

Emma Griffin, *Bread Winner: An Intimate History of the Victorian Economy*

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020. Pp. 320. ISBN 978-0-3002-3006-2. £20.00 (hardback)

Lindsay Middleton

University of Glasgow and University of Aberdeen

Emma Griffin's *Bread Winner* opens with a paradox: though economic measures indicate a steady rise in wages across Britain over the nineteenth century, the real picture was not one of increased wealth or security for all (p. 2). Greater wealth threatens greater inequality, and for the most marginalized people of Victorian and Edwardian Britain – working-class women and children – increasing wages could usher in problems felt keenly within the home (p. 2). Despite growing industrialization and the changes it afforded, for much of the period between the 1830s and the outbreak of the First World War, British society operated according to traditional models centred around the family. It was the expectation that men earned wages, while women turned those wages into food, clothes and a comfortable home. In her book, Griffin sets out to demonstrate the precarity of this economic model using a sample of over six hundred Victorian and Edwardian autobiographies, written by people born between 1830 and 1903. From these texts, Griffin mobilizes the intricacies of daily life to highlight the powerful influence familial relations had on the earning and spending of money, and vice versa.

Separating the book into three parts, 'Work', 'Money' and 'Life', *Bread Winner* makes the provocative argument that an increase in men's wages often worked to the detriment of their dependents. Chapters 1, 2 and 3 explore the gendered expectations that governed the working world, considering women's paid work, men's paid work and women's unpaid domestic work respectively. Griffin demonstrates how limited women's choices were in contrast to the increasing opportunities men had. Men's work carried cultural weight, enabled social relationships and gave men the freedom to spend money. If women worked in factories or domestic service they were often badly paid, and their limited opportunities narrowed further after marriage and childbirth. The assumptions surrounding men's versus women's work created an economic model that was deeply engrained in personal and societal expectations, as demonstrated when Griffin recounts one writer's recollection that 'his father's duty was complete once he handed over the wages; but his mother's work just started from there' (p. 103). These aspects of working life actively perpetuated gendered divisions so that homes could function. The sustained inequalities between men and women had darker implications, however, when personal decisions or failings saw the balance of power tipped too far in the direction of the male earner.

Fathers are the subject of Chapter 4, as Griffin uses childhood recollections from the autobiographies to discuss the external and personal factors that made a good or a bad breadwinner: the crux of her book. We have seen that men gave their wives money to run the home, but this exchange required a level of trust and generosity. Bad health and the availability of employment could negatively influence a man's wages, but Griffin largely focuses on men who earned enough money yet made decisions that deprived their wives and children. While her argument leans towards this material, that does not make it less striking: 63 per cent of men who were said not to provide for their families fall into this latter category, with alcoholism, irregular shifts and an unwillingness to share wages cited as the reasons behind their neglect (p. 120). Urban

settings heightened the likelihood of these problems: shift work was available to take or leave, and there were multiple places to spend money outwith the home. Those who lived rurally did not have the same access to recreational spaces, relying more heavily on their home for food and comfort. Griffin postulates that even though the wages of rural men were predominantly lower than those working in towns and cities, and at increased risk from external factors like crop failure, increased hardship often bolstered a successful breadwinner model. Families had to work harder and, crucially, together in order to survive: 'all partners on one family enterprise, and all things ran smoothly in their course' (p. 127). Griffin thus situates men's personal choices in a larger map of social change: change that was particularly felt in industrialized hubs. While many fathers were good providers, higher male wages tilted the balance of power in the direction of men even more so than it had been in the past. The ownership of money within the family unit needs to be examined to understand discrepancies between wages and living standards.

The rest of Part Two explores the collateral damage wrought when the breadwinner model failed. Chapter 5 investigates family breakdown via divorce, death and desertion, while Chapter 6 turns to the lives of the mothers who chose or were forced to take on paid work. Consistently, it is women and their children who struggle without a male earner, having to work harder and live on less within societal structures that largely prevented them from maintaining economic stability. The section on 'Life' contains three final chapters that examine the place of food, emotions and political activism in the lives of the writers, always with a focus on how familial hierarchies influence their presence. Griffin's short conclusion then returns to her overarching argument: it is by paying attention to the nuanced details of family life that we can best understand 'large historical questions' (p. 301). This is where the strength of *Bread Winner* lies. Were the statistics that draw patterns between money and relationships left as numbers, the overall argument would risk feeling repetitive at times. But Griffin weaves her primary sources throughout the chapters, keeping lived experience at the core of her observations. Personal incidents – begging for chip scraps, or watching your father eat an unattainable egg – illuminate the gaps between broad economic patterns and real life. Indeed, though there could be more attention paid to the changing literary contexts these authors were writing within, that does not stop the voices of the autobiography writers shining through. In *Bread Winner*, Griffin convincingly demonstrates that noticing the small, domestic and often overlooked details of historical life is a vibrant and compelling way to gain insight into the big questions of the past.

doi:10.1017/S0007087421000108

Pratik Chakrabarti, *Inscriptions of Nature: Geology and the Naturalization of Antiquity*

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020. Pp. 280. ISBN: 978-1-4214-3874-0. \$54.95 (hardback)

Gianamar Giovannetti-Singh

University of Cambridge

Inscriptions of Nature is a beautifully written, provocative and timely book by historian of science Pratik Chakrabarti. On the surface, it appears to tell a captivating story about the