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Working-class autobiography in the nineteenth century

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David Vincent

Working-class autobiography, 1790-1900

Synopsis

The field of nineteenth century working class autobiography was opened up in the 1980s with the work of John Burnet and David Vincent. Through their publications, and their bibliographical work in conjunction with David Mayall, they drew attention to a diverse and fertile genre whose existence reflected a major transformation in the way in which the labouring poor regarded themselves and were in turn viewed by those who had hitherto monopolised the use of the printed word. The discovery of more than a thousand texts by working class men and women was associated with the growing interest in 'history from below.' It proved possible to use these writings to cast fresh light on the pragmatics of self-representation (Gagnier) and on specific topics ranging from working class reading (Rose), women (Swindells) social mobility (Miles) and child labour (Humphries).

In the last three decades engagement with the genre has been influenced by the rise of cultural studies. New questions about the autobiographies as physical texts have been posed by the history of the book and its interest in the physical production of the written word and the nature of reading practices. Through the work of Robbie Gray and others, the interface between working class self-representation and the still dominant mode of the bourgeois memoir has been explored. The application of the descriptor 'working class' to these writings has been challenged by the foregrounding of the distinct histories of women, immigrants and other neglected groups. As historians and literary critics have begun to work together, issues such as the narrative and discursive strategies of self-taught working class writers have begun to receive serious attention (Dentith). At the same time the evolving agenda of social history, particularly the growing interest in subjectivity and privacy, has renewed interest in a genre which continues to expand as new texts are brought to light.

Biography

David Vincent is Professor of Social History at the Open University. His publications include: *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom* (1979, 1982); with John Burnett and David Mayall, *The Autobiography of the Working Class. An Annotated Critical Bibliography*. 3 Vols (1983, 1987, 1988) and studies of the history of literacy and secrecy in Britain and Europe.

