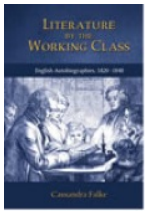
Home
Editorial
Authors' Responses
Guidelines For Reviewers
About Us
Masthead
Feedback

Search Every Field
Search

LITERATURE BY THE WORKING CLASS: ENGLISH AUTOBIOGRAPHIES, 1820-1848



By Cassandra Falke
(Cambria, 2013) xxvii + 234 pp.
Reviewed by Nan Hackett on 2014-05-04.

Click here for a PDF version.

Click here to buy the book on Amazon.

Working-class autobiographies have long been recognized as worthy of academic attention. In Regina Gagnier's *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832-1920* (1991) and in my own *Nineteenth Century British Working Autobiographies: An Annotated Bibliography* (1985), we focused on the relationship between authors and autobiographies or between selves and self-representations, particularly as mediated by class. Initially, only social historians had written on working-class autobiographies, which were used to discuss living and working conditions of the lower class and politics of the nineteenth century. Our books argued that working-class autobiographies deserved to be studied by literary critics.

Over twenty years later, Cassandra Falke has accepted our invitation to consider working-class autobiographies as literature. Strangely enough, however, she faults Gagnier for characterizing working-class autobiographies as "rhetorical" and me for claiming that these self-representations were de-personalized, as if literature were not rhetorical and de-personalization not a literary choice. Falke herself concentrates on rhetorical control in the five autobiographies she treats, extensively explaining how editors, publishers, and other commercially-invested people as well as those with political interests presented John Clare as a laboring poet and Robert Blincoe as an abused factory worker. Here lies the chief value of this book. Though her generalizations about literary aesthetics in working-class autobiography are questionable, and though she elides all discussion of early nineteenth-century labor politics (as though literature cannot be political), this book makes its mark by individually examining the autobiographies of five working-class men and by showing how publishing and promotion mediated the writing of them.

Falke's corpus is severely limited. Though Gagnier surveyed 804 autobiographies and I based my observations on 173 texts, Falke confines her comments to just five, with an appendix of 73 titles published by 1848. Are the five under discussion typical or atypical of working-class autobiographies of this time period? Falke does not explain why she chose them to justify her claim that working-class autobiography is generically literary. Does she, then, make up in depth what she lacks in breadth? I am inclined to say that she combines useful specifics from five texts with questionable generalizations about literature.

In this re-working of her dissertation, Falke reads working-class autobiography as literature that paralleled in time, if not in form or fame, autobiographies by the Romantic writers Wordsworth, DeQuincey, and Coleridge (x). She hopes to "turn critical attention away from the theorization of autobiography in the 1820s-1840s and toward the practice" (xii). To this end, she first defines her key terms: literature, autobiography, and working class. Her definitions seem random and are not used in her later discussion of the five texts. Once she gets past the theoretical constructs in chapter one to her discussion of the specific autobiographies, however, her observations about the five texts are well-researched and thought-provoking.

Falke's definition of literature is based on Thomas De Quincey's distinction between the communication of power and the communication of knowledge, which neatly corresponds to the contrasting ways in which working-class autobiographies have been used: while literary critics examine their rhetorical suasion and their literary styles, social historians mine them for historical data on politics and labor in the nineteenth century. To this distinction Falke adds Derek Attridge's definition of literature as "singular and inventive" (11). Certainly, most working-class autobiographies *are* singular and inventive, written by men and women inventing themselves as authors whose thoughts and observations of life should be taken seriously. As such, their self-presentations were singular productions, unlike the lives of criminals or the conversion narratives that preceded them. Yet rather than explaining this kind of singularity or inventiveness, Falke notes that when readers consider working-class authors as *hands* more than as heads or as hearts, the "coherent development"(15) of an intellectual or emotional self expected in Romantic autobiography is usually missing. Because literary critics of the earlier nineteenth century thought autobiography a genre to be taken up only by "lofty" and "distinguished"(18) writers, as amply cited by Falke, working-class autobiography was not accepted. Here Falke displays one of her strengths: extensive reading of journalism, pamphlets and other lesser-known forms of literature.

Extensive reading does not always result in clear exposition. In citing critics of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century to help define her terms and lay out her theory, Falke seems haphazard. How does Kenneth Galbraith's distinction between insular and case poverty -- cited from *The Affluent Society* (1971) -- explain Falke's claim that members

of the working class in nineteenth-century Britain fluctuated in their financial and material security depending on the availability of work and the rising or falling of wages, thereby negating Galbraith's economic distinctions? In trying to formulate a "non-essentialist" (22) definition of working class, to define the class without using Marxist terminology or critics, and to insist that definitions of the class must include "cultural constraints" (20), she ultimately equates the working class with the poor.

Certainly, all five of her autobiographers were poor, both as children and as working adults. Yet as skilled artisans (Claxton and Thomson) or as hard-working unskilled laborers (Clare and Blincoe), they would have distinguished themselves from the unemployed. By quoting Andrew Sayer's dictum (from "Class, Moral Worth, and Recognition" [2005]) that "the *poor* are not disadvantaged primarily because others fail to value their identity" (qtd. 22, emphasis added), Falke lumps together two groups usually considered distinct in the nineteenth century. Also, her five exemplary texts, other working-class autobiographies she cites, and Falke herself repeatedly claim that others *do* fail to value workers' identities as autobiographical subjects worthy of literary attention beyond their use as agrarian poets, self-made men, or pathetic workers in need of legislative protection. Her quotation of Sayer continues: the poor "are disadvantaged primarily because they lack the means to live in ways which they as well as others value" (qtd. 22). Unfortunately, Falke ignores a conflict that many working-class autobiographers discuss at length: the conflict between themselves and their fellow workers as well as between themselves and those who considered themselves their "betters." In defending their desire to study mathematics, read literature, save money, and write their life stories, the authors were accused of accepting values that fellow workers derided and more comfortably-classed readers thought "above their station." In contrast, Falke minimizes the problems of class consciousness and class conflict that complicate most working-class autobiographies. According to her, the five autobiographers she treats were "apolitical" writers who "did not see political engagement as a probable means of achieving either their personal goals or their goals for their class" (xvii). In choosing these autobiographies and focusing on their literariness, Falke sidesteps any discussion of labor, politics, and class conflict.

Once Falke moves from theorizing about literature, autobiography, and class, she narrows her focus to five male autobiographers: John Clare, Robert Blincoe, Timothy Claxton, Thomas Carter, and Christopher Thomson. Here her abilities as a literary critic and her knowledge of nineteenth century texts stand out. But her claims for the literariness of Clare, Blincoe, and Claxton give way to questions about how much publishers control what they publish or promote. Clare, she suggests, was represented a laboring poet in his fragmentary autobiographies and as a rustic poet in the biographies written by those who sought to publicize this untaught Romantic author. Blincoe's life story, Falke explains, was used for the Ten Hours bill and factory reform movement, and Claxton was made to play different roles in his US-published autobiography and his England-published *Hints for Mechanics*. On the one hand, then, Clare and Blincoe were denied agency and independence by the journalists and publishers who shaped their self-representations. On the other hand, Claxton was allowed agency in his English *Hints*, but only the agency of a self-made man who was very self-effacing about his working-class origins. Less an autobiography than an advice manual anticipating the self-help books of Samuel Smiles, *Hints* urges the working-class reader to work hard and to accept one's place in the factory system in order to succeed. By contrast, Claxton's American memoir gives a name and a voice to his wife, who appears in *Hints* only as an acquisition along with a lathe and other working tools.

By the time Thomas Carter's *Memoirs of a Working Man* was published in 1845, Falke claims, the Victorian reading public welcomed autobiographies by laborers. Yet Carter seems no freer to discuss his personal life than his precursors were. For this Falke faults both Carter himself and Charles Knight, his publisher, whose association with the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge plainly indicates what he thought autobiography should diffuse. Each of her first four working-class autobiographies is then shown to have been mediated by its publishers or by authors who knew what the public wanted or expected from the life story of a worker. Stories of this kind, Falke admits, were mediated by prevalent class norms of nineteenth century society as interpreted by their publishers or internalized by the authors themselves.

Her fifth autobiography is the exception. According to Falke, Christopher Thomson's *Autobiography of an Artisan* (1847) exemplified the synthesis of "life and opinions" to which Carter and other laboring autobiographers aspired. Thomson, writes Falke, "altered the utilitarian structure of a working man's life that Claxton and Carter had followed--making friendships, books, and aimless walks as much a part of his autobiography as they were of his mental life. Never a rebel politically, Thomson rebelled aesthetically" (142). Thomson's work is one of the most enjoyable working-class autobiographies of all nineteenth-century texts. Like all five of Falke's authors, he was not politically active. Did he gain his aesthetic freedom by sacrificing political interests? Scholars have found that the autobiographies of politically active men and women in nineteenth century English tend to be dry, dull, drab and rhetorically self-effacing. Perhaps Thomson's avoidance of politics freed him to tell the story of his life in a style that Falke found aesthetically interesting. Whether or not his avoidance of politics deserves the credit for his style, he deserves to be read and appreciated for the art and atypical literariness of his autobiography.

Since Falke ends her study with Thomson's book, she does not consider the working-class autobiographies that follow it, including the de-personalized texts of Labour politicians, the sentimental texts of the vanishing agricultural laborers and the melodramatic tale of Ellen Johnston, who told her story with the aid of penny dreadful aesthetics. In the second half of the nineteenth century, autobiographers could choose from a variety of generic templates, though they still tended to be self-effacing.

This book definitely has its merits. Though Falke examines just five books and avoids discussing the political activities or class consciousness of laboring men in nineteenth century England, she ably documents the rhetorical and political power of controlling class interests. Her work should be read for that even more than for what it offers on working-class literature and its aesthetics. Her account of the five texts treated here should prove informative and provocative for students of nineteenth century England, especially of the first half; for critics of autobiography; and for anyone who wants to see how aesthetic values may be shaped by the means of production.

Nan Hackett is Professor of English at Concordia University, St. Paul in St. Paul, Minnesota.

CASSIE FALKE RESPONDS TO NAN HACKETT

The community of scholars researching working-class authors of the romantic period is small. In the spirit of charitable scholarly exchange it is probably best that I not defend, point-by-point, against the assertions Dr. Hackett makes here. Bickering over approaches could stagnate a process of recovery that I would rather see move forward. Dr. Hackett is

right to point out that chapter one of my book has some weaknesses. My delineation of my own critical project should be more clear there and should look forward to future possibilities for study in working-class romanticism more than looking back at the ways this book differs from preceding studies of working-class autobiography, studies to which I am obviously indebted.

A vital process, positioning work in reference to previous scholarship nevertheless tends to create dichotomies where it does not find them. Dr. Hackett feels that I posit dichotomies between rhetoric and literature and politics and literature. In fact, in the introduction and first chapter of my book, I try to emphasize that these categories are historically constructed and furthermore that they have been constructed in a way that obscures innovations working-class authors made to the autobiographical form. My hope for the book remains that it will exemplify ways of reading working-class autobiography that underscore their formal innovation without neglecting their material history.

Regrettably, Dr. Hackett devotes seven paragraphs of her twelve paragraph review to the problems she finds in chapter one. Her treatment of the introduction, conclusion, and chapters two through five centers around the first paragraphs of these sections. Other readers will, I hope, find more of value in the body of these chapters. Other readers, I hope, will close my volume more focused on the working-class authors whose work it was my goal to bring to light.

Leave a comment on Nan Hackett's review.

Name:

Email:

Comments:

I'm not a robot

reCAPTCHA
Privacy - Terms

Submit

About Us
Copyright © Dartmouth College, 2008-2020