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[Review of the book *The Economics of the Industrial Revolution*]

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[Review of the book *The Economics of the Industrial Revolution*]

**Abstract**

[Excerpt] This book contains a collection of papers on the causes and impact of the Industrial Revolution in Britain. The authors are, with perhaps one exception, practitioners of the New Economic History, which relies on economic theory and statistical testing of hypotheses. The papers cover three topics: the causes of the Industrial Revolution; the role of agriculture; and the impact of industrialization on the standard of living of British workers.

**Keywords**

Britain, Industrial Revolution, labor economics, employment, labor market

**Disciplines**

Economic History | Industrial Organization | Labor Economics | Labor History | Labor Relations

**Comments**


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Editor Gary M. Fink has updated and revised this useful reference work originally published in 1974 as the *Biographical Dictionary of American Labor Leaders*. As the changed title suggests, Fink has broadened his selection criteria beyond "the most significant" subjects to those who reflect "the great diversity . . . among trade union leaders, political radicals, intellectuals, and the like." Thus he has taken into account major trends in labor history over the past two decades, as scholars have expanded the field beyond the previously dominant institutional framework.

The 234 sketches that have been added to the approximately 500 in the earlier edition increase the visibility of women, the radical left, and "rank-and-file" leaders. Fink has admittedly "less successful" in his attempt to include more "black Americans and other minorities," because of both the extent of discrimination within the labor movement itself and the lack of sources on many nonwhites who might otherwise have been profiled.

Like its predecessor, this dictionary provides six useful appendixes organizing individuals according to union affiliation, religious preference, birthplace, formal education, political preference, and public offices. Effectively complementing the concise and informative biographies (which also offer useful bibliographic information), these compilations should assist readers interested in locating and evaluating continuities, contrasts, and other patterns scattered through the individual entries.

In an introduction that did not appear in the 1974 edition, the editor has quantified and contrasted four sets of data on American labor leaders. Compiled in 1900, 1925, 1946, and 1976, these materials provide snapshots of the labor movement in distinct moments that are representative of important periods in its history. Despite problems with the comparability of the data, Fink has offered suggestive analyses of nineteen variables grouped under the rubrics of "institutional," "biographical," and "socio-political" characteristics. But it is the biographical dictionary itself that makes this book especially useful to scholars.

**James R. Grossman**

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The book contains a collection of papers on the causes and impact of the Industrial Revolution in Britain. The authors are, with perhaps one exception, practitioners of the New Economic History, which relies on economic theory and statistical testing of hypotheses. The papers cover three topics: the causes of the Industrial Revolution; the role of agriculture; and the impact of industrialization on the standard of living of British workers.

Readers of this journal should find the essays on the standard of living debate to be of particular interest. Lindert and Williamson's analysis of trends in workers' earnings supersedes all previous work in the field. Their conclusion that the earnings of blue-collar workers nearly doubled between 1781 and 1851, even after adjusting for upward trends in unemployment and urban disamenities, supports a surprisingly optimistic view of the consequences of the Industrial Revolution. On the other hand, the opposing "pessimistic view" is given new life by von Tunzelmann's essay. Using dynamic programming to solve an optimal growth model, von Tunzelmann finds that "a more interventionist government could have raised real wages without endangering long-term growth" (pp. 223-24). Although his conclusions must be considered tentative, von Tunzelmann has succeeded in redefining the issues of the standard of living debate.

Although each of the papers represents an important contribution to our understanding of the Industrial Revolution, let me single out three others for comment. The two opening essays, by Mokyr and McCloskey, represent the best available introduction to the causes of the first Industrial Revolution. I also highly recommend Crafts' comparative essay on England and France, which warns us that the question "Why was England first?" is both unanswerable and misconceived.

The book is an excellent introduction to the study of British industrialization and to the field of economic history. As such, it should be required reading for students of economics, history, and surely, one could argue, industrial relations.

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