

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Levine, David and Keith Wrightson, *The Making of an Industrial Society: Whickham 1560–1765*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991. Pp. Xxi, 456. Maps, tables, index. \$112.50

Ian J. Gentles

Volume 22, Number 1, October 1993

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016731ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016731ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Gentles, I. J. (1993). Review of [Levine, David and Keith Wrightson, *The Making of an Industrial Society: Whickham 1560–1765*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991. Pp. Xxi, 456. Maps, tables, index. \$112.50]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 22(1), 62–63. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016731ar>

Levine, David and Keith Wrightson, *The Making of an Industrial Society: Whickham 1560-1765*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991. Pp. Xxi, 456. Maps, tables, index. \$112.50.

The medieval manor of Whickham, situated a mile or two upstream from Newcastle, at the junction of the rivers Tyne and Derwent, had long been part of the possessions of the bishopric of Durham. In the later sixteenth century however, the English crown, insatiably hungry for new revenues, had obliged the bishop to surrender his mining rights in order to exploit properly the riches beneath the soil of the manor. These rights were soon sublet to a ring of Newcastle burgesses who quick to exploit the fabulous deposits of coal that sat only a few feet beneath the surface of the green hillsides of the manor. Within the space of a few years this coal-owning oligarchy became prodigiously rich, and Whickham was transformed from a pastoral manor to one of the earliest industrialized centres in England. Within a century its population had quadrupled. At the top of the social pyramid was a tiny elite of coal-owning baronets. At the bottom was a great mass of coal-workers, ironworkers, labourers and cottagers that included over three-quarters of the parish. The old manorial livestock-rearing economy had been almost completely eclipsed. By the mid-seventeenth century, Whickham was not a "pre-industrial" parish: it was an industrial parish in a "pre-industrial" age. As such, it exhibited the demographic characteristics of an industrial society; lower mean age at first marriage, higher cumulative fertility, higher infant and child mortality, lower life expectancy, particularly for men, and continuous population mobility. The demographic experience of the two thousand or so inhabitants of this small town was essentially no different from those "devourers of mankind", the explosively growing cit-

ies of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The fruit of a massive joint research project on primary sources spanning several centuries, this book is a model of careful scholarship, clear, graceful writing, and generous-minded discussion of other people's work.

Levine and Wrightson have come up with several startling findings. Contrary to what they expected, the authors report that the so-called dual economy of industry and agriculture was not a reality in the village and parish of Whickham. It was almost a pure wage economy, based on a single commodity, coal. Working conditions, vividly described by the authors, were almost unimaginably harsh. Although coal miners did well in good times, the endless cycle of boom and bust meant that there were many years of want, illness and sometimes of real hunger. In any given year an average of forty per cent of families depended on the parish for relief. Consequently, the poor relief system was of central importance in the community. With gradually-rising prosperity, the system became more generous over time. "Although it would be going much too far to suggest that the system was essentially "benevolent and sympathetic" in operation," state the authors, "it would be churlish to ignore the fact that it was sometimes so" (p.353).

This tone of qualified positive sympathy for the community and its institutions may land the authors in trouble with those who prefer the past to be painted in darker hues. Thus, whereas Lawrence Stone has categorically informed us that the typical Elizabethan village was a place of malice and hatred, enlivened by the occasional witch hunt, Levine and Wrightson paint a much more nuanced portrait of a community with a stable col-

lective identity based on their shared interest in the town fields, the commons of Whickham Fell, and their common meeting place, the parish church. There they not only participated in the rituals of marriage, baptism, communion and burial, but also stood witness to the public penances of those convicted of moral delinquencies or failures in their religious duties. The myriad relationships of small-scale debt and credit that have survived from the sixteenth century are just one type of evidence that persuades the authors that "the neighbourhood was not only a support network, but also a reference group and a moral community, founded upon the expectation of adherence to conventional standards of both public and private behaviour" (p.280).

This said, Levine and Wrightson go on to make the point that kinship relations in this coal-mining parish were extremely loose. In contrast to Cressy and Chaytor, they find that for most people the nuclear family had supreme importance in their lives. Many marriages were happy and companionate, while "children were much prized and desired" (p.321). In particular small children were heavily indulged. Findings such as these are no surprise to those familiar with the early-modern history of the family, but they hammer another nail into the coffin of the "nightmare" version of family history popularized fifteen or twenty years ago by Lloyd de Mause, Lawrence Stone and others. The illegitimacy rate, quite high in the sixteenth century, shrank steadily in the seventeenth century, and remained extremely low until the 1730s.

The authors are concerned to establish that the coalminers of Whickham were not "a race apart;" nor was the community a "sink of disorder" despite the transience of so many of its householders in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The very low rates of assault, theft, counterfeiting, infanticide and homicide

refute the conventional belief that Whickham was "the habitat of a savage & brutalized plebeian population that had slipped the bridle of control" (p.306). The widespread notion of marital endogamy among coalminers is also shown to be a myth.

The coalminers' self-respect is most clearly demonstrated, the authors argue, in the mass strikes that they mounted in both 1731 and 1765. Foreshadowing the organized activities of the nineteenth-century working class, these collective work stoppages prevented the coal owners from increasing workloads and curbing the right of pitmen to switch employers at will. Accompanied by remarkably little violence, the strikes illustrate the growth of a disciplined class consciousness, and underline the authors' point that the participants were not "a rabble of coal-heavers" ... they were pitmen, and they also conceived themselves to be free-born Englishmen."

My only criticism of this book concerns its focus. Not intended as a work of urban history, *The Making of an Industrial Society* is really an intensive study of a small locality in north-eastern England. Except for the last fifty pages its main subject is the coalminers and their families who in the mid-eighteenth century comprised only about half the population of the parish of Whickham. Not until the two final chapters does the adjacent city of Newcastle—one of England's major cities both then and now—figure prominently in the account. In describing the collective activities of the coalminers of the Wear and Tyne coalfields between 1730 and 1765, Levine and Wrightson almost abandon Whickham so as to treat the Durham coalfield as a whole. At this point the book stops being an intensive socio-economic study of one community, and turns into a piece of labour history, although a fascinating one. Apart from this slight problem of focus, however, the book can

be recommended unreservedly as a first-rate analysis of the impact of early industrialization on an urbanizing community.

IAN J. GENTLES
Department of History
Glendon College, York University

Tyack, Geoffrey. *Sir James Pennethorne and the Making of Victorian London.* (Cambridge Studies in the History of Architecture.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. Pp. xvi, 336. 6 Colour Plates, 127 Black-and-white Plates, Bibliography, Index. \$150.00 (cloth).

Although this new series of Cambridge Studies in the History of Architecture is "meant primarily for professional historians of architecture and their students," Dr. Tyack has succeeded in creating a volume that will interest a much broader group, not least the Urban Historian. Tyack's research is meticulous and the text so well-written that the book is difficult to put down. The design of the book helps; it has footnotes rather than endnotes and high-quality illustrations integrated with the text—except the colour plates—so that the reader does not have to flip back and forth between text, notes and illustrations as often happens with architectural history volumes.

The book does not present a strictly chronological discussion of Pennethorne and his works. It is divided into ten chapters, seven of which (#2 to #8) are arranged thematically. Tyack opens with a detailed examination of Pennethorne's training in the office of John Nash, from 1820, and his studies in Rome and elsewhere in Italy, starting in 1824. In Rome, Pennethorne recorded "that instead of measuring minutely each *celebrated* building I have visited *all the remains*" (p.8), and told Nash that "the introduction of the Italian style of Palace into our

street architecture would be quite new and have a fine effect" (pp.11-12). This Italian experience provided Pennethorne with a deep grasp of the vocabulary and design principles that made him a leading classical architect of the period. Back in Nash's office in 1826, Pennethorne was involved in plans to link the southern end of Regent Street to Whitehall and the Strand. Specifically he worked on the building of Carlton House Terrace and the layout of St. James's Park, an experience significant for his subsequent career. In 1830 Nash retired leaving Pennethorne in charge of the practice. In 1839 Pennethorne was appointed joint architect and surveyor for Metropolitan Improvements to the Commissioners of Woods and Forests, the beginning of a government career the difficulties and disappointments of which are so sensitively charted by Tyack throughout the book.

The chapters on Metropolitan Improvements (#2), Parks for the People (#3) and The Rebuilding of Whitehall (#8), probably have the greatest interest for the Urban Historian. The former paints a vivid picture of the social and traffic problems in early Victorian London, and Pennethorne's proposed schemes for improvement that were so often thwarted by government. The social benefits of the urban park are highlighted in Parks for the People. Pennethorne played an important role in the creation of several urban parks in London of which Victoria Park in the East End and Battersea Park were the most successful. Pennethorne's architectural dreams and disappointments are vividly expressed in schemes for the rebuilding of Whitehall. Here Tyack makes a very important contribution to the background of the "Battle of the Styles" in the design of the Foreign Office. He shows the negative attitude of the First Commissioner, Sir Benjamin Hall, toward Pennethorne, and that Hall was the prime mover in instituting the