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Poor Women's Lives: Gender, Work and Poverty in late-Victorian London

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Anna Davin

This book is an excellent contribution to our historical understanding of London, of gender and of labour markets. Andrew August brings together the concerns of feminist historians of the last twenty-odd years (in particular *Ellen Ross in Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870-1918*, OUP 1993) with issues raised in labour history, especially by Gareth Stedman Jones (in *Outcast London*, OUP 1971 and 'Working-class Culture and Working-class Politics in London, 1870-1900', in *Languages of Class*, CUP 1983). Deploying census and other statistical material with skill and a minimum of fuss, he addresses the specificities of local labour markets, demographics and households in the larger urban context.

August chose for his study three London neighbourhoods: Lisson Grove (Marylebone), Somers Town (Euston) and Globe Town (Bethnal Green). Each shared similar levels of poverty according to Booth's map of 1880s London; they had distinct boundaries, usually constituted by railway, canal or main road; and for each the invaluable-detailed manuscript books of the census enumerators were available. All were relatively long established (as August shows from census data on place of birth), with fewer migrants from other parts of England and fewer migrants from abroad than in London as a whole. Globe Town had the highest London-born population (88% as against 78.6 in Somers Town, 77% in Lisson Grove, and in London overall 69.7%). Lisson Grove had the most Irish born (4.7%; while Somers Town had 2.9%, Globe Town 0.6%; and London overall 2.1%). Inhabitants not born in the UK were a tiny proportion (1.1% in Somers Town, 0.6% in Lisson Grove, 0.8% in Globe Town; in London overall 2.8%).

August stresses both differences and similarities between the neighbourhoods, examining how they developed as well as focusing on the 1880s:

Each grew in response to particular market and geographic forces, and different trades were concentrated in each. But the general structures of the labour markets were quite similar, particularly in the pervasiveness of casual and seasonal employment and the strict division of labour by sex. Common patterns of household formation existed across all three neighbourhoods. The dynamics of women's employment and of gender relations within households reveal a common way of life in the neighbourhoods and apparently throughout inner-London poor areas. In all of them, tremendous burdens of work, powerfully restrictive gender ideologies, and crushing poverty presented women with tremendous challenges, to which they responded with energy and determination.

The larger comparative dimension is by contrast relatively undeveloped. He admits this himself when touching on married women's work in Bradford and the Potteries (drawing on Karl Ittman and Richard Whipp, though not Jacqueline Sarsby); however in his use of work by Elizabeth Roberts and Carl Chinn, on Lancashire and Birmingham, respectively, the sense of local specificity is outweighed at times by the search for common patterns.

August is clearly aware of the limitations of census data - its snapshot character, for instance, which means that the enumeration, always in April, under-represent summer and winter work while intermittent and casual employment is easily missed. He notes the under-reporting of women's paid work where male heads of household were ignorant of it, or did not want it known that their wives worked, or did not think it would 'count'; the exclusion of domestic labour and the invisibility of prostitution, begging and theft. Nevertheless, sensitive to such problems and using the data with care, he succeeds in drawing out convincing patterns of employment and of household formation in his three neighbourhoods.

To interpret this formidable quantitative data he turns to more qualitative material - the evidence of witnesses to parliamentary commissions; memoirs; newspaper reports and so on - and to the work of other social historians. Stressing the importance of understanding the 'life-course' (or life-cycle) of women in relation to their employment, August adapts the categorisation of households used by Lynn Lees (*Exiles of Erin: Irish Migrants in Victorian London*, Cornell UP 1979). He designates seven family types, correlating age of wife with number of resident offspring and whether they are employed: wife under 45, no offspring (type 1), 1 child less than a year old (type 2), offspring at home none employed (type 3), offspring at home fewer than half employed (type 4), offspring at home more than half employed (type 5); wife 45 or over, no offspring or only one over 20 at home (type 6), and wife 65 or over (type 7). Analysis of the computerised census data on household and employment according to these categories then allows him to argue, in dialogue with his predecessors, that married women did not turn to paid work because of crises in the domestic budget. Though their need for money was greatest when they had young children, this was when they were least likely to be employed, not most.

Though it is impossible to know exactly what these women thought, their behaviour reflects a culture of female work in these neighbourhoods. Women simply expected to work hard throughout their lives. When it was possible, given their domestic responsibilities, this work would be in paid employment, and their wages certainly formed a welcome addition to the household budget.

At other times the economic value of their domestic labour, or its indispensability, overrode the usefulness of any earnings. In each of his neighbourhoods the percentage of wives employed according to the 1881 census declined with the first child (household type 2): from 29.5% to 13.2% in Somers Town, 32% to only 31.3% in Lisson Grove, and 27% to 17% in Globe Town. The figures for household type 3, with children not employed, are 12.1%, 19.4% and 15.4%. Over the next stages, as children began to bring in a wage then leave, rates rise again, to fall away once more after age 65. This general pattern holds in all three neighbourhoods, though in Lisson Grove, where more service work was available, employment rates were higher at all ages and especially for household type 3. It seems that there older married women earned wages while their daughters took over at home.

Another historical argument tackled by August is the question of women's relative power in household and

neighbourhood. Did controlling the household budget mean, as Carl Chinn has argued, that married women escaped their apparent subordination? While agreeing that women's neighbourhood networks and mutual support meant that they were not helpless victims of their menfolk, August is clear that the cultural expectations of gendered behaviour and relationships worked to women's great disadvantage. Their authority 'chiefly operated in a network of women and children'. They themselves upheld 'powerful gender roles that required self-sacrifice and mutuality on the part of poor women', At the same time women faced an economic system which kept and exploited them as labour so cheap that their earnings had always to be supplemented by men - husbands, fathers, brothers or sons.

Andrew August has produced a book which though brief rests on an immense amount of work, lightly borne. Though complex it is well organised. Each chapter is broken up into sections and subsections (twice however the headings are confusingly in the wrong fount - pp. 88 and 92), and concludes with a useful summary. There is a detailed breakdown of the kinds of work done by women in the three neighbourhoods, with in each case a good sense of the larger chronological and labour context and neither too little detail nor too much. Issues of birth rate, life-cycle, migration, household and employment are all held in balance. Perhaps it would have been interesting to know more about other kinds of difference. In Lisson Grove, for instance, with its Irish-born population and no doubt also London-born who identified as Irish, is there any discernible effect on ages of marriage, or fertility patterns, or employment? Globe Town was at this point still very English. In other East End neighbourhoods, especially in Stepney and Whitechapel, Jewish immigration was growing - what were the consequences in terms of gender, household and employment?

The urge to ask for Andrew August's close analysis to be extended still further demonstrates the interest of this book - its approach is so fruitful that in the end one wants more. It provides a heartening demonstration that the qualitative research of recent years can be reinforced and extended by quantitative research, that numerical data need not be narrow, oversimplifying and dry, and that there is always more to be discovered. It should be widely read by all those interested in women's history, social history, historical geography, labour history, and the kind of London history which brings in all such approaches.

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