

**Emma Griffin, Bread Winner: An Intimate History of the Victorian Economy (Yale, 2020) [book review]**

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Review of Emma Griffin, *Bread Winner: An Intimate History of the Victorian Economy*  
(Yale, 2020)

This insightful book by Emma Griffin examines the breadwinner model of wage earning from 1830-1914. It builds on her previous book, *Liberty's Dawn*, which used autobiographies to reconstruct the lived experience for the working-classes in the Industrial Revolution. By drawing on 662 working-class autobiographies, Griffin casts light on the 'interior workings' of family life and argues that we should consider the 'domestic' as the 'mainstream' (pp. ix, 5). Only by bringing together the 'social' and the 'economic', Griffin posits, can we truly make sense of what life was like for families in Victorian and Edwardian Britain. The main argument of the book is that the breadwinner model failed: the real-wage gains that men made in the nineteenth century did not translate into higher living standards for their families. Using autobiographies, Griffin is able to convincingly prove that, for urban families at least, economic progress deepened gender inequality and childhood poverty. The autobiographers reveal that women and children did not share in the narratives of nineteenth-century economic progress.

The book opens by examining women's work. Of her 140 female autobiographies, 38% revealed that they undertook unpaid domestic work at home as girls or adolescents, and several of these went on to work in service, the 'most significant employer' of unmarried women (p. 37). Griffin also shows how many shop owners paid artificially low wages to female employees under the pretext that they were 'teaching the girl the trade' (p. 53). In Lancashire, Cheshire and Yorkshire, however, female employment in mills was readily available and comparatively well-

paid, but wages never reached a level for the female operatives to live independently. Griffin argues that the low wages paid to women was a crucial component of the breadwinner model as it led to a dependency on the male wage. The lack of opportunities for women confined them to a narrow range of employment and, as a result, limited their opportunities for economic independence.

The second part of the book charts male wages. She shows how even in the 'low-wage' sectors of the economy, male earnings were sufficient for independent living and, of course, supporting a family. In practice, however, as male wages rose, so too did inequality between the sexes. In the majority of cases there was no correlation between rising male wages and rising living standards of their dependents and this was particularly acute in urban areas. Of the 491 autobiographers who knew their father, 57% of them revealed that he was an unreliable breadwinner. A small number of the autobiographies identified that this was due to unemployment or health conditions, but the vast majority indicated that their fathers spent their earnings on themselves. Accounts of heavy drinking, Griffin shows, run 'like a thread' through accounts of working-class life and were clearly detrimental to family finances and the family's peace (pp. 117-8). One result of the high wages paid to male urban workers was a disinclination to work when they had earned enough to spend on their chosen pastime - the backward bending supply of labour curve - and, sadly, drink was often prioritised over families.

In contrast, in rural areas, the breadwinner model was more effective. Only 14 out of the 142 autobiographers raised in agricultural villages indicated that their fathers were 'unreliable providers' (p. 122). Griffin posits two explanations why this was the case: the scarcity of work meant that not turning up was too risky; and that the low wages meant fathers had less 'freedom to spend any money on themselves'

(p. 125). Many historians have been cautious to endorse the censorial viewpoint of Victorian temperance advocates and social commentators on working-class culture. The autobiographers, in contrast, suggest that these views may have been more accurate reflections of urban life than has been recognised by later scholars

Griffin moves on to chart the economic and social impact of absent fathers. Out of the 662 autobiographies, 171 (26%) revealed that they had spent part of their childhood in a fatherless household. Death accounted for 12%, illegitimacy 3%, and desertion 11%. Desertion had a more serious impact on family finances than death. Griffin shows how women could, and did, remarry after the death of their husband and plug the drain of family finances with another male wage (if, of course, their new husband was a reliable breadwinner). Desertion, in contrast, left women and their dependants stranded with no access to another source of income. Griffin convincingly proves an intimate connection between high wages and desertion. Indeed, the autobiographers highlight how the 'loss of father's earnings' was the 'defining feature of paternal separation' (p. 155). In contrast, agricultural areas had lower mortality, illegitimacy, and desertion rates, further emphasising how the breadwinner model worked in the British countryside. Of course, when a father died, deserted, or was unreliable as a breadwinner, women had no option but to work in a 'desperate attempt' to substitute for a male wage (p. 173). Griffin reveals that this work was often irregular: laundry work, lodgers and dressmaking, for instance, all helped keep urban households solvent. In rural areas, women's work was widespread, even with a quality breadwinner. Griffin suggests that this reflects local custom and tradition, rather than economic necessity.

One of the most interesting aspects of this book was the study of diets. She shows how hunger remained ever present for many working-class children, but food

supply problems, such as harvest failures, had been eliminated by the mid-nineteenth century. Before 1840, diets were controlled by wages and the price of bread and large swathes of the population were affected when harvests failed. The repeal of the Corn Laws, mechanisation, and distribution all helped to lower food costs so that by the end of the nineteenth century, childhood hunger resulted not from a lack of resources, but from 'failures in the distribution of resources' (p. 208). She also examines what was eaten by families and how this changed over time. Between 1830 and 1914, diets changed from predominantly vegetarian, to one where meat was regarded as an aspiration for even the 'poorest of households' (p. 212). The chapter closes by examining how hungry children fed themselves in the late Victorian city. Some autobiographers admitted to begging, such as Jack Lanigan, who begged bread from the workmen leaving an engineering works, whilst others revealed that stealing and scrounging was an effective way to feed themselves (p. 222). Griffin also shows how the growing network of charitable activities helped fill empty bellies: soup kitchens made a 'substantial contribution to the diets of the poorest children'. Some autobiographers recalled the stigma of accepting food from the soup kitchen, whilst others suggested that it was 'too normal a part of life to occasion feelings of shame' (p. 225). The testament of so many hungry children is a constituent part of Griffin's argument: rising male wages did not translate into a rising living standards for most families in Victorian and Edwardian Britain.

The penultimate chapter of the book traces the 'history of emotions' of children towards their families. Griffin reveals how negative emotions towards fathers, especially those who earned high wages and drank heavily, was a key feature of many autobiographies. In contrast, males who earned low wages or were made redundant through no fault of their own, were 'praised and respected' by their

offspring; it was the 'commitment to the family' not the 'size of the wage packet' that many autobiographers remembered (p. 235). Griffin also pays particular attention to the physical chastisement of children and shows that it was a more quotidian experience of family life than has been recognised before. The autobiographers reveal that many mothers were deeply unhappy with their lives, especially those who had no option but to work, and that ultimately took its toll on the wellbeing of their mothers (p. 256).

The final chapter examines the later life of many of Griffin's autobiographers. Of the 450 male autobiographers, 140 reveal that they were politically active, and 57 of became Members of Parliament. Tom Mann, Harry Pollitt, and Walter Citrine, for instance, all wrote autobiographies. In contrast, only 34 female autobiographers mentioned any form of political activism, and only 4 became MPs: Margaret Bondfield, Bessie Braddock, Jennie Lee, and Ellen Wilkinson. Of these four, two of them never married, and none of them had children. Motherhood, Griffin concludes, 'was a serious impediment to political engagement' (p. 285). Many of the male politicians underscored the importance of work and high wages to their political journey. Work provided the opportunity to meet new people and to share political ideas; wages allowed them to spend time at night school to improve their education facilitating entry into the political sphere. Conversely, the need for household labour, and the low wages paid to women when they did work, combined to confine women to the home.

Emma Griffin's book convincingly proves that the breadwinner model failed so many women and children. The rise in real wages that many men shared in did not translate into higher living standards for their dependents. If anything, the opposite is true. The dominance of the breadwinner model widened inequality between men and

women between 1830 and 1914. A few more dates of when the autobiographers were writing would have helped the reader make sense of change and continuity; however, this possibly reflects the fact that the autobiographers themselves did not specify when something happened. Overall, this is a remarkable and fascinating book that brilliantly illuminates the human character of economic life in Victorian and Edwardian Britain.

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