

Stephen Knight, *English Industrial Fiction of the Mid-Nineteenth Century: The Voice of the People*, New York and London: Routledge, 2024, 175 pp., ISBN 978102739052

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Today's visitors to Manchester's Chetham's Library, the oldest public library in the UK, are still shown not only the hoofprint of the devil Elizabethan magus John Dee supposedly evoked inside the building, but also the table where Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx – who jointly authored the Communist Manifesto in 1848 – studied and worked together. German-born Engels had been sent to Manchester in 1842 by his father, who thought this change of air would cure him of his radicalism. Yet, it was there he fell in love with Mary Burns, whose acting as a guide to some of the poorest districts in industrial Britain ultimately led to the publication of *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845).

While Engels was observing the social landscape of the industrial revolution, other people proved sensitive to the distress of the mill workers, their poverty, their unhealthy working conditions, their struggles and the moral debasement that was consequent on deprivation and lack of hope. These strong impressions triggered not only political pamphlets and practical action, but also a widespread creative response in the form of poems, plays and prose narratives that variously combine radicalism (or at times anti-radicalism) and romance.

It is this body of works Stephen Knight tackles in *English Industrial Fiction of the Mid-Nineteenth Century: The Voice of the People*, a book that reveals the full extent of Prof. Knight's voracity as a reader, the intensity of his critical attention and the clever, scholarly sincerity of his political engagement. This volume also testifies to a fruitful dialogue with the previous studies other critics

devoted to this subject. Louis James's *Fiction for the Working Man. A Study of the Literature Produced for the Working Classes in Early Victorian Urban England: 1830 – 1850* (1963) is duly referenced by Prof. Knight, together with Martha Vicinus's *The Industrial Muse: A Study of Nineteenth-Century British Working-Class Literature* (1974), among a wealth of other studies. This gives me the opportunity to mention also some previous works Knight himself devoted to related subjects, from *British Industrial Fictions* (which he coedited with Gustav Klaus in 2000) to his recent *G. W. M. Reynolds and His Fiction* (2019).

While poems such as Thomas Wilson's "The Pitman's Pay", (1826) and Thomas Hood's "The Song of the Shirt" (1843) or popular plays like John Walker's *The Factory Lad* (1832) and Douglas Jerrold's unpublished *The Factory Girl* are of interest in themselves, Knight has chosen to focus on a set of

59 narratives, from short stories to lengthy novels, which offer quite different accounts of the situation, from distinctly radical readings which support worker resistance to fully conservative tracts in favour of the mill-owners and primarily blaming troublesome workers for creating problems over issues which are held simply to have origins in the political economy. (141)

Although this set of fictions includes 'canonical' novels such as Benjamin Disraeli's *Coningsby* (1844) and *Sybil* (1845), Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855), Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849) and Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), the majority of the titles Knight discusses are virtually unknown today. In order to obviate this problem, ensuring effective critical communication, Knight has adopted a two-pronged strategy. After hinting at the identity and ideological agenda of the various authors, as well as at the social and political issues that filtered into their narratives, he summarises the plot itself, thus paving the way for the overall analysis of this literary genre offered in the last chapter.

The reasons why one should read this book are many. First of all, despite our living in a 'post-industrial' age, capitalism – with its cycle of production and consumption, and its economic priorities – runs our lives even more pervasively than in the past. Seeking for a balance between capital and workforce is still central to our lives as it was at the time of Chartism. The book commends our respect because of its generous inclusive attitude, which is spelled out right from the subtitle – *The Voice of the People*. In any epoch, there are people who find themselves marginalized, and those who help making their voices heard are

doing a service to society as a whole, although of course this ethical choice proves in itself a source of frictions, as Knight's book shows while discussing the reception of certain novels. In addition to proving the socially inclusive power of literature, this volume also invites a critical reappraisal of what Margaret Cohen defined "the great unread" (1999: 23) – the mass of popular fictions that circulated widely at the time of publication but that was subsequently excluded from both teaching and literary debates.

This book promotes our awareness of the past also by shedding light on the role women played in publicising the conditions of the working classes, as shown by the literary output of Hannah and Sarah More, Harriet Martineau, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, Frances Trollope, Elisabeth Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë. While some of these women were moved by an evangelical compassion for their fellow human beings, others were motivated by ideology rather than religion, as shown by Martineau, who believed – like William Godwin – in necessitism, and who titled a collection of short narratives *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832).

I opened this review mentioning the Manchester setting of Engels and Marx's studies, the thought of which accompanied me while reading Knight's book. I wish to end these reflections by mentioning some of the other connections the volume evoked in my readerly imagination. Exploring the origins of this literary genre – in the age of Chartism, the 1832 Reform Bill, the newspaper tax and the events of 1848 – alerts us to a number of issues that resonate with subsequent fictions, not only of industrial import. The ideal of *medieval communalism* that transpires from Disraeli's works also marks William Morris's late 19th-century Utopian novel *News from Nowhere* (1890), an attempt to combine Marxism with medievalism and romance. Aptly subtitled *An Epoch of Rest*, this novel clearly conveyed hope for a resolution of social conflicts, which however kept resurfacing at the turn of the century. Yet another age of unrest followed World War One, as shown by the general strike of 1926, which D.H. Lawrence was ready to weave into the symbolic patterns of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) together with a nostalgia for medieval organicism. Thus the sexiest novel of the 20th century celebrates the epos of vitalism against mechanism also through repeated references to the forest of Sherwood, surviving in the industrial age as a wounded wood, which is surrounded by a mining scenery of Dantesque horror.

These free associations enable me to introduce a more serious question. While focusing on a distant time, at the climax of the industrial revolution, Knight's book actually provides us with critical tools that help us achieve a

better understanding of the resurging social conflicts (and therapeutic efforts) that mark the entire span of modernity. The author of *The Politics of Myth* (2015), a book that reconnects distant ages in a felicitous attempt at critical *longue durée*, has once again proved able to discuss a literary phenomenon in depth, in relation to a precise socio-political background, while also alerting us to a rich cloud of finely spun – but how solid! – connections.

References

Cohen, Margaret. 1999. *The Sentimental Education of the Novel*. Princeton (NJ): Princeton UP.