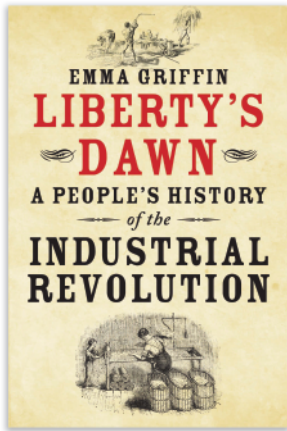


## Reconsidering a Revolution



**LIBERTY'S DAWN:  
A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF THE  
INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION**

BY EMMA GRIFFIN  
NEW HAVEN, CT.: YALE UNIVERSITY  
PRESS, 2013, 295 PAGES

REVIEWED BY DAVID A. PRICE

The British Industrial Revolution, the burst of developments in manufacturing that lasted from 1760 to the mid-18th century, has often been treated harshly by historians and others. The Oxford economic historian Arnold Toynbee, who popularized the term, called the Industrial Revolution “a period as disastrous and as terrible as any through which a nation has ever passed.” Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times* were literary mortar rounds aimed at it. The poet William Blake referred to the factories of the era as “dark Satanic Mills.”

Yet it seems many of the working poor did not share the view that times were rotten. In *Liberty's Dawn*, University of East Anglia historian Emma Griffin sifts through hundreds of personal histories left behind by workers of the time (almost all of them men) and finds a record of growing economic opportunity and political engagement.

“He is a misanthrope indeed,” wrote one, “who would wish the old days or customs back again.”

While conceding that the abuses during the Industrial Revolution were real — including long hours, dangerous conditions, and child labor — Griffin draws from the workers’ accounts to create a portrait of the improvements that the revolution brought to them. Foremost among these was the availability of employment. In Britain’s allegedly idyllic preindustrial age, work could be hard to come by, and farm jobs commonly brought bare subsistence wages. The economic growth that came with industrialization, however, brought not only abundant and steady factory jobs, but also easier entry into the skilled trades.

Beyond lifting many Britons out of subsistence, Griffin reports, the Industrial Revolution “changed the balance of power in the master-servant relationship.” Abundant jobs made it tenable for workers to respond to petty oppressiveness from their employers by moving on to work elsewhere. A worker who became fed up with humble submission could reject it. Among the rebels she cites is a farmhand, George Mitchell, who resolved to leave after a hard day’s work ended in an argument with his employer; he gave two weeks’ notice and took a job at a stone quarry in the next town, doubling his income in the process.

Industrialization may have also made it easier for couples

to marry. Studies of church records have suggested that the average marriage age of men, which was 27 before the Industrial Revolution, fell to 25 by the 1800s; that of women fell from 26 to 23. Griffin finds in the workers’ memoirs that the decision to marry was tied closely to personal prosperity and surmises that the economics of the times enabled young men and women to marry earlier. Young marriage, no longer the privilege of a few, was common in industrial areas, while it appears to have remained rare in the agricultural countryside.

Perhaps the most far-reaching effect of industrialization, on Griffin’s account, was the spread of literacy among workers. To be sure, the Industrial Revolution, with its use of child labor, blunted any growth that might have otherwise taken place in elementary education; on average, the workers in her study started work at the age of just 10. Yet literacy was more common than might be expected. It seems puzzling at first. Of one worker, Emanuel Lovekin, who went to the coal mines as a child, Griffin asks: “How was a man whose schooling ended at the age of seven and a half able to write an autobiography of 7,000 words?”

The answer is that industrial Britain produced educational opportunities for teens and adults. After Lovekin as a teen “began to feel very Strongley the desieries to learn to read,” in his words, he attended a local night school. He also became involved in a Methodist Sunday school, first as a student and later as a teacher. Others like him took part not only in night schools (both commercial and charitable), but also in mutual improvement societies. The latter were small groups of workers who pooled their money to buy books and then discussed or debated them. For some men, mutual improvement societies became a means of gaining the skills for political organizing and served as a route into politics.

In contrast to the gains made by men, it is clear that women generally did not share in the new employment or educational opportunities (apart from access to Sunday schools) — no doubt a result, in large part, of cultural attitudes toward women’s work and roles.

If taken as a scientific study, Griffin’s account is open to methodological objections, especially as to the unrepresentative nature of the memoirs. By definition, only the workers who grasped the opportunities for literacy left behind written accounts of their lives. In addition, her book would have been strengthened by a fuller account of other historical work that has been sympathetic to the Industrial Revolution and its effects on the lower classes, such as that of the late R. M. Hartwell. Still, *Liberty's Dawn* offers fascinating and colorful first-person views of the period that, at least in material terms, launched the modern age. **EF**