Unite)'s archives. For instance, what would be interesting to note is the importance the male workers attached to their 'skilled trade', compared to the preparedness of many women to multi-skill, for instance in conducting dirty work such as being lowered into the sewerage section of ships to clean, work which the male skilled workers would more than likely have refused. However, in all fairness, this is not actually addressed by many authors writing about this industry, but is something one might have expected to come across in this book as it is so detailed. Furthermore, unless one was a particular student of this subject in its entirety one would not notice these concerns, or indeed even care, as this book is so well written.

Despite these minor personal grumbles, I did really enjoy this section. It separates and explains the historical development of the impact of the machinery on the crafts, the introduction of different trades and the development of, and relationship with, their trade unions. Even the painters get four pages dedicated to them and they are usually quite neglected in other literature. There are some very thorough explanations of the problems faced by the engineers and the AEU membership in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is this kind of material that is written in such a way it is accessible to everyone and really makes this part of the book very special.

The following section and next couple of chapters focus on the leadership of the Boilermakers' Society (BS). They concentrate on the effectiveness of the craft unions in the industry and argue that, and explain how, we should not assume that this outcome was inevitable. It then gives an in-depth account of the activities of the BS, possibly due to it being the largest of the unions in the industry. My initial reaction was that it was refreshing to see a full account of Robert Knight's leadership of the BS and Reid dedicates a lot of this section to his leadership and strategies. Reid suggests that Knight's achievements during these years should be fully appreciated (p. 136). He argues that the Webbs' view of Robert Knight is more positive than is usually thought and that they approved of his policies and saw him as a pioneer. Indeed, they described him as '... a man of remarkable ability and strength of character' (4) and Mortimer claims that he was '... one of the most distinguished unionists ... in the history of the British Trade Union Movement'.(5)

Reid takes a very sympathetic stance towards Robert Knight and his strategies and policies. In terms of his attitudes to the workers (in relation to his refusals to finance local strike action or his stern attitude towards unskilled workers), Reid argues that '... a strong case can be made that this was a necessary restraint given the difficult industrial and financial condition of these years' (p. 129). Indeed, it could be argued that Robert Knight's style and strategy is very reminiscent of some union leaders today which it could be argued shows how progressive he was, although I can fully appreciate why he received hostility from the union membership, especially on Tyneside.

One reason was due to his caution with regard to the holding of shop meetings, which inevitably led to unofficial disputes, and the warning that members would be fined if precipitated strike action when work was plentiful. A further source of hostility was an instance when Knight accused shop stewards of exceeding

their power by bargaining for fixed piecework rates.(6) The membership resented these accusations by Knight as it threatened their local autonomy, together with ‘... his undoubted tendency towards personal dictatorial control.’(7) Reid tends to neglect these more negative aspects of Robert Knight.

This is not to argue that Robert Knight does not deserve attention for other reasons. Firstly, perhaps, because many of his policies reflect those of modern day trade unionism, in particular, in his attitude to cooperative relations with employers. His main policy was one of conciliation towards shipbuilding employers and he deplored strikes. Not surprisingly, he received the approval of the shipbuilding employers, although many of the membership were becoming uncomfortable with Knight's attitude and many of the other trade unions resented Knight. Indeed, Knight's policies led to long heated debates with ‘Many trade unionists ... greatly resenting their loss of local autonomy’.(8) However he did pioneer some very successful joint trade union schemes. For instance, he drew together the majority of trade unions involved in engineering and shipbuilding to form the 'Federation of Engineering and Shipbuilding Trades of the United Kingdom' which was a great achievement, though any potential success for the trade unions in terms of collective bargaining for a whole industry, was hampered due to the ASE's refusal to take part in the Federation. Nonetheless, another perceived important consequence of Knight's policies was the establishment of a new negotiating procedure agreement between the Trade Union Federation and the Employers Federation. This agreement was signed in 1898.

The agreement outlined a procedure for dispute settlement which stated that work should proceed pending a settlement even though the North East organiser of the ASE was in 'open revolt' to the agreement. Despite this, the Webbs claimed that the agreement ‘fulfilled a useful function in settling disputes between different unions’.(9) Robert Knight was also very successful in establishing new agreements between employers and unions, holding the view that there was sufficient common interest between unions and employers to reach new agreements much like the ‘new unionism social partnership’ strategy of the present day. However, Reid makes it clear that Robert Knight was not in any sense a 'new unionist' as the term was used in this particular period. Knight was a major figure amongst the 'older' generation of craft union leaders who were opposed to the 'new unionists' who included many prominent socialists of the time such as Kier Hardie and Tom Mann. Knight claimed that ‘Collectivism ... could never take the place of individualism’.(10) and the bitter debate surrounded the exclusion of the unskilled labourers into the larger unions composed mainly of craftsmen. Yet, despite vast criticisms of Knight, Reid also subtly notes that he WAS continually re-elected unopposed until he retired in 1899 (p. 144).

Chapter nine focuses on John Hill and the Clyde shipbuilding industry and I found this absolutely stimulating. It is a wonderful chapter that gives an in depth description of the unrest on the Clyde and the politics surrounding, is extremely well researched and it is very well written. Unfortunately what follows was less appreciated. Part three is a move to the theory and practice of craft politics and follows the construction of the political theory of two key craft union leaders, Knight and Hill.

The first chapter moves the focus away from directly studying the shipyards and shipyard workers to sections taken from Knight's annual report quotations to highlight his politics. It also includes an examination of religion and Knight's politics. I did not enjoy this chapter as much as previous ones and felt that it did not fit as well. I thought it could have been more of an examination of the politics of the workers/crafts and/or trades rather than another sole focus on Knight. Then again, the following chapter (twelve) also focuses predominantly on Robert Knight. This makes me wonder whether this book should have actually been two separate manuscripts. It is, after all, entitled ‘shipyard workers and social relations in Britain’ – yet there is so much dedicated to chapters focusing solely on Robert Knight and his life/contribution to trade unionism. This is not to say that these chapters are uninteresting but if a book states it is about a certain topic I would expect it to be committed to that.

Chapter thirteen takes us back to the politics and it is refreshing to read the accounts of Lawson and Clynes mixing the realities of the harsh work in the mines/mills with their leadership roles in trade unions and politics. As might be evident, this section of the book is again focused on leaders of trade unions and their involvement with politics. It also explores the relationship between liberalism and socialism and it is here

where, from my perspective, it goes in another unwelcome direction. There is too much coverage of the leaders, in particular Knight and Hill, in the book as a whole. Reid argues that a full account of their behaviour at key moments is vital for a proper understanding of the development of the early Labour Party. It could be argued that the leadership's social relations were important in terms of influencing the direction of the establishment of the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) in 1900, and that this increased their votes on contentious issues and enabled them to cover a range of generations, geographical regions and occupations (p. 332). However, I feel that this should have been two separate books as the latter sections from chapter six concentrated overly on just two leaders of trade unions and their politics and role in politics.

On a final note, I was very shocked to turn a page to find out that there was no more, which was very disappointing. I might have expected some kind of warning such as a conclusion.

Nonetheless, despite this, I thoroughly enjoyed the earlier sections of this book, and it was a wonderful read up until the excessive coverage of Knight and Hill detracted from what its title promised would be its key concerns.

Notes

1. J. McBride, 'Can sectionalism be good for solidarity? Some evidence from the maritime construction industry on Tyneside', *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, published online 6 January 2011 < <http://eid.sagepub.com/content/early/2010/10/26/0143831X10377807.abstract> [2]>; J. McBride, *The Persistence of Power? Trade Union Workplace Union Organisation and Industrial Relations in the Tyneside Maritime Construction Industry*, PhD thesis (University of Northumbria, 2005). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. I. Roberts, *Craft, Class and Control: The Sociology of a Shipbuilding Community* (Edinburgh, 1993). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. S. And B. Webb, *Industrial Democracy* (London, 1920), pp. 510, 513. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Ibid, p. 30. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. J. E. Mortimer, *History of the Boilermakers' Society. Volume I 1834-1906* (London, 1973). [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Ibid; J. F. Clarke, *Labour Relations in Engineering and Shipbuilding on the North East Coast in the Second Half of the 19th Century*, MA Thesis, (University of Newcastle. 1966). [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Mortimer, p. 168. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. J. F. Clarke, *Building Ships on the North East Coast. Part 1. c1640-1914, A Labour of Love, Risk and Pain* (Middlesbrough, 1997) p. 330. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Webb, p. 132. [Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Mortimer, p. 125. [Back to \(10\)](#)

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