

Liberty's Dawn by Emma Griffin

By Amanda Foreman

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Was the Industrial Revolution a catastrophe for ordinary folk drawn into the towns – or a new world of opportunity?



The North of England was transformed by factories (Joseph McKeown/Hulton Archive/Getty)

Towards the end of 1869 the industrial town of Ashton-under-Lyne was shocked to its core by the suicide of one of its leading citizens. Thousands turned out for the funeral of William Aitken (1812-1869). A former leading light of the Chartist movement, Aitken was a beloved figure in the town. But his chequered life remains a challenge for historians hoping to find linear explanations to 19th-century working-class radicalism. Was he a product of the Industrial Revolution, for example, or a relic of 18th-century populism?

In Emma Griffin's intriguing and original thesis about the effects of the Industrial Revolution, Aitken has a small but important part to play as the mouthpiece for her controversial claim that the revolution "was not a story of immiseration, degradation and loss" for the working classes. Rather, it "helped to create a proud and independent proletariat . . . a class of working men ready to take its place in the cultural and political life of the nation".

Using 350 autobiographies on which to stake her claim, Griffin looks at men, women and children and asks how their lives changed in the wake of industrialisation. Not surprisingly, Griffin concludes that children in mining and factory towns suffered greater hardship than their rural counterparts because they were sent to work at an earlier age; usually at 8 rather than 10 or 11, and were forced to work longer hours in harsher conditions. Crucially, though, Griffin argues that child labour was not the result of uncaring capitalism but the continuation of a long tradition in British society.

For women, the story is more mixed. Griffin regards the Industrial Revolution as the generator of a massive cultural revolution in the bedroom. The age of marriage declined significantly during the 19th century and centuries-old marriage customs disappeared almost overnight.

But it is the menfolk who were the greatest winners in the brave new world of manufacturing. Not only did they have greater access to employment opportunities, but they also gained from the explosion of Sunday schools, night schools, improvement societies, mechanics' institutes, and reading rooms that accompanied the rapid urbanisation. Griffin argues that the combination of increased wealth, access to education, and greater labour mobility destroyed the old servant-master relationship. Working men "acquired a voice for themselves and the capacity for action". But this is a leap, and not a conclusion shared by such as Aitken — who complained about the apathy and "ingratitude" of "the people". "As a rule," he wrote in his autobiography, "all men who have hitherto taken the people's side of the question have had to sacrifice their own money and time."

At 250 pages there isn't enough evidence or discussion for Griffin to take on her doubters. She has produced an exciting new work that holds out the promise of something truly groundbreaking. But for now, the jury is still out over whether Arnold Toynbee's "darker period" is to be replaced by Griffin's "dawn of liberty".

***Liberty's Dawn* by Emma Griffin; Yale University Press, 336pp, £25; e-book £14.40. To buy this book visit thetimes.co.uk/bookshop or call 08452712134**