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It is often said that the key to understanding the present is to look to our past. Historians are no doubt well familiar with this and other similar platitudes, but the heart of the sentiment nevertheless remains true. Protest, resistance and challenge are themes which have shaped individual lives and collective histories since time immemorial, and the study of these themes often reveals greater insight into the communities involved in or impacted by conflict. This year's edition of *Symeon* reflects on instances of protest, resistance and challenge and, most significantly, the people concerned therein.



LILY CHADWICK
Editor-in-chief

Throughout history, tensions arising from work and labour disputes have commonly resulted in protest and acts of resistance. Dr Amanda Herbert introduces the labour performed in and around early modern spas and examines the socio-economic conditions which surrounded the termination of a bath guide at a Somerset spa. Likewise, Jackson Foster analyses the web of political, social, and economic considerations which influenced outbreaks of conflict during labour in the Tudor period and, in particular, episodes of violence which arose from these tensions.

Some forms of resistance can be epistemological. In her piece, Ella Palin challenges existing historiography by underscoring failures in the methodologies used to analyse West African economies, most notably the lack of consideration given by scholars to the contributions of women's labour in sustaining local and regional economies. Similarly, Tom Rymer writes on the intersection of gender, class, and labour in studies of Indian indentured labourers and offers an

alternative methodology known as 'caste-gendering' by which scholars may gain a nuanced perspective on the particular experiences of Dalit women as indentured workers.

And last but certainly not least, the study of protest and challenge in history frequently highlights the multifaceted concerns and identities which have shaped acts of resistance and their connections to contemporary issues. Dr Liam Liburd unpacks the historical significance of recent debates in British political discourse by examining protests against fascism and imperialism in Black British history. Abbie Fray analyses instances of cross-dressing in medieval revolts and explores how medieval understandings of gender and dress influenced contemporary reception of specific acts of protest. Finally, Daniel Burrell offers a glimpse into nineteenth-century mortuary culture and the unrest which emerged among working-class women in West Hartlepool following an attempt to introduce cremation as an alternative to traditional burial practices.

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Front cover: Images from the Department of History, 2016. (Image courtesy of Durham University).

This page: Durham Cathedral. (Image courtesy of Durham University).





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Department news



Professor Len Scales
Head of the Department of History



One of the pleasures of being Head of Department is attending university open days, meeting A-level students who have applied, or are thinking of applying to the Department, and telling them about History at Durham. I describe to them the place where we are privileged to work and study, at the heart of the UNESCO World Heritage site.

I encourage them to find a few moments to stroll around the Bailey, to soak up the atmosphere, and to visit the cathedral with the tomb of Bede (d. 735 CE), Durham's first historian. I tell them about the monk-historians of medieval Durham (including our namesake, Symeon), who drew inspiration from Bede's writings. People have been studying and writing history in Durham for a long time. But what I especially emphasise to the next generation of Durham historians and their parents is just how much has changed, how the study of history has been transformed—even in the couple of decades or so since I came to Durham. The vast range of types of history with which our students can now engage in depth, the global reach of our programme, the way in which we challenge our students to discover new worlds beyond their A-level fare, are things of which I am enormously proud. As another year passes and the Covid-19 pandemic starts to become part of our own shared historical memory, the Department is more committed than ever to the richness, variety, and range of what we do and what we teach.

The 'Covid cohort' of undergraduate historians who arrived in the autumn of 2020 came to a Durham fighting to keep our teaching going amid a pandemic. They watched their tutors navigating, with varying degrees of aplomb, the new joys of Zoom and hybrid seminars. Together, as teachers and students, we took our faltering steps in a strange world. As 2020 turned to 2021, surging infection and government decree closed the Department altogether and forced us online. But we kept going and I believe that, as a department and a university, Durham did better than most. Many members of that 'Covid cohort' will graduate this summer. We will be back in Bede's cathedral. There will be photos on Palace Green and a departmental reception to celebrate, in the company of their families, the achievements and resilience of our students, who have come through so much. They have seen the Department return to life. The masks have mostly gone; the hubbub of historical debate has returned to our seminar rooms on North Bailey. There will be much to celebrate.

After several years of high student recruitment, culminating in the A-level bonanza of 2021, we remain a big department, with around eight hundred students currently studying history as a significant part of their degree programme. And the Department's academic and professional services staff has also continued to grow during the past year, reflecting our continued commitment to History in breadth and depth and to supporting our large student community. Laura Channing, Radha Kapuria, and Daisy Livingston joined the Department last autumn, bringing their expertise in, respectively, modern African economic history, modern South Asian cultural history, and medieval Islamic history. We were also fortunate in being joined by several new fixed-term academics, to help meet our teaching needs and as cover for departures and for funded leave: Vic Clarke (modern Britain), Iker Itoiz-Ciáurriz (teaching fellow, modern Europe), Vicky Manolopoulou (early medieval Europe), Gabriele Marcon (early modern Europe), and Justine Trombley (late medieval Europe). Shortly after the last *Symeon* went to press, History gained a new Departmental Manager, John Thompson, who has brought with him a wealth of experience and fresh thinking from his previous home in Geography. Our Learning and Teaching team has been joined by Kate Straughan, and Daniel Oliver has taken on the role of Learning and Teaching Co-ordinator. We also, sadly,



Professor Kay Schiller, *Der schnellste Jude Deutschlands: Alex Natan (1906-1971), Eine Biografie* (Wallstein Verlag, 2022).

said goodbye to several colleagues during the past year. Nicole Reinhardt departed to take up the co-directorship of the Institute for European History in Mainz, while Helen Foxhall Forbes, Eleanor Barraclough, and Laura Forster left for, respectively, a chair at the Università Ca Foscari, Venice, a lectureship at Bath Spa University, and a research fellowship at the University of Manchester. Sarah-Mary Geissler from the Learning and Teaching team also resigned to pursue new career goals. We wish all our departing colleagues well.

Events in eastern Europe have been much in our minds this year, and the Department has played a prominent part in Durham University's commitment to supporting Ukraine in the face of Russia's invasion and war of aggression. Markian Prokopovych's tireless work in co-ordinating activities within the Department and beyond was recognized with his International Partnership Award in the 2023 Global Durham Awards. Markian has played a central role in building bridges between Durham and Ukrainian universities, particularly Zaporizhzhia National University (ZNU), with which Durham established a twinning relationship in June 2022. He organised and chaired a wide-ranging programme

MAKING THE REVOLUTION GLOBAL

BLACK RADICALISM AND THE BRITISH SOCIALIST MOVEMENT BEFORE DECOLONISATION



THEO WILLIAMS

Dr Theo Williams, *Making the Revolution Global: Black Radicalism and the British Socialist Movement Before Decolonisation* (Verso, 2022).

of seminars and public-history events in Durham during the current academic year, making use of hybrid formats and live English-Ukrainian translation. Several members of the Department delivered talks and participated in panel discussions in the programme. Students from ZNU joined James Koranyi's 'Mapping Eastern Europe' special subject via a live link. Collaborative research workshops and Ukrainian staff and student visits to the Department are planned for the coming weeks.

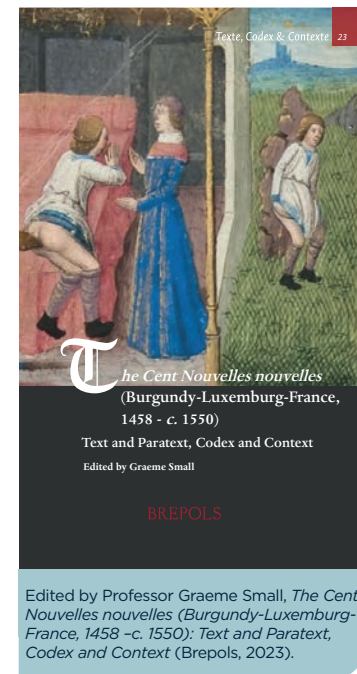
Durham historians continue to make their mark with their research. Kay Schiller's latest book, *Der schnellste Jude Deutschlands* ('the fastest Jew in Germany'), telling the story of the life and times of the German-Jewish sprinter Alex Natan (1906-1971), has attracted considerable attention in the German media. Other recent books by members of the Department are Theo Williams' *Making the Revolution Global*, a study of Black radicalism and twentieth-century British socialism, Henry Miller's *A Nation of Petitioners*, looking at petitioning in Britain in the 'long' nineteenth century, and Graeme Small's edition of the late-medieval Franco-Burgundian blockbuster, *The Cent Nouvelles nouvelles*. Giles

Gasper co-authored *Mapping the Universe*, the latest volume of the edited works of the thirteenth-century scientist and bishop Robert Grosseteste. Rebecca Clifford's book *Survivors: Children's Lives after the Holocaust* was awarded the Yad Vashem International Book Prize for Holocaust Research. Andy Wood's distinction as a social and cultural historian of early modern England was acknowledged by his election as a Fellow of the British Academy, the UK's national body for the humanities and social sciences. By the time you read this, the news, still under wraps as I write, will have broken announcing Durham's success in securing a significant externally funded interdisciplinary research platform, the Wellcome Platform for the Medical Humanities, in which History's own Coreen McGuire is playing a critical role. Two postdoctoral researchers have this year brought their exciting projects to the Department: Catherine Hailstone (atmospheres of power in late-Antique churches) and Josh Rhodes (eighteenth-century English agricultural transformations). And it has been good to see the achievements of members of the Department receiving recognition from the university, with Alex Barber, Barbara Crosbie, and Kevin Waite all securing promotion to Associate Professor. Congratulations to one and all.

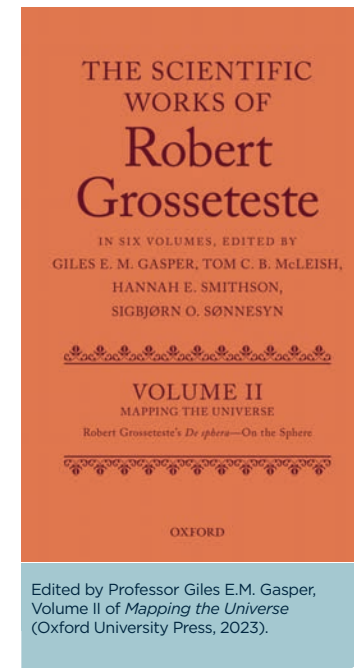
The Department continues to take seriously its commitment to engage with audiences beyond the university and to foster conversations with Durham's local and regional communities, as well as communicating our research to a broader public. In May 2022 Durham Town Hall hosted a well-attended event in our History Now! series, led by Rebecca Clifford and by Oxford's Robert Gildea, who is writing an oral history of the 1984-85 miners' strike. The session, which featured Robert in

conversation with members of a multi-generational County Durham family who lived through and recalled the strike, stirred much excitement, and was covered by the local press. Last autumn the Department marked Black History Month with a roundtable discussion at the Gala Theatre. Recent media appearances by Durham historians have included Natalie Mears talking about the Tudors on Ireland's Newstalk radio channel and Erika Graham-Goering putting Melvyn Bragg right about the Battle of Crécy (1346) on BBC Radio 4's *In Our Time*.

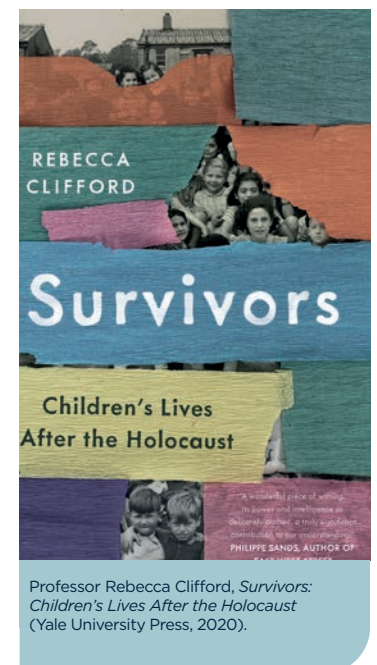
We are currently looking forward to moving into new purpose-made departmental accommodation at 58 Saddler Street during the summer, which will allow colleagues to vacate the temporary workspaces we have recently been occupying, above an estate agent's office on New Elvet. The sighs of relief will be audible across town. We are also keenly anticipating once again having a departmental Common Room, in Cosin's Hall on Palace Green, as we continue to rebuild our sense of community after the Covid years. Not all is plain sailing, of course, and a squeeze—we hope, only temporary—on departmental finances explains why *Symeon* is this year coming to you in online form. I'm sure this won't be the last of our challenges. (Let's not even start with the subject of ChatGPT ...). But History in Durham will continue and, I hope, go from strength to strength. And I am sure that, in closing, we will all wish to say a heartfelt 'well done' to our students who have made it through three (or more) challenging years to graduation this summer.



Edited by Professor Graeme Small, *The Cent Nouvelles nouvelles (Burgundy-Luxemburg-France, 1458 - c. 1550): Text and Paratext, Codex and Context* (Brepols, 2023).



Edited by Professor Giles E.M. Gasper, *The Scientific Works of Robert Grosseteste, Volume II of Mapping the Universe* (Oxford University Press, 2023).



Professor Rebecca Clifford, *Survivors: Children's Lives After the Holocaust* (Yale University Press, 2020).



Labour Disputes and 'Ill Language' at the Early Modern Spa



Dr Amanda E. Herbert

Dr Amanda E. Herbert is Assistant Professor of Early Modern Americas in Durham's Department of History. She earned her PhD from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, and is the author of scholarly books and articles on the history of the body: gender and sexuality, health and wellness, food and nutrition. She is an editor of *The Recipes Project* and has written for wider audiences at *Aeon Magazine* and *Gastro Obscura*. You can find her on Twitter @amandaehbert.

When we imagine the history of mineral water spas, we typically think of the genteel, sociable spaces of the nineteenth century. We picture elite people taking tea, gambling in assembly rooms, waltzing in ball rooms, or dressing for masquerades. We remember the marriage mart, the Regency, the country house party. We people the spa with dandies and incomparables, Jane Austen and Beau Brummell, rakes and poor relations. There is a good reason that the spa makes us think of these things: they are its most famous icons, and tourism boards, heritage institutions, authors, and artists have used them as touchpoints in the truly crucial work that they do to help people remember and connect with the past. But the mineral water spa meant much more, to many more people, before the nineteenth century began. My book project, *Spa Medicine and Body Politics in the British Atlantic World*, tells a different history of the spa, one centring on medicine, labour, politics, and power.

The primary function of early modern mineral spring cities was not to entertain, but to serve the sick and injured. Mineral waters were imagined as powerful medicines, capable of curing everything from gout to dandruff. To achieve a cure, early modern people both drank the spa waters and swam in them. What's more, these cures were free: spas offered access, *gratis*, to thousands of women and men each year, including military veterans, refugees, and the poor. Regardless of a person's gender, race, age, nationality, or socioeconomic status, anyone who travelled to the spa seeking help was offered the opportunity to heal and get well. And spas were located across Britain and its early empire: in England and in Nevis, in Jamaica and in Scotland, in Ireland and in Virginia.

In recovering and uncovering this new history of the spa, my book considers the labour regimes of the many lower-status people who worked in and around the pools. One story in particular of a spa labourer named Walter Ponting, who worked at the famed spa complex at Bath in Somerset, can help to illuminate some of the tensions and challenges of early modern spas. In the spring of 1663, the City Corporation of Bath 'Agreed that Walter Ponting shall be dismissed of his place', because he had 'given ill language to some of the Aldermen of this City', and specifically, to a man named Alderman Gibbes. Ponting was rebuked and was told that he could no longer earn his living working in the city's pools. But Ponting decided to contest the decision.

To an outsider, and perhaps even to us today, this decision would have seemed like a bad one. Spa governors like Gibbes were, almost without exception, elite men. They typically held professions in areas related to the work of the spa:

health care (physicians, natural scientists, apothecaries) or trade (merchants, enslavers, shopkeepers) or hospitality (innkeepers, hoteliers, brewers, vintners). Often, they owned property at or near the spa. This was certainly the case with Alderman Gibbes. He served on the Corporation, as did one of his relatives. In 1658-9 he was elected as Overseer of the Common for Bath, which gave him control over hundreds of pounds and the ability to hire workers on the city's behalf.¹ By 1670 Gibbes had control of one of Bath's largest tenement-inns, called The Bell.² By 1688, he was Mayor-Elect.³ And when he died in 1714, all of the bells in Bath rang to commemorate Alderman Gibbes.⁴

Walter Ponting had none of the power, wealth, and privilege that Alderman Gibbes possessed, but he was also a special kind of labourer, part of an extensive and specialised corps of female and male workers who made their living at the spa: he was a Bath Guide, and his job was to make sure that spa-goers did not drown.

At this time, most British women and men could not swim. Entering the pools, pumps, and plunge areas at spas was intimidating. One seventeenth-century spa-goer, a woman named Celia Fiennes, complained that when she visited Bath, she had trouble staying upright in the water: '[the water flow] is so strong it will quickly tumble you down...the spring bubbles up so fast and so strong and so hot against the bottoms of one's feet.'⁵ Feinnes had a right to be nervous; drowning while bathing in mineral springs was a very real risk. Spa city burial records reveal that large numbers of people did, unfortunately, drown in the chest-deep pools. In Bath alone, people 'drowned in the bathe' repeatedly; this included John Howell (October 1595), William Prosser (June 14, 1617), John Knowles (August 12, 1623), William Dearing (October 28, 1624), John Buennett (May 8, 1638), and William Bruckton (September 12, 1639).⁶ Taking the cure could be a dangerous undertaking.

But as a Bath Guide, Walter Ponting knew how to swim, float, and dive. He understood how to enter and exit the pools with confidence. He was trained to keep others safe in the water, too. Each time he met with a client, Ponting would have helped them into the pool and allowed them to get their balance. Gripping clients firmly by their upper arms and elbows, Ponting would have led them slowly around the pools, walking carefully to ensure they did not bump into other cure-seekers or dip too low below the surface of the water. He would have administered massages and dispensed medicines. A curative routine lasted approximately thirty minutes, and at the end of the session, Ponting would have

1. Bath Common Accounts, St. Mary Magdalen Holloway, Rev. C.W. Shickle, tr. Acc. No. 50:380, Class B942.38, Loc: LS Bath, Bath Central Library.

2. Bath Charities Hospital of St. John the Baptist, Hospital of St. Mary Magdalene, Bellott's Hospital, and Hospital of St. Katherine Notes, Indentures, etc., 1260-1925, C.W. Shickle, tr., 2 Vols., Acc: 33:325 Class B360, Bath Central Library.

3. The First Book of Minutes of the Council appended to the Charter of Queen Elizabeth, Vols. I and II, 25 Jan 1613 to 1 Jan 1738, Bath Guildhall Record Office (BGRO).

4. Churchwardens' Accounts and Vestry Minutes for Bath St. James, 1654-1780, D/P/ba/ja/4/1/1, Somerset Heritage Centre.

5. Fiennes, *The Journeys of Celia Fiennes*, 18-20.

6. Register of Burials, 1569-1800, Bath Abbey (Sts. Peter and Paul), Bath Guildhall Record Office.

helped his clients out of the water and freed them from their heavy, dripping, canvas-and-linen bathing costumes. He then would have aided them in crossing the slippery wet paving stones, helped them into their Bath Chairs, and made his goodbyes. For nervous non-swimmers, Bath Guides were (quite literally) lifesavers. And so, when Walter Ponting 'gave ill language' to Alderman Gibbes, the verbal gesture perhaps was more significant than we might assume. As a Bath Guide, Ponting had his own kind of authority.

When Ponting was fired by the City Corporation, he did not back down and do what he was told, but instead assembled his allies. Ponting worked in the Cross Bath, which by the second half of the seventeenth century had become the pool of choice for elite women and men. By the time of the incident with the Alderman, Ponting would have had the ear (as he had, quite literally, the arm) of all of Bath's most powerful and politically important male visitors. There was

a precedent for this kind of request; thirty years prior, when another Bath Guide, Richard Steevens, had been threatened with dismissal, he had appealed to Sir Robert Naunton (1563-1635), a former Secretary of State.⁷ Steevens was quickly re-hired at 'Sir Robert Nantons request.'⁸

We do not know who advocated for Ponting, but it worked. Three weeks after his dismissal, Walter Ponting was reinstated. On 11 April, the corporation 'agreed that Walter Ponting [was once again] to [be] bathguide at the Cross Bath.' But that there was a catch: as a condition of his reinstatement, Ponting had to make 'his submission for his dismeanor towards Mr. Walter Gibbes this afternoon in full court.'⁹ By shaming Ponting in full court, by forcing him to make 'submission' in front of his friends and neighbours, the City Corporation tried hard to reassert their authority and influence over Ponting, and by extension, over all of the Bath Guides of the city.

This was not a compromise but a complex negotiation. In mineral spring cities around the British Atlantic world, labourers enabled spa cities to function. Governors, for all of their wealth and privilege, were not the only influential people at the spa. In their acts of resistance, labourers like Walter Ponting asserted that spas were not just elite playgrounds, but were crucial sites of labour, healing, and power.

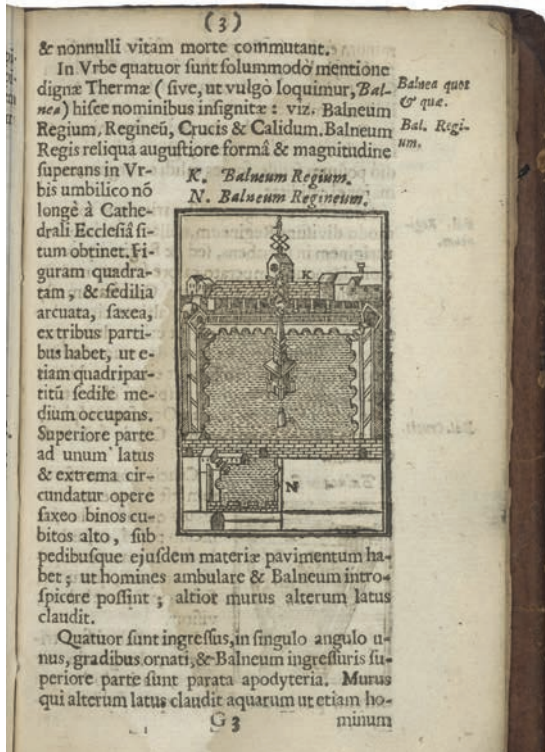


Figure 2: Thomas Johnson, *Mercurius botanicus* (1641), fig 1, Folger Shakespeare Library.

7. Roy E. Schreiber, "Naunton, Sir Robert (1563-1635), politician," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 Sep. 2004, accessed 28 Apr. 2021, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-19812>.

8. Bath Council Books Vol. I, C.W. Shickle, comp., 1613-1684, Acc: 50:351, Class B352.0422 BAT Local Store, Bath Central Library.

9. The First Book of Minutes of the Council appended to the Charter of Queen Elizabeth, Vols. I and II, 25 Jan 1613 to 1 Jan 1738, Bath Guildhall Record Office.

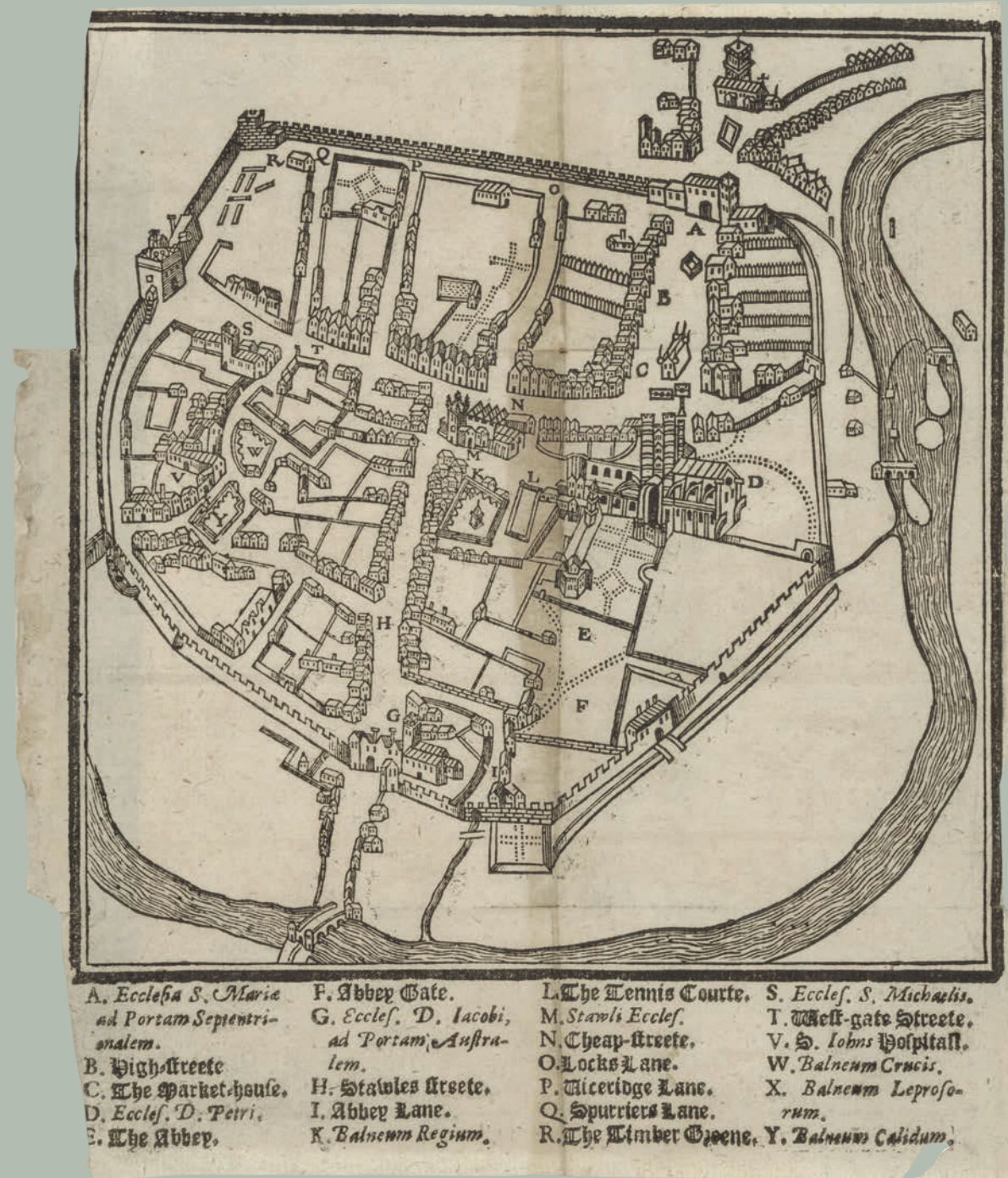


Figure 3: Thomas Johnson, *Mercurius botanicus* (1641), fig 2, Folger Shakespeare Library.



Figure 1: Frontispiece of Hobbes' *Leviathan* (Abraham Bosse, Etching on Paper, 1651, The British Museum, London).



Jackson Foster

Jackson Foster is pursuing a Medieval and Early Modern Studies MA in the Department of History. His research explores crime in Tudor England; more particularly, he has written on interpersonal harm, the development of a formal distinction between murder and manslaughter, and socio-legal theories of guilt. Before Durham, Jackson graduated *summa cum laude* from the University of Alabama, where he studied history, religion, computer science, and the liberal arts. Next year, his second in the UK on Marshall scholarship funding, he plans to read for an MSc in Criminology and Criminal Justice.

Just Part of the Job: Labour and homicide in early modern England

There are few maxims as famous as the one used by Thomas Hobbes to characterize ungoverned life: 'nasty, brutish, and short.'¹ Though Hobbes sought to justify a strong state role in mediating humankind's basest impulses, he, born and raised in the twilight of Elizabeth I's reign, would have recognized that violence was not solely an outcome of anarchy. Indeed, the late sixteenth century was a time in which physical confrontation and interpersonal homicide were more common and condoned than our own.² Perhaps to the chagrin of Hobbesian theory, under an increasingly competent and centralized Tudor administration, fatal harm was better detected, and more sophisticatedly prosecuted, but it did not decline precipitously.³

What, then, was the role of labour in this macabre phenomenon? We must first accept a basic premise: that crime, in its myriad forms, is socially embedded. This means that we can productively map features of Tudor society onto broad, statistical patterns of felonies — and the anecdotes that arise from these patterns. We might gather, for instance, the incendiary potential of words, especially when coupled with alcoholic drinks and masculine bravado, from a 1587 incident in Southwark. On 28 December of that year, according to coroner Thomas Agar's inquest, John Rainhans, a coppersmith, exchanged insults with Quentin von Vossle, a cordwainer, at a tavern in St Olave.⁴ After 'Vossle pulled Rainhans' cloak and prevented him from leaving' the haunt, the two scuffled until Rainhans dealt

to Vossle a stab wound that proved deadly almost a week later.⁵ This specific affray is representative of many others in its cause (sticks, stones, *and* words broke bones), venue, spontaneity, and composition: even skilled craftsman and well-off yeoman fought.

However, interpersonal harm predominately involved the humbler 'sort' of people. Of course, this is not to say that workers, husbandmen, and poor craftsmen suffered from a moral defect. They simply constituted the largest portion of an average parish, and of the overarching early modern English social order.⁶ It would be likewise absurd to laud the gentry, who composed 2 per cent of the national population, for accounting for only 2.8 per cent of homicide indictments in Essex, Sussex, and Surrey.⁷ Rather, demographic proportionality was a reality of criminal slayings, and mortal violence amongst the labouring class was, above all else, informed by the practices and practicalities of everyday life.

And central to the lives of labourers was toil. Thus, numerous homicide indictments in the counties listed above detail conflict at sites of labour. On 23 January 1559, whilst pruning hedges at a farm in Ifield parish, the unfortunate labourer John Langlye fell into a quarrel with John Jeyle, who fatally 'struck [him] in the back with a [billhook]'.⁸ Deodands—items or weapons forfeited by a killer to the coroner and, eventually, the Royal High Almoner — indicate the frequency of this type of event. In Essex, Sussex, and

1. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London, 2017), p. 113.

2. See the scholarship of Lawrence Stone and J.A. Sharpe, to name a couple.

3. Matthew Lockwood, *The Conquest of Death: Violence and the Birth of the Modern English State* (New Haven, 2017); Thomas A. Green, 'The Jury and the English Law of Homicide, 1200-

1600,' *Michigan Law Review* 74 (3), pp. 413-99; Randolph Roth, 'Homicide in Early Modern England 1549-1800: The Need for a Quantitative Synthesis,' *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies* 5, no. 2 (2001), pp. 33-67.

4. No. 1844 in J. S. Cockburn (ed.), *Calendar of Assize Records, Elizabeth I. Vol. 5: Surrey Indictments* (London, 1975).

5. *Ibid.*

6. Keith Wrightson, *English Society: 1580-1680* (New Brunswick, 2003), pp. 39-44.

7. For the first numerical estimate, *ibid.*, p. 32.

8. No. 23 in Cockburn, (ed.), *Calendar of Assize Records, Elizabeth I. Vol. 1: Sussex Indictments* (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1975).

Surrey, coroners seized as deodands a host of agricultural implements: from 1558-1603, at least ten bills, as well as two each of pitchforks, shovels, spades, and cattle goads. Moving from the fields and up the socioeconomic ladder did little to guarantee amicability amongst colleagues. Thomas Bartholomew, a joiner, attacked John van Teale, a fellow joiner, with his chisel on 29 December 1570, inflicting injuries from which van Teale perished three days later.⁹ As the middling and labouring sorts slogged away together, the communal nature of work itself provided further settings for feuds. On 24 January 1572, labourer William Older was tasked with keeping watch over a field called 'Huchecoaks'.¹⁰ Apparently unbeknownst to Older, William Warde, another labourer, was instructed to protect an adjacent field, 'Le Crosse Way'.¹¹ Believing Warde to be acting suspiciously (a possible intruder), Older challenged him, then assaulted him with a staff, striking a mortal blow to Warde's eye.¹² Interpersonal harm was an occupational hazard of both professional and parochial jobs.

In the history of homicide's intersection with work, uncovering the experience of women — their subjection to, and employment of, violence — is difficult but not impossible. Coroners' inquests and their associated indictments referred exclusively to a woman's marital status, not her occupation, in the event she had one. In the absence of information concerning female defendants' and victims' vocations, or 'mysteries' in contemporary parlance, their work — along with any danger linked to their efforts — remains fittingly mysterious today. Using existing historiography, we might view the extent of women's labour as akin to their remit on force: domestically conscribed.¹³ To an extent, this was true. Yet to neatly divide wage-earning and familial obligations is anachronistic; related court records demonstrate as much.¹⁴ A wife might dabble in her husband's trade, or assist it by feeding, housing, and punishing his apprentice. Catherine Moore exhibited a clear familiarity with cooperation, her spouse's discipline, when she mortally

assaulted his apprentice with tools of the craft (piercers, tub bords, and hoops) on 28 July 1585.¹⁵ Moreover, female servants, in the course of their work, attempted a number of unexpected chores and braved their masters' patriarchally-rooted ire. On 3 July 1576, Margaret Udell, servant to husbandman Richard Sylvester, met her demise after Sylvester struck her for taking too long to feed his pigs.¹⁶ Workers of all genders succumbed to *and* caused human loss.

They resisted such loss when possible, adopting self-defence. Physical resistance was a key theme in an inquisition on the body of William Devall Jr, held 28 March 1586 by Surrey coroner James Patchinge. Patchinge determined that, two weeks earlier, Devall Jr attacked carpenter John Chapman 'in field near a sawpit at Lingfield,' kicking him 'to the ground.'¹⁷ When Chapman returned to his feet, William's father charged at him with a dagger.¹⁸ 'Fearing for his life,' Chapman lashed at Devall Jr 'in self-defence' with the back of a bill, foisting a deadly puncture.¹⁹ Patchinge did not report the Devalls' motivations, but the location of their assault hints at a choice to strike whilst Chapman was about his business.

All this said, we should hesitate to conclude that labour uniquely occasioned danger. Most every situation in Tudor life — from friends playing dice to a hunter shooting at a man's head mistaken for a heron's plumage — could produce violence.²⁰ Still, work is an important lens for homicide because it offers a sense of harm's proximate causes. Available evidence reveals that interpersonal violence was androcentric, catalysed by insults, spontaneous, and conferred by



Figure 3: Death summoning a labourer to its dance (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, Français 995, f. 14r).

commonplace implements. It usually resulted in unintended but, due to the insufficiency of medical care, foreseeable deaths. Additionally, in cases involving labouring women and servants, homicide was a product of imbalances of power innate to a job, and to society more generally.

The characteristics of early modern killings accelerated legal developments fundamental to our current ideas of criminal culpability. Manslaughter as a charge, and its subtle understanding of *mens rea* (mental guilt), arose from one kind of conflict described in this essay: those which were sudden, hot-blooded, and not always planned to be fatal.²¹ The state and its judiciary reasoned that these 'chance medleys,' as they came to be known, deserved less severe punishment than premeditated murder, and so manslaughterers were afforded various protections.

In 1582, eminent Justice of the Peace William Lambarde lamented that 'sin of all sorts swarmeth and ... evil-doers go on with all license and impunity.'²² But the purpose of this brief study is not to depict the present as

halcyon, nor the past as barbaric and regressive. In different contexts, the sixteenth-century labouring class was perfectly capable of acting peacefully and legally. Poor workers, husbandmen, and craftsmen worried about the privatization of shared land assembled in an orderly fashion, two-by-two, to tear down enclosure hedges, skirting the statutory definition of riot (three or more men).²³ Or, when facing privation, their children and wives expropriated self-sustaining amounts of grain from merchants, repaying at amounts in line with fair market rates.²⁴

We are left, then, to accept the truth that *homo homini lupus est* ('man is a wolf to man'). This should spark us to interrogate how ways of life, social attitudes, and material factors exposed people to violence, pushed them to commit it, and helped them to restrict it. Such examination, principally in under-represented groups like lower-status workers, is as essential to the historian as it is to the criminologist, policymaker, or conscientious citizen.



Figure 2: The Tudor tavern was an ever-so-suitable domain for a row (David Teniers the Younger, *Tavern Scene*, Oil on Panel, 1658, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC).

9. No. 449 in Cockburn, *Surrey Indictments*.

10. No. 395 in Cockburn, *Sussex Indictments*.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. This once-unquestioned perspective has, fortunately, encountered recent critique. See below.

14. Jane Whittle and Mark Hailwood, 'The gender division of labour in early modern England,' *The Economic History Review* 73, pp. 3-32.

15. No. 1657 in Cockburn, *Surrey Indictments*.

16. No. 913 in J. S. Cockburn, ed., *Calendar of Assize Records, Elizabeth I. Vol. 3: Essex Indictments* (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1975).

17. No. 1717 in Cockburn, *Surrey Indictments*.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

20. No. 737 in Cockburn, *Sussex Indictments*; No. 3000 in Cockburn, *Essex Indictments*.

21. Green, 'The Jury and the English Law of Homicide, 1200-1600.'

22. William Lambarde and Conyers Read, ed., *William Lambarde and Local Government: His "Ephemeris" and Twenty-Nine Charges to Juries and Commissions* (Folger Shakespeare Library, 1962), p. 68.

23. Nos. 684 and 967 in *Star Chamber Reports: BL Harley MS 2143*, ed. K. J. Kesselring (Kew: List and Index Society, 2018).

24. See the writing of Keith Wrightson and John Walter on subsistence riots in Maldon, Essex and E.P. Thompson's seminal article on the 'moral economy' of the English crowd.

The Emergence of Early Modern Capitalism:

Have historians underestimated the economic conditions and living standards in pre-colonial West Africa (1600-1800)?



Ella Palin

Ella is a second-year undergraduate history student at Durham University who first became interested in African economic history after taking a second-year module on the topic. Ella is particularly interested in the synthesis of quantitative results in qualitative contexts and their related interdisciplinary approaches. Ella hopes to continue her studies by pursuing postgraduate degrees in African history with the intention of focusing her research specifically on African economic growth in the pre-colonial period.



Figure 1: Map of West Africa, 1839. Image available under Creative Commons license.

Traditional historiography around quantitative studies of African economic development has unjustly demarcated African growth to borderline stagnancy and underdevelopment.¹ Angus Maddison estimated that between 1000-1950 Africa's GDP per capita only doubled, whilst estimated global GDP increased four-fold.² Between 1600-1800, Africa's GDP regressed slightly from 420 to 422 in Geary-Khamis international dollars—a hypothetical currency to compare world-wide prices and products—suggesting borderline stagnancy across two-hundred years.³ By comparison, the global growth rate saw a more significant rise of 596 to 677.⁴ This limited GDP growth is a typical example of evidence used by scholars to misconstrue African economies as stagnant and underdeveloped in the pre-colonial period in comparison to global progression. The emergence of capitalism was associated with the West rather than Africa through the *substantivism* school—epitomized by Karl Polanyi—that depicted a 'traditional' society with no market conditions, specialized currencies for products and controlled prices for state monopolization.⁵ The misconceived division between a Westernised 'modern' capitalism against the exceptionalism of 'stagnant' Africa is evident in the divergence in the nominal periodisation: global histories of 'core' countries are marked as 'Early Modern' (1600-1800) whereas African history is confined to periodisation dictated



Figure 2: Cowrie shells, seen here used to adorn a Samo armband, were commonly used as currency in West Africa. Image available under Creative Commons license courtesy of The Tropenmuseum, NL, National Museum of World Cultures.

by Eurocentric colonialisation, e.g. the pre-colonial (pre-1887), colonial (c.1887-1950s), and post-colonial (1950s-present) periods.⁷ This essay argues against the compression of pre-colonial history to economic stagnancy and 'traditionalism' by demonstrating the underestimation of these analyses.⁸ West African economic conditions (covering modern polities within and around the limitations of the Niger River) were comparable to the rest of the globe. Historians have traditionally underestimated the emergence of capitalist market engagement, quantitative living standards, and have neglected female contributions to West African economies.

Firstly, in contrast to *substantivist* scholarship, a closer analysis of early modern domestic market conditions in West Africa indicates the emergence of capitalist markets which parallel the rest of the globe through price fluctuations, market access, and usage of universal currency. Antony Hopkins, for instance, argues for the dynamic

market against the *substantivist* school that countered Polanyi's idea of static prices, isolation of markets and lack of widespread access.⁹ Factor market analysis has been applied to West Africa evidencing supply and demand responsiveness.¹⁰ For instance, price fluctuations between ports on the Gold Coast (the price of chickens in Dahomey—in current-day Benin—increased from between sixty and sixty-seven to 267-333 cowries between 1694 and 1751) are indicative of responsive and fluctuating market prices.¹¹ Seasonal price fluctuations of palm oil—due to supply increase—depreciated at a rate of 5 to 10 per cent after harvest in Whydah (modern-day Benin) which indicates a lack of state-held prices and the presence of market conditions.¹² Moreover, market access was facilitated through indigenous 'distributive system[s]' of trade routes which enabled a spread of capitalist markets.¹³ The use of long-distance trade (through purposely bred pack animal including oxen and donkeys

1. Morten Jerven, 'African growth recurring: An economic history perspective on African growth episodes, 1690-2010', *Economic History of Developing Regions*, 25, 2 (2010), pp. 127-154, p. 133.
2. Ibid., p. 133.
3. Ibid., p. 133; D. S. Prasad Rao, E. A. Selvanathan, 'Computation of Standard Errors for Geary-Khamis Parities and International Prices: A Stochastic Approach', *Journal of Business & Economic Statistics*, 10, 1 (1992), pp. 109-115, p. 109.
4. Jerven, 'African growth recurring', p. 133.
5. For interest in the interpretation of African underdevelopment, see: Emmanuel Oladipo Ojo, 'Underdevelopment in Africa: Theories and Facts', *The Journal of Social, Political and Economic Studies*, 41, 1 (2016), pp. 89-103, p. 89.
6. Paul E. Lovejoy, 'Interregional Monetary Flows in the Precolonial Trade of Nigeria', *The Journal of African History*, 15, 4 (1974), pp. 563-85, p. 563; Robin Law, 'Trade economy and the West African coast: Posthumous questions for Karl Polanyi: Price inflation in pre-colonial Dahomey', *Journal of African History*

33, 3 (1992), pp. 387-420, p. 388.

7. For the idea of 'core' countries in the emerging capitalist world economy, see: Wallerstein, Immanuel 'The three stages of African involvement in the world economy' in Peter C.W. Gutting, Immanuel Wallerstein (eds.) *The political economy of contemporary Africa*, (London and Beverly Hills: Sage, 1976) pp. 30-57, pp. 30-31; for the criteria for the early modern periodisation, see: John F. Richards, 'Early Modern India and World History', *Journal of World History*, 8, 2 (1997), pp. 197-209, p. 198; for the institutionalisation of 'Early Modern' in historical organisation in journals and departments, see: Shaw, Ryan, 'Periodization', *ISKO Encyclopedia of Knowledge Organization* (2020), accessed 13 April 2023, at <https://www.isko.org/cyclo/periodization>, pp. 1-9, p. 6.
8. For the theory of a "compression of history", see: Gareth Austin, 'The "reversal of fortune" thesis and the compression of history: Perspectives from African and comparative economic history', *Journal of International Development*, 20 (2008), pp. 996-1027, p. 998.

9. Law, 'Trade economy and the West African coast', p. 403.

10. Gareth Austin, 'Factor markets in Nieboer conditions: pre-colonial West Africa, c.1500-c.1900', *Continuity and Change*, 24, 1 (2009), pp. 23-53, p. 24.

11. Klas Rönnbäck, 'Climate, conflicts, and variations in prices on pre-colonial West African markets for staple crops', *Economic History Review*, 67, 4 (2014), pp. 1065-1088, p. 1072, p. 1076; Robin Law, 'Trade economy and the West African coast', p. 404.

12. Law, 'Trade economy and the West African coast', p. 399; Rönnbäck, 'Climate, conflicts, and variations in prices on pre-colonial West African markets for staple crops', p. 1078.

13. For the explanation of the pre-colonial distributive system, see: A.G. Hopkins, 'The distributive system', Chapter. In A.G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (London: Routledge, 2019) pp. 96-122, pp. 121-122.

14. Ibid., pp. 118-119.

15. Ibid., p. 106, pp. 108-109, p. 119.

European welfare ratios for building labourers between 1600 and 1800.

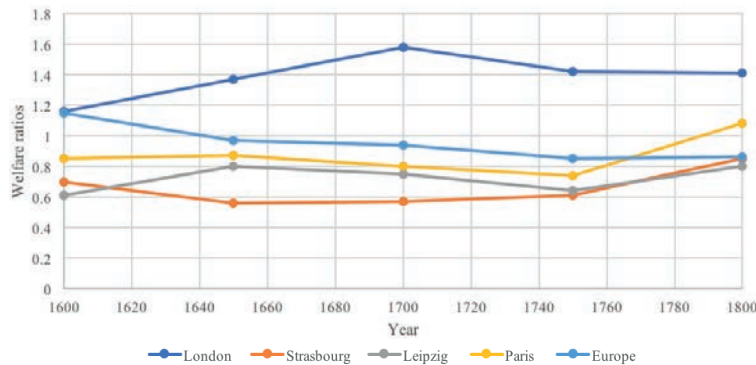


Figure 3: Sourced data: Robert Allen, 'The Great Divergence in European Wages and Prices from the Middle Ages to the First World War', *Explorations in Economic History*, 38 (2001), pp. 411–447, p. 428.

and the use of the Niger river from Timbuktu, Mali) allowed widespread access to products in internal markets.¹⁴ Mobile markets (caravans) transported products around West Africa and required the labour of guards, traders, and treasurers who traversed ecological zones and exchanged various local staples.¹⁵ The cost and type of transport can be equated to pre-industrial European methods.¹⁶ Finally, access to these long-distance markets was aided by the general-purpose currency of cowries for exchange across goods from Senegal-Niger localities to Lagos-Whydah on the coast.¹⁷ Cowrie

imports by 1720 were equal to a third of the annual export price, promoted through their general use in the Atlantic Slave Trade.¹⁸ The dynamism and widespread access to the proto-

capitalist market enabled access and economic engagement in contrast to the 'traditional' denotation and was comparable to global trends.

Quantitative studies of West African living standards conducted in the early 2000s provide a global comparison for economic conditions of wage labour in West Africa over the supposed stagnancy and underdevelopment of Maddison's GDP data.¹⁹ Colonial quantitative analyses have been vast due to source abundance.²⁰ However, the comparative lack of formalised data in the pre-colonial period limits studies to using proxy data.²¹ For example, living standards in Yoruba (covering Togo, Benin, and Nigeria), northern Ghana, and Burkina Faso have previously been estimated through a statistical analysis of heights across

different communities, which in turn have been used to extrapolate analyses on the relative nourishment, and by extension the economic prosperity, of communities there.²² Whilst concluding that male soldiers in Ghana and Burkina Faso represented the upper-bound of nourishment across Africa, these heights represent limited and localized living standards specific to select groups of male soldiers and enslaved people.²³ Rather than using proxies such as height data, Rönnbäck provides interventionist quantitative research in pre-colonial West African living standards through welfare ratios.²⁴ These are calculated as a comparative method to gauge the level of prosperity above or below subsistence; a ratio of one translates to the minimum income to survive, a ratio below being unsustainable for life.²⁵ Quarterly wages (of indigenous labourers in the Gold Coast, British Royal African Company (RAC), 1700–1750) are divided by a calculated subsistence basket.²⁶ The subsistence basket is the income threshold required to feed and house a family of six under the male-breadwinner's salary—consuming 2,251 calories and fifty-six grams of protein in a localised diet.²⁷ Figure 1 indicates the global comparisons through a selection of Robert Allen's European welfare ratios from building labourers' wages.²⁸ The European averaged welfare ratio was calculated from fifteen European cities given by Allen and oscillates around the ratio of one, indicating that many, if not most, contemporaries lived at subsistence level.²⁹ More sporadic

yet abundant data from Rönnbäck places indigenous canoe men (who worked for the RAC forts, carrying European visitors, enslaved people, and cargo) as averaging 0.7–0.8 between the period 1735–1750—seemingly not anomalous within the ratios of Paris, Leipzig, and Strasbourg.³⁰ Carpenter welfare ratios in the Gold Coast surpassed that of London (1705–1720) averaging between 3.0 and 4.0 (where London lay at 1.58 for labourers and 2.21 for carpenters).³¹ Rönnbäck highlights the minimum costs that the RAC strove for which enables this case study to be extrapolated to show that urban work was on a parallel level to places in Europe with a minimal affluence gap.³² The quantitative welfare ratios in the emerging capitalist West Africa debunk the traditional stagnancy of GDP estimates.

Moreover, Rönnbäck's data only provides a minimum estimate of projected wealth through a qualitative analysis of inequality and women's labour. Firstly, the presence of capital wealth inequality would be limited under pre-capitalist or 'traditional' demarcation of West Africa.³³ The urban wage work of welfare ratios provides the minimum rather than the total prosperity of West Africa. The study of inequality—mirroring that of the 'core' polities—indicates internal capital divergence through the 'wealth-in-people' (likened to the wealth in property in the land abundance of West Africa).³⁴ Furthermore, studies have generalised

agricultural work to small subsistence farming which neglects the emerging inequality in the period.³⁵ For example, there is evidence of wealthy Nigerian farmers profiteering off seasonal demand by owning large-scale crop storage to sell at higher prices—clearly not working at subsistence level and engaging with local market conditions for capital gain.³⁶ More significantly, Rönnbäck's familial assumptions indicate minimal and skewed estimates.³⁷ Welfare ratios assume a male-breadwinner with a nucleus of a family of six relying on such wage.³⁸ An integrated familial nucleus with a singular male breadwinner is a European concept that cannot be relied on for accurate measure of West African living standards.³⁹ The nucleus of the family provides an international comparison for welfare ratios. However, the underestimation of women's labour requires an additional and separate analysis to not statistically skew the income of the family in the calculation of welfare ratios.⁴⁰ Women's 'economic autonomy' and profit was rooted primarily in agricultural pursuits following the emergence of palm oil production around the turn of the nineteenth century.⁴¹ Women harvested and cracked the palm kernels to make oil and then carried the product to buyers before colonial markets opened.⁴² Female monopolization of pottery and textile production enabled market engagement to supplement the male breadwinner in welfare ratio calculations. Shai potters (in Accra,

current-day Ghana) gained income through specialization in pots and in Mali and northern Nigeria, highly skilled female textile spinning had a wide scope of circulation.⁴³ The autonomy of women's income is a qualitative addition to that of the quantitative work of welfare ratios that demonstrates the underestimation of those results within the familial nucleus used. Overall, the inequality and contribution of women's labour in analysis demonstrates the underestimation of quantitative data for West African living standards.

In conclusion, the traditional denotations of pre-capitalist society in West Africa with subsistence living standards and economic underdevelopment is exaggerated. Global comparisons parallel West Africa in the early modern period through the emergence of capitalist market engagement, comparable welfare ratios and inequality levels. The failure of modern scholarship to take into account the labour of women in West Africa also signifies the inadequacy of quantitative data used to characterise West African economies. West African economic conditions have thus been raised as a parallel to 'core' capitalist countries. Conversely, by questioning the familial structures and separating women's labour in statistical structures in West Africa, a process of 'reciprocal comparison' should be aimed for in reflecting this process back to global quantitative studies to achieve more accurate results and nuance.⁴⁴

16. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 115; Marion Johnson, 'The cowrie currencies of West Africa, Part I', *Journal of African History* 11, 1 (1970), pp. 17–49, p. 36.

18. Lovejoy, 'Interregional Monetary Flows in the Pre-Colonial Trade of Nigeria', p. 568; Law, 'Trade economy and the West African coast', p. 570.

19. Gareth Austin, Stephen Broadberry, 'Introduction: The Renaissance of African economic history', *Economic History Review*, 67, 4, Special issue, The Renaissance of African Economic History (2014), pp. 893–906, p. 895; Jerven, 'African growth recurring', p. 133.

20. For colonial quantitative living standards, see: Ewout Frankema, Marlou Van Waijenburg, 'Structural Impediments to African Growth? New Evidence from Real Wages in British Africa, 1880–1965', *The Journal of Economic History*, 72, 4 (2012), pp. 895–926.

21. Jerven, 'African growth recurring', p. 132; Klas Rönnbäck, 'Living standards on the pre-colonial Gold Coast: A quantitative estimate of African laborers'

welfare ratios', *European Review of Economic History*, 18 (2014) pp. 185–202, p. 186.

22. Rönnbäck, 'Living standards on the pre-colonial Gold Coast', p. 186; Gareth Austin, Joerg Baten, Bas Van Leeuwen, 'The Biological Standard of Living in Early Nineteenth-Century West Africa: New anthropometric evidence for northern Ghana and Burkina Faso', *Economic History Review*, 65, 4 (2012), pp. 1280–1302, p. 1281, p. 1296.

23. Austin, Baten, Van Leeuwen, 'The Biological Standard of Living in Early Nineteenth-Century West Africa', p. 1297, p. 1299; Rönnbäck, 'Living standards on the pre-colonial Gold Coast', p. 186; David Eltis, 'Welfare Trends among the Yoruba in the Early Nineteenth Century: The Anthropometric Evidence', *The Journal of Economic History*, 50, 3 (1990), pp. 521–540, p. 529.

24. For a review of Rönnbäck and the interventionist nature of his work, see: Judith M. Spicksley, 'Quality of Life Before Colonialism—Labour and Living Standards in Pre-Colonial West Africa: The case of the Gold Coast. By Klas Rönnbäck', *The Journal of African History*, 58, 2 (2017), pp. 374–75, p. 357;

Rönnbäck, 'Living standards on the pre-colonial Gold Coast', p. 189.

25. Rönnbäck, 'Living standards on the pre-colonial Gold Coast', p. 189, p. 194.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 190–191.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

28. Comparison enabled by Rönnbäck who modelled the subsistence basket off Allen's European analysis, see: Klas Rönnbäck, 'Living standards on the pre-colonial Gold Coast', p. 189.

29. For the calculation of the European average, the cities used were Antwerp, Amsterdam, London, Florence/Milan, Naples, Valencia, Madrid, Paris, Strasbourg, Augsburg, Leipzig, Munich, Vienna, Gdansk, Krakow, Warsaw, Lwow, and Hamburg (calculated to 2 decimal places), see: Robert Allen, 'The Great Divergence in European Wages and Prices from the Middle Ages to the First World War', *Explorations in Economic History*, 38 (2001), pp. 411–447, p. 428.

30. Rönnbäck, 'Living standards on the pre-colonial Gold Coast', p. 185, pp. 194–195; Peter C. Gutkind,

'The Canoe men of the Gold Coast (Ghana): A survey and an exploration in Precolonial African Labour History', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 29, 115–116 (1989), pp. 339–376, p. 339, pp. 348–349.

31. Allen, 'The Great Divergence in European Wages and Prices from the Middle Ages to the First World War', p. 428.

32. Rönnbäck, 'Living standards on the pre-colonial Gold Coast', p. 191, p. 198.

33. Ewout Frankema, Michiel De Haas, Marlou Van Waijenburg, 'Inequality Regimes in Africa from Pre-Colonial Times to the Present', *African Affairs*, 122, 486 (2023), pp. 57–94, p. 60.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 73, p. 76.

35. Polly Hill, 'The Vain Search for Universal Generalizations: 1. The Relevance of Economic Inequality.' Chapter. In Polly Hill, *Development Economics on Trial: The anthropological case for a prosecution* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 16–29, p. 17, p. 20.

36. Morten Jerven, 'The Emergence of African Capitalism.' Chapter. In Larry Neal, Jeffrey G.

Williamson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Capitalism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 431–54, p. 445; Hill, 'The Vain Search for Universal Generalizations', p. 17, p. 20.

37. For the neglect of women and complicated assumptions in welfare ratios, see: Spicksley, 'Quality of Life Before Colonialism – Labour and Living Standards in Pre-Colonial West Africa', p. 374; Sara Horrell, Jane Humphries, 'Women's Labour Force Participation and the Transition to the Male-Breadwinner Family, 1790–1865', *The Economic History Review*, 48, 1 (1995), pp. 89–117, p. 90.

38. Rönnbäck, 'Living standards on the pre-colonial Gold Coast', p. 189.

39. Polly Hill, 'The Farming Household: Its Defects as a Statistical Unit.' Chapter. In Polly Hill, *Development Economics on Trial: The anthropological case for a prosecution* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 78–82, p. 78.

40. For the promotion of separation and previous neglect of women's work, see: Polly Hill, 'The Neglect of Women', Chapter. In Polly Hill, *Development Economics on Trial: The*

anthropological case for a prosecution (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 140–45, p. 143, p. 142.

41. Polly Hill, 'The Vain Search for Universal Generalizations: 2. The Poor Quality of Official Statistics.' Chapter. In Polly Hill, *Development Economics on Trial: The anthropological case for a prosecution* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 30–50, p. 36.

42. Emmanuel Akyeampong, Hippolyte Fofack, 'The Contribution of African Women to Economic Growth and Development in the Pre-Colonial and Colonial Periods: Historical Perspectives and Policy Implications', *Economic History of Developing Regions*, 29, 1, (2014), pp. 42–73, p. 55.

43. Akyeampong, Fofack, 'The Contribution of African Women to Economic Growth and Development in the Pre-Colonial and Colonial Periods', p. 51.

44. For a detailed explanation of 'reciprocal comparison', see: Gareth Austin, 'Reciprocal Comparison and African History: Tackling Conceptual Eurocentrism in the Study of Africa's Economic Past', *African Studies Review*, 50, 3 (2007), pp. 1–28, p. 10.

‘Caste-Gendering’ in Indian Indentured Labour



Tom Rymer

Tom Rymer is a second-year history undergraduate at Durham. During the 2022-2023 academic year, Tom became interested in South Asian Studies through modules offered in the Department of History on caste-gendering and colonial India. The content delivered in these modules has influenced Tom's research into the wider cultural and social issues of India under British colonial rule.

The ‘caste-gendering’ historiographical movement which emerged at the end of the twentieth century was used to describe the intersection of caste—a social hierarchy that divides people into different groups based on their birth—with gender, arguing that gendered cultural oppression was mobilised to reinforce the social hierarchy

of caste. Previously, Indian feminist historiography had tracked a homogenised account of oppression, failing to acknowledge the different lived experiences of women depending on their caste position.¹ Therefore, ‘caste-gendering’ provides a multi-layered lens through which scholars of South Asian history may further understand

systems of inequality present in certain social contexts. To show how a ‘caste-gendering’ perspective achieves these nuances, this article will focus on the lowest caste position—the *Dalit* or untouchable group, members of which were considered to be culturally polluting to all others within the Indian caste system. Specifically, this article will follow Dalit women within the nineteenth-century system of indentured labour, a measure brought in by the British government to cover for the loss of labour from the abolition of slavery in 1833 and which contracted workers to five years on plantations.² Through the experiences of individuals—for instance, the case of a Dalit woman named Kunti who, after being assaulted by an overseer on a Fijian plantation in 1913, became a central figure in both colonial and nationalist discourses around lower castes—we can trace how gender and caste intersected in instances of oppression.³ In an attempt to silence Kunti's story and redirect blame for the assault, colonial authorities responded by defaming her as a supposedly loose character in an attempt to justify the subjugation of Dalit women.⁴ Though written in a sympathetic voice to undermine the indentureship system and the colonial state itself, nationalist print written by higher-caste Hindus ultimately betrayed their own caste prejudices surrounding Dalit women.⁵ A ‘caste gendering’ perspective reveals Dalit women beyond their prescribed station in the social hierarchy. By peeling away at cultural characteristics assumed by their position and using more creative sources we can do away with simplistic singular narratives that have plagued the histories of indentured labour. In doing so, a deeper understanding of late-colonial Indian Ocean world can be achieved, returning agency to Dalit women by moving past the gendered culture surrounding colonial and nationalist histories.

Whilst previous studies have correctly recognised the colonial oppression of indentured workers, a deeper understanding of the social structures used to suppress Dalit women may be obtained by applying a ‘caste-gendering’ approach to the research. Writing in 1974, revisionist historian Hugh Tinker labelled indentureship as ‘simply slavery by another name’, establishing the Tinkerian paradigm that has dominated historiography surrounding indentured labour.⁶ Whilst correctly acknowledging the poor conditions which workers described as *narak*, meaning ‘hell’, it reduces their experience into one narrative.⁷ This revisionist scholarship creates a homogenised experience of indentureship and does not consider gendered nuances as well as expressions of female agency. This has often led to lazy assumptions that all those who entered indentured labour were coerced or tricked into the work, restricting these women to passive victims of a colonial process. One of many oral stories follows a woman named Raj Pali who left Uttar Pradesh with her family and travelled to Fiji in search of a better life. The story is told by her granddaughter, Hermanshi Kumar, and is symptomatic of the caste-gendering movement's creative approach in use of sources. Her example serves as a demonstration of the indentured worker as an active subject in history rather than automatically being mislabelled as one tricked into enslavement.⁸

The ‘caste-gendering’ perspective further deepens our understanding of labourers as subjects. Colonisers frequently weaponised Dalit women's sexuality against them.⁹ For instance, English missionary C.F. Andrews described Dalit women in indentured work as a ‘rudderless vessel... she passes from one man to another.’¹⁰ This



Figure 1: Photograph of labourers harvesting sugarcane; the labourer to the left is of Indo-Fijian descent (Photograph by Tudor Washington Collins, available under Creative Commons license).

1. Chandra Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses’, *Feminist Review*, 30 (1988), pp. 61-62; Gopal Guru, ‘Dalit Women Talk Differently’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30 (1995), p. 2548.

2. Charu Gupta, *The gender of caste: representing Dalits in print* (Seattle, 2016), pp. 236-237.

3. Brij V. Lal, ‘Kunti's cry: Indentured women in Fiji plantations’, *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 22 (1985), pp. 55-56.

4. *Ibid.* p. 56 and Gupta, *The Gender of Caste*, p. 264.

5. Uma Chakravati, *Gendering caste: through a feminist lens* (Los Angeles, 2018), p. 8.

6. Brij V. Lal, ‘A Girmitiya ‘Sepoy’’, *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 29 (2016), p. 246.

7. Lal, ‘Kunti's cry’, p. 66.

8. Aanchal Malhotra, ‘A teenager traces her Indian great-great grandmother's life as an indentured labourer in Fiji’, *Scroll*, accessed 1 November 2022 at <https://scroll.in/magazine/886645/a-teenager-traces-her-indian-great-great-grandmothers-life-as-an-indentured-labourer-in-fiji>.

9. Lal, ‘Kunti's cry’, p. 56.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

expresses the derogatory view of female indentured workers whom they believed to be immoral, whilst displaying a desire to control female sexuality. Such sources have been reflected in histories which have made the unfounded assumption that women within the plantations were promiscuous and labelled them as sex workers.¹¹ By approaching the colonial oppression of Dalit women in indentured labour through a 'caste-gendering' perspective, we can illuminate the gender-specific way in which Dalit women were attacked through their sexuality, whilst also doing away with the homogenised narratives offered by the likes of Tinker by acknowledging their autonomy as individuals rather than a homogenous group.¹²

The caste-gender lens also illuminates the culture in which caste and gendered inequality existed and the privileged culture of the higher caste Hindus. Feminist historian Charu Gupta's study provides a 'caste gendering' perspective to illuminate a gendered high-caste culture.¹³ In response to the Kunti story, the Hindu press presented Dalit women in Fiji as perpetual victims, with Maithilisaran Gupta, a Hindi poet, writing the verse 'The helpless damsel fallen into the clutches of the wicked,' reflecting a wider nationalist discourse for critiquing indenture.¹⁴ The emotional appeal of this response demonstrated that high-caste Hindus saw victimisation of indentured women as a transgression against their own patriarchal control. The higher-castes in charge of the press were enveloped in the caste-based dichotomy of purity and pollution, believing that without protection their lower-caste 'sisters' would be corrupted.¹⁵ They embedded this mix of gender and caste-based prejudices into the anti-indenture rhetoric of the late-colonial period. In the nationalist magazine *Stri Darpan*, partly as a result of the stigma surrounding crossing the *kala pani* (the black waters) which was thought to rid an individual of their caste, an editorial argued that, were a single low-caste woman to migrate, 'she is bound to become corrupt.'¹⁶ This anti-colonialist stance relied on the denial of Dalit women's agency, compounding their position on the periphery of the caste system.¹⁷ In a similar way to C.F. Andrews' comment that these women were 'rudderless', the high-caste culture of viewing indentured women as victims deprived them of their autonomy. Through a 'caste gendering' perspective, we can discard their perception as 'rudderless' and victimised and instead view them as individuals with lived experiences, deepening our understanding of the privileged culture of the higher caste and the oppression of Dalit women.

The 'caste gendering perspective' provides a means to deepen our understanding of the nuances of indentured labour and acknowledge the multi-layered nature of inequality and oppression that structured labourers' experiences. The perspective allows for a greater focus on the individuals' lived experiences, rather than trying to provide a one-size-fits-all narrative as Tinker attempted to achieve. It also complicates nationalist histories which have suggested there was a singular feminist movement in India by illustrating that lived experiences of women were contingent on their caste position. This is visible through the case study of indentured Dalits in Fiji who were at the bottom of this social structure. By acknowledging the caste-gendered prejudices of both the colonialist and higher-caste Hindus directed at the Dalit *Girmitya*, a culture designed to restrain the sexuality of lower-caste women becomes evident. Peeling away both colonialist and nationalist obfuscations of Dalit women's agency helps to deepen our understanding of the gendered caste system which attempted to justify this inequality through the dichotomy of pollution and purity.

11. Crispin Bates, 'Some Thoughts on the Representation and Misrepresentation of the Colonial South Asian Labour Diaspora', *South Asian Studies* 33, no. 1 (2 January 2017), pp. 10-13.

12. Lal, 'A Girmitya Sepoy', p. 249.

13. Gupta, *The gender of caste*, pp. 264-266.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 246.

15. Chakravati, *Gendering caste*, p. 8 and Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu wife, Hindu nation: community, religion, and cultural nationalism*, (Bloomington, 2001), p. 2.

16. Omendra Kumar Singh, 'Reinventing Caste: Indian Diaspora in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*', *Asiatic* 6 (2012), pp. 49-50 and Gupta, *The gender of caste*, p. 259.

17. Gupta, *The Gender of Caste*, p. 242.



Figure 2: Photograph of a sugarcane plantation with an Indo-Fijian woman observing in the background (Photograph by Tudor Washington Collins, available under Creative Commons license).



Through a 'caste gendering' perspective, we can discard their perception as 'rudderless' and victimised and instead view them as individuals with lived experiences, deepening our understanding of the privileged culture of the higher caste and the oppression of Dalit women.



Thinking with the 'F-word':

Fascism, white supremacy,
and Black British history

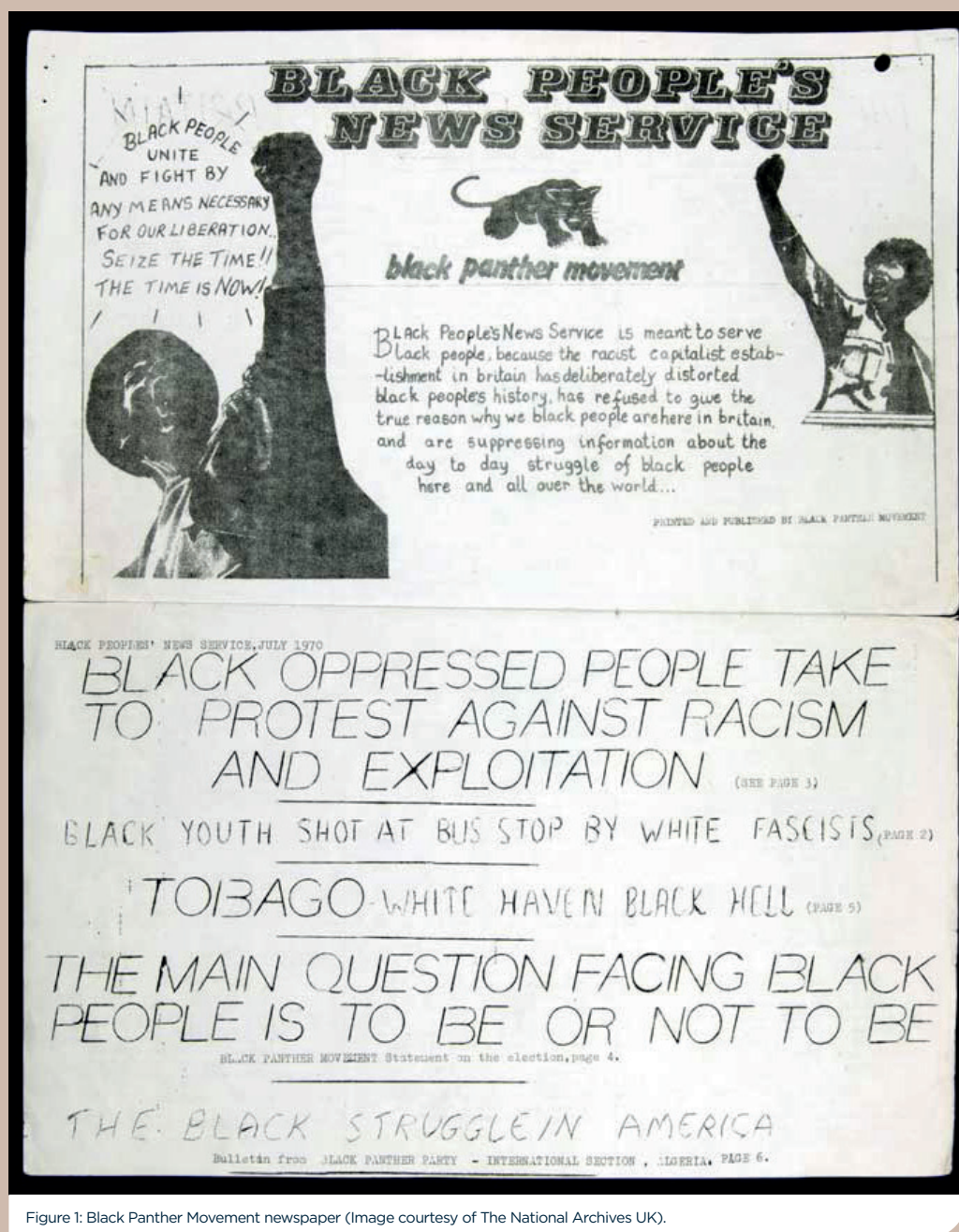


Figure 1: Black Panther Movement newspaper (Image courtesy of The National Archives UK).



Dr Liam J. Liburd

Liam J. Liburd is Assistant Professor of Black British History at the Durham University. His research focuses broadly on the ongoing impact of the legacies of empire and decolonisation in modern Britain. His current research focuses on Black radical analyses of fascism and on the question of how historians might use these to transform our understanding of the relationship between British fascism and the British Empire, as well as, more broadly, of the politics of race in modern Britain. He is in the process of trying to turn his thesis into his first book, under the working title: *Thinking Imperially: The British White Supremacist Movement and the Politics of Race in Modern Britain*.

The hardening of the current Conservative government's rhetoric and policy towards migrants, refugees, and those seeking asylum has prompted several commentators and public figures to issue bleak prognostications of Britain's imminent slide towards fascism. Comments such as these resulted in a brief and well-publicised furore in early March 2023 after *Match of the Day* presenter, Gary Lineker, compared the Home Office's announcement of a new Illegal Migration Bill to the 'language... used by Germany in the 1930s'.¹ This incident, in particular, provoked debate about the appropriateness of making analogies or comparisons between fascism and present political circumstances.

Writing in *The Times* a few days after Lineker's tweet, Karen Pollock, the chief executive of the Holocaust Educational Trust, warned that it was 'wrong' to use either the rise of the Nazis or the Holocaust 'as shorthand' to describe present-day political conditions.² Fascism belonged—for Pollock—to 'a specific period of history, rooted in a time and a place'. Shortly after this, BBC Radio 4 broadcast an edition of their *Archive on Four* programme offering similarly cautious perspectives on the ethics of invoking 'The Other F Word'.³

I sympathise with the reticence of Pollock and others, particularly when it comes to the history of the Holocaust. Not all analogies are equally valid, and some are outright offensive as well as entirely disproportionate in their inaccuracy. At the same time, it is also the case that such analogies and comparisons can be—and have been—incisive tools for historical and political analysis.

To insist on viewing fascism as rooted remotely in a neatly bounded past, possessing neither a history nor legacy outside of a 'specific period', represents a refusal to learn anti-racist lessons from history. To conceptualise fascism in these narrow terms is also to ignore the long history of the Black political thinkers who rejected such limited analyses

of fascism. Black Studies scholar, Cedric Robinson, attacked the tendency in academia, public history, and popular culture to seal fascism off from other historical phenomena and to set it up as the aberrant 'villain' with the West standing for its 'heroic' polar opposite.⁴ By contrast, noted Robinson:

From the perspective of many non-Western peoples... the occurrence of fascism—that is militarism, imperialism, racist authoritarianism, choreographed mob violence, millenarian crypto-Christian mysticism, and a nostalgic nationalism—was no more an historical aberration than colonialism, the slave trade, and slavery.

This different perspective on fascism amounted to what Robinson dubbed the 'black construction of fascism'. This 'theory of fascism' developed out of a political analysis of fascism by 'ordinary Blacks in the Diaspora and their leaders', formulated on the basis of their 'common discourse' and experiences. Predicated on this analysis, Black activists and intellectuals understood fascism primarily as a form of white supremacy, umbilically connected to other forms, systems, and ideologies of racist oppression.

Though Robinson's discussion focused primarily on African American anti-colonial anti-fascist activism during the inter-war period, Black activists and intellectuals in Britain advanced similar 'joined up' analyses of fascism. From the anti-colonial British imperial subjects living in 1930s London attacking 'colonial fascism' in the Empire, to the British 'Black Power' activists of the 1970s referring to the confluence of 'street' and state racism as 'British fascism', such analogies and comparisons represent a longstanding feature of Black political activism in Britain. I want to use the rest of this article to explore the deeper function and

1. Gary Lineker (@GaryLinker), 'There is no huge influx. We take far fewer refugees than other major European countries. This is just an immeasurably cruel policy directed at the most vulnerable people in language that is not dissimilar to that used by Germany in the 30s, and I'm out of order?' [tweet] (2:25pm, 7 March 2023), <https://twitter.com/GaryLineker/status/1633111662352891908?s=20> [accessed 21 April 2023]; Jemma Crew & Katie Razzall, 'BBC

'speaking frankly' with Gary Lineker over tweet comparing UK asylum policy to 1930s Germany', *BBC News* (8 March 2023), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-64883655> [accessed 21 April 2023]; Alex Green, 'Pundits boycott Match of the Day after Gary Lineker stood down by BBC', *The Independent* (10 March 2023), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/gary-lineker-bbc-ian-wright-emily-maitlis-alan-shearer-b2298448.html> [accessed 21 April 2023].

2. Karen Pollock, 'Let's calm down, remember history, and keep Nazi comparisons out of political rhetoric', *The Times* (10 March 2023), <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/lets-calm-down-remember-history-and-keep-nazi-comparisons-out-of-political-rhetoric-j3vcx2qs8> [accessed 21 April 2023].

3. *Archive on Four—The Other F Word* (15 April 2023), *BBC Sounds*, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m001lws> [accessed 21 April 2023].



Figure 2: George Padmore, c. 1937.

purpose behind the making of these analogies and comparisons through a discussion of examples drawn from those two aforementioned points in the twentieth century—namely, from the inter-war writings of the Trinidadian communist and Pan-Africanist, George Padmore, and from the periodicals of 1970s British Black Power organisations.

George Padmore's activist career—which, at one stage, saw him deported from Hamburg to Britain by the new Nazi government in early 1933—left him with an urgent concern about

the rise of fascism and a sensitivity to the affinities between fascism and British imperialism. Throughout the several books he authored and the articles he contributed to left-wing, anti-colonial, and Black publications across the world, Padmore deployed the concept of 'colonial fascism'—the idea that European capitalist imperial powers were incubating fascism or actually in the process of going fascist themselves.⁵

Padmore cited one minor imperial functionary as the personification of 'colonial fascism'. At several points in

his career as an activist-journalist, he reported on the life of Josslyn Victor Hay, the 22nd Earl of Erroll. Until his mysterious murder in 1941, Erroll was a member of Kenya's 'Happy Valley' set, a group of British aristocrats living in Kenya's White Highlands. He was involved in local politics, but also flirted with fascism, briefly serving from 1934 until sometime in 1935 or 1936 as the Kenyan representative of Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF).⁶

As Padmore reported in the Independent Labour Party's *New Leader* newspaper, when the police searched Erroll's home following his murder, they discovered "[l]arge quantities of fascist literature' and 'a membership card' for the BUF among his possessions.⁷ However, Erroll's involvement with the BUF seems to have been short-lived and his understanding of fascist ideology fairly fuzzy. He put little effort into starting a Kenyan BUF branch and instead engaged with the already-existing political structures, becoming president of the Convention of Associations, later serving of Kenya Colony's Legislative Council, and then serving on the Executive Council.

Padmore explained this by arguing that Erroll and Kenya's other white settlers did not need fascism: 'For the most part,' he wrote, 'they were already full-blooded Fascists.' What Padmore meant by this was that the racially stratified authoritarianism at the heart of fascism was well-established within Britain's white settler colonies. Here, Padmore was not just drawing a simple one-to-one analogy between fascism and imperialism. He was provocatively asserting that, throughout the British Empire, democratic structures for white Britons co-existed alongside, and even incubated, a 'fascism' wielded against non-white colonial subjects. It is in instances like this,

peppered throughout Padmore's writings, that he makes a radical and highly relevant intellectual contribution. He explodes the assumption—still very much alive today—that fascism and liberal capitalist democracy represent mutually exclusive polar opposites.

Though operating in a very different context, the British Black Power activists in the 1970s continued to theorise along similar lines. Britain's Black Power movement was a 'protean', 'varied', and nationwide movement, involving a range of organisations and a vibrant Black political press.⁸ The movement developed from the late 1960s, partly inspired by the African American Black Power movement and by an open and increasingly violent racism towards people of African Caribbean and South Asian descent in British society.

The Black Power press publicised everyday occurrences of racist violence and Black radical analyses of racism. In doing so, they made expansive use of the terms 'fascist' and 'fascism', applying them to everything from white supremacist organisations like the National Front (NF) to the racism of the police and the judiciary. For the activists within Britain's Black Power movement, what Padmore had once called 'colonial fascism' had returned home with the end of the British Empire. The danger now came from a metropolitan 'British fascism'.

The publications of organisations like the Black Panther Movement (BPM), the Black Liberation Front (BLF), the Black Unity and Freedom Party (BUFP), contain an account of the politics of race in modern British history in which 'fascism' does not feature as some kind of outsider extremist phenomenon. In the first instance, Black Power activists viewed the activities carried out or inspired by fascist organisations as part of a



Figure 3: Mangrove Nine Protest, 1970 (Image courtesy of The National Archives UK).

bigger issue of racism. As the BPM's *Black People's News Service* outlined: 'institutional and individual forms of racism always work together. One cannot exist without the other.'⁹ For instance, they regarded the spate of petrol bombings of Black peoples' homes, businesses and communities in the early 1970s as connected to other incidents of racial discrimination from the police, the judiciary, the education system, and elsewhere.¹⁰

Moreover, in the face of individual assaults and institutional oppression, Black Power activists found themselves unable to distinguish between fascism and democracy *in practice*.¹¹ They argued that regardless of whether discrimination and violence was being carried out by uniformed agents of the state, NF activists, or unaffiliated members of the public, its meaning and effect was essentially the same. These acts collectively (re-) asserted a conception of Britain as a 'white' space.

In their expansive application of the term 'fascism', Black Power groups refused to view white supremacy as a problem confined to the extremist political margins. As well as highlighting these affinities, they also monitored actual connections

between fascists and wider society. Black Power newspapers reported on known members of the National Front working in schools, accusations of collusion between British police officers and the NF, and the extensive infiltration of the prison service by NF members and sympathisers.¹² Unsettlingly, their reports suggest a literal as well as figurative continuum of racist oppression in which the extra-parliamentary racism of the fascist organisations found an echo and even merged with the institutional racism of the British state and the prejudices of wider society.

As the writings and ideas of George Padmore and Britain's Black Power movement show, to think about fascism in these terms, and to make more expansive use of the 'f-word', was not to trivialise history but to problematise it and to focus attention on the problems of the present. As the anecdote I opened the article with illustrates, some find it all too easy to comfortably overestimate the distance between the liberal-democratic 'us' and the fascist 'other'. But as the history this article has briefly outlined demonstrates neither in the past, nor in the present, has this distance been so great as to warrant such complacency.

4. Cedric J. Robinson, 'Fascism and the Responses of Black Radical Theorists' [1990], *Cedric J. Robinson: On Racial Capitalism, Black Internationalism and Cultures of Resistance*, ed. H.L.T. Quan (London: Pluto Press, 2018), p. 152.

5. Bill Schwarz, 'George Padmore', in *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain*, Bill Schwarz, ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003),

pp. 141-142; Leslie James, *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below: Pan-Africanism, the Cold War, and the End of Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 43-46; Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* (London: Verso, 2019), chaps. 8 & 9.

6. 'Earl of Erroll As Blackshirt Delegate To Kenya', *Blackshirt*, 62 (29 June 1934), p. 10; George Padmore, *How Britain Rules Africa* (London: Wishart Books, 1936), pp. 359-360; James Fox, *White Mischief* (London: Vintage, [1982] 1998), pp. 46, 145; Erroll Trzebinski, *The Life and Death of Lord Erroll* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 129.

7. George Padmore, 'The Truth About the Murdered Fascist Earl', *New Leader* (14 June 1941), p. 3.

8. Rob Waters, *Thinking Black: Britain, 1964-1985*, Oakland, University of California, 2019, pp. 34, 35, 61.

9. 'The Meaning of Racism', *Black People's News Service* (February 1971), p. 2.

10. 'The bombing', *Black Voice*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1971), p. 5; 'Genocide - The Plot - The Crimes', *Black Voice*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1971).

11. 'Is There Any Difference?', *Black Voice*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (n.d.), p. 1.

12. 'NF Teacher', *Grassroots*, Vol. 3, No. 5 (n.d., c.1970s), p. 10; 'The Terrorists of Wandsworth Prison', *Grassroots* (October/November 1977), p. 1.

Riot, Cross-Dressing, and Resistance to Gender Roles in the Late Middle Ages



Abbie Fray

Abbie Fray is a second-year undergraduate History student at Durham University. She enjoys studying a wide range of periods and themes. Abbie specialises in histories of gender and sexuality, particularly in late medieval Europe. Recently, she has completed a short research project on 'Masculinity, Authority and Revolt in England 1381-1549', and hopes to explore these themes further in future studies.



Figure 1: Medieval illustration of men harvesting wheat with sickles, by anonymous, c. 1310. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Medieval popular riot and revolt were spaces for people to resist authorities and expected gender roles. This article will define revolt as a collective action where physical force challenged authorities.¹ In 1536, enclosure riots broke out in York in response to the enclosure of the commons of Knavesmire, preventing people from accessing and using this land. Married couples, men, women, and notably cross-dressers were among those punished there for having 'riottously assemblyd'.² The revolt was documented for court records and describes the crimes and punishments of the rebels. For instance, Rauff Walker was a shoemaker and rioter who 'was also then and ther in womens clothing'.³ By choosing to cross-dress, Walker not only resisted authority as a participator in the revolt, but also resisted expected gender roles.

This article will examine riot and resistance in the late medieval period through the lens of cross-dressing. Cross-dressing is the act of wearing articles of clothing that are typically worn by the opposite gender. Here, we can see Walker, a male, wearing female clothing. To grasp its significance, we must explore examples of cross-dressing within the context of other resistance to gender roles. The act of cross-dressing offers us a wealth of evidence to the ways in which people subverted gender roles and challenged authority in the Middle Ages. Firstly, Walker's cross-dressing threatened ideals of masculinity. Secondly, Walker's actions highlighted double standards in the Middle Ages as women were punished more severely for resisting gendered ideals. Finally, cross-dressing emphasised the fragility of the patriarchy. Hence, the significance of cross-dressing in revolt is what it reveals about different forms of resistance to gender roles in the late Middle Ages.

Walker's cross-dressing must be seen as more than an individual's actions as it threatened widespread ideals of masculinity. Previous historiography has examined cross-dressing in revolt as an act separate from other forms of resistance. Alun Howkins and Linda Merricks follow Natalie Zemon Davis in arguing that cross-dressing was used as a disguise during revolt and, therefore, this choice of clothing may not have been an intentional resistance of gender norms.⁴ This is a potential explanation for Walker's cross-dressing in the York 1536 enclosure riots as he also had 'a muffle over his face', presumably to hide his identity to avoid punishment.⁵ Nevertheless, authorities



Figure 2: Agricultural labourers, fifteenth century. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

quickly saw through Walker's disguise and saw he 'wyse ther personally'.⁶ If Walker's cross-dressing was a disguise, it was unsuccessful. The deposition exposed his cross-dressing and undermined his disguise.

When analysing Walker's cross-dressing, it might be tempting to see his motivations as isolated and individual. However, this approach fails to place Walker in the context of gender roles in revolt. Isolating the example of Walker does not make sense when studying medieval revolt as people's actions and gender roles were closely intertwined. His cross-dressing posed a threat to wider ideals of masculine gender performance. For example, similar language was used to describe another male rebel. Whilst Walker 'wyse ther personally', not cross-dressing, Alexander Mason was described as 'his owne proper person'.⁷ Though he resisted the authorities, the deposition spoke about Mason in a complimentary tone. Unlike Walker, he revolted in a 'proper' way, upholding his gender and masculinity. Moreover, by clarifying that Mason dressed as himself, the court highlighted Walker's transgression, suggesting he was not 'his owne proper person'. Nevertheless, the deposition concluded by stating he 'wyse ther personally', implying he was there as himself, as a man. The authorities restored Walker's 'owne person',

1. Christian D. Liddy, and Jelle Haemers, 'Popular politics in the late medieval city: York and Bruges,' *The English Historical Review* 128, no. 533 (2013), p. 785.

2. Angelo Raine (ed.), *York Civic Records*, vol. 4 (Wakefield, 1945), p. 3.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

4. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays*. (Stanford, 1975), p. 149; Alun Howkins and Linda Merricks, 'Wee be black as Hell': Ritual, Disguise and Rebellion', *Rural History* 4, no. 1 (1993), p. 41.

5. Raine (ed.), *York Civic Records*, p. 3.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

reasserting gender roles. By presenting his cross-dressing as only a disguise which they removed, the authorities forced Walker back into his masculine role, reasserting their control. Walker's treatment in comparison with other rebels such as Mason, emphasises that his cross-dressing was more than only a disguise. Walker's cross-dressing threatened commonly-held ideas of masculinity, which was ultimately perceived as a threat to authority.

To improve our understanding of people's resistance to gender roles, historians must consider cross-dressing within its wider context in revolt. For instance, Walker's cross-dressing highlights the double standards expected of men and women. Whilst Walker and two other men were fined £20 for their participation, women were punished more harshly.⁸ Before Walker's crimes, the deposition states Isabelle Lutton and Agnes Cooke were 'commytted unto the Shiryffs prison and to be caryed of the thewe aboute this City three several days in example of lyke offenders'.⁹ Men had some freedom to stray from masculine ideals, yet women's attempts to deviate from submissive feminine positions were quickly prevented or corrected. As Shannon McSheffrey suggests, women understood the expectation of them to be compliant.¹⁰ Therefore, their punishment reflected the increased severity of their crime. When exploring the 1381 Peasants Revolt, Sylvia Federico highlights that women in the Middle Ages were also vulnerable to accusation and punishment for participating in revolt.¹¹ Moreover, women were publicly humiliated as a result of their punishments, deterring others from following their example. They suffered permanent damage to their reputations, changing the way they were viewed and treated within the city. In this way, official responses to instances of riot reveal contemporary concerns regarding those who strayed from social expectations. Authorities wanted to deter others from following rebels. Women's humiliation thus highlighted their deviance, setting an 'example of lyke offenders' so the revolt was not repeated.¹² Publicly humiliating them reasserted their gender identities and ensured other women did not stray from their passive positions.

In contrast, Walker was punished as a man with 'Alexander Mason' and 'Rychard Gybson'.¹³ Mason and Gybson were not cross-dressing, highlighting that Walker was seen as a man when he was punished. After paying their fines, the men could continue to live their lives without being

socially humiliated like the women. Women's resistance to gender ideals was viewed as a far more threatening act than men resisting prescribed gender norms. This gave men, such as Walker, more freedom to challenge and resist gender roles, for example by cross-dressing. These reactions to Walker's cross-dressing during the enclosure riot highlighted the different standards expected of men and women with relation to resistance and riot.

Finally, it is important to see Walker's resistance to gender roles within the social structures of the time. Cross-dressing in the 1536 riot highlighted the fragile nature of the patriarchy. The authorities tried to undermine Walker's cross-dressing to dismiss the threat he posed. It is imperative that we explore Walker's position within the patriarchal society he occupied. Ruth Karras rightly suggests cross-dressing threatened medieval society by highlighting that gender roles were performative.¹⁴ This approach is supported by Vern Bullough who argues status and authority were central to cross-dressing.¹⁵ The cross-dresser's ability to manipulate power and status made authorities anxious. This is evident in York as the authorities were unaware of how to address Walker's actions and thus simply dismissed them. We can see this in the silences of the sources, as he was fined 'to keep the peace'.¹⁶ The deposition ignores his gender transgression by only focusing on his physical resistance. As a site of resistance, social norms and gender roles were already fragile and flexible in riot, as seen by Isabelle Lutton and Agnes Cooke's deviation from feminine submission.¹⁷ Women were already questioning their expected obedience and asserting their dominance. David Cressy convincingly argues cross dressing threatened patriarchal control.¹⁸ Therefore, as Walker's cross-dressing showed that gender boundaries could be resisted, it also threatened existing gendered hierarchies.

Nevertheless, although Walker's cross-dressing was quickly dismissed, his guilt was clearly stated. The source attempted to reassert social order, concluding that he was at the 'unlawfull ryott doying'.¹⁹ The deposition tied Walker's cross-dressing to his actions in the riot, dismissing both acts of resistance as being transgressive and wrong. Thus, the authorities were concerned over the threat Walker's cross-dressing posed to gender and social norms. The reactions of authorities to Walker's actions demonstrated that individual cross-dressers threatened the roots of patriarchal authority, highlighting



Figure 3: Richard II meeting with the rebels of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, by Jean Froissart, fifteenth century. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

the performative nature of gender. By examining Walker's cross-dressing, we can see the impact of resistance to gender roles in revolt on wider societal structures. These societal structures are only evident when we examine Walker within the context of his time and environment, rather than isolating his actions.

To conclude, even in the details of a single act of revolt, we can already begin to see the methodological weaknesses

which appear when approaching medieval cross-dressing in isolation. By isolating cross-dressing, these individuals' actions have been consigned to the historical periphery, preventing historians from examining their relationships to other acts of resistance. The reality was far more complex as cross-dressing was intertwined with other forms of resistance to gender roles. Walker's extraordinary example of cross-dressing in revolt highlights the fragility of gender roles in times of resistance.

8. Ibid., p. 3.

9. Ibid., p. 2.

10. Shannon McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), p. 138.

11. Sylvia Federico, 'The imaginary society: women in 1381.' *Journal of British Studies* 40, no. 2 (2001), p. 164.

12. Raine (ed.), *York Civic Records*, p. 2.

13. Ibid., p. 3.

14. Ruth M. Karras and David L. Boyd, "'Ut Cum Muliere': A Male Transvestite Prostitute in

Fourteenth-Century London', in Kim M. Phillips and Barry Reay (eds.), *Sexualities in History: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 98.

15. Vern L. Bullough, 'Transvestites in the Middle Ages.' *American Journal of Sociology* 79, no. 6

(1974), p. 1382.

16. Raine (ed.), *York Civic Records*, p. 3.

17. Ibid., p. 2.

18. David Cressy, 'Gender trouble and cross-dressing

in early modern England.' *Journal of British Studies* 35, no. 4 (1996), pp. 438-9.

19. Raine (ed.), *York Civic Records*, p. 3.

The West Hartlepool Incident:

The disposal of the dead and the construction of identity in a late nineteenth-century British town



Daniel Burrell

Daniel Burrell is a second year PhD student with the History Department at Durham University and is currently supervised by Professor Julie-Marie Strange and Dr Helen Roche. His thesis aims to reshape cremationism as an intellectual space for the creation and navigation of enchanted new realities and environments in late nineteenth-century Britain. Daniel has studied the cultural, social and intellectual issues surrounding modern British and European death and disposal practices throughout his student career at Durham. He is particularly happy to talk about the historical role of worms, both physical and imagined.



On Tuesday 8 September 1874, the Town Improvement Commission for West Hartlepool met at the local Athenaeum building to discuss a proposed plan to purchase land for the enlargement of the local cemetery. This was not an uncommon issue for municipal authorities in this period, as even relatively modest urban settlements were beginning to experience the pressures of a rapidly growing population with increasingly poor living conditions.¹ However, this meeting was attended by the distinguished local solicitor, Edward Turnbull, who proposed that cremation should be considered as an alternative and preferred form of disposal that would render the expansion unnecessary. As a result, the Commission was met by a large and impassioned protest comprised of several hundred local working-class women, led by a Mrs Clarkson, who presented a signed petition which condemned cremation and requested that traditional 'Christian' burial remain unchallenged.² Turnbull ultimately failed to persuade anyone present to support his proposal and the cemetery was duly expanded later that month.

This incident represented an important moment in the history of British death culture and the ways in which British people conceptualised and engaged with the issues surrounding death, grief, commemoration and the disposal of the body. It was one of the earliest and most dramatic cases in which cremationism, a complex philosophy which advocated for the burning of the dead, was presented to scrutiny in a public forum. While much can be said regarding Turnbull's intentions concerning cremationism, it is the ideals and values of the apparently victorious local protestors who opposed it, which will be focused upon here. The nature and reception of this protest ultimately revealed how contemporary ideas related to death and disposal provided a space for the interrogation and articulation of emerging, complex, and overlapping identities in this period. As such, through both their physical and imagined presence, the dead effectively continued to 'work' for the living, long after they themselves had decayed.³

The petition presented by the protestors declared that they were the collective 'Mothers of West Hartlepool' and the 'Wives of Working Men'.⁴ They were also depicted by many commentators as belonging to the 'humbler classes of society'.⁵ In contrast, the commissioners represented West Hartlepool's middle-class social elite. Turnbull particularly displayed an arrogant sense of social

superiority when he ridiculed the protestors as the 'great unwashed', 'a rotten lot - a peculiar class that can easily be operated upon'.⁶ This attitude was reflected in the views of many contemporary commentators, who dismissed the protestors' concerns as 'popular ignorance and popular prejudice'.⁷ However, the protestors clearly celebrated their working-class identity and saw fit to mobilise it in their opposition to cremationism. They even organised and launched their protest from the nearby Market Hotel public house, a social space symbolically imbued with a historical legacy of working-class identity and expression.⁸

Through the complete and rapid destruction of the body in an industrial furnace, cremationism was perceived by many to effectively obviate significant aspects of traditional funerary practice, including the need for a procession, service, grave, sepulchre, as well as post-death rituals and commemoration. Despite being prescribed for the working-class as a solution to excessive funerary costs, and an uplifting testament to modern progress and civilisation, many advocates of cremationism failed to acknowledge the significance of traditional death culture, and the site of the burial ground itself, in the construction and expression of local working-class identity and sense of community.⁹ Through traditional death practices, many saw a rare opportunity to offer love, respect and humanity for someone that society had so often failed to provide in life. Many thus associated cremationism with the hated, anonymising 'pauper pit', and the attendant loss of ownership over their loved ones that it implied.¹⁰ As such, by defending traditional burial, and opposing what they saw as its potential erasure, the protestors were striving to re-affirm and defend their own working-class identity and spaces.

The protestors were also mostly comprised of, and led by, 'noisy, violent and unreasonable women', 'ladies' or the 'fair sex'.¹¹ Many commentators attempted to weaponize the protestors' femininity against them in order to dismiss their concerns. They appealed to deeply rooted misogynistic conceptions regarding the supposed hysterical nature of working-class women. One commentator likened Mrs Clarkson to Madame Theroigne and the 'terrible insurrection of the women in the first French Revolution'.¹² The mobilisation of these dramatic analogies allowed commentators to associate traditional burial and its defenders with an irrational, seemingly reactionary, femininity that was un-English and starkly contrasted with the progressive masculine sobriety of

1. James Stevens Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death*, (Stroud, 2000).

2. *Weekly Freeman's Journal*, (19 September 1874).

3. Thomas Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains*, (Princeton, 2015). 4. 'Cremation: Exciting Demonstration at West Hartlepool', *South Durham Herald*, (12 September 1874).

5. 'The "Cremation" Question', *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, (9 September 1874).

6. 'Cremation: Exciting Demonstration at West Hartlepool', *South Durham Herald*, (12 September 1874).

7. *Daily Telegraph and Courier*, (11 September 1874).

8. 'The "Cremation" Question', *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, (9 September 1874).

9. Peter Jupp, *From Dust to Ashes*, (Basingstoke, 2006).

10. Julie-Marie Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870-1914*, (2005).

11. *Daily Telegraph and Courier*, (11 September 1874), and 'The "Cremation" Question', *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, (9 September 1874).

12. 'Cremation at West Hartlepool', *The Northern Echo*, (10 September 1874).



Figure 2: A side view of the Athenaeum Building which includes a partial view of the opening to Lynn Street, on which the Market Hotel public house (since demolished) was located and from which the protesters emerged.

Turnbull who, as a 'champion of cremation', was likened to the virile Norse God 'red-bearded Thor'.¹³

Another commentator emphasised that women were 'always foremost with tongue, teeth and claws'.¹⁴ Many others mobilised similar dramatic animalistic imagery, describing the protestors as 'Maenards flocked', 'female cattle', 'little birds fluttering about', a 'pack' speaking in 'groans and hisses'.¹⁵ This language and attitude was heavily influenced by contemporary scientific discourse regarding advancements in evolutionary biology and revealed the ways in which working-class people, particularly women, were often perceived to be less than human when they attempted to assert their own agency. They were understood to have physically and morally degenerated down the evolutionary scale and required uplifting to achieve the imagined standards of a superior British civilisation.

Many of the practices and rituals associated with Victorian death culture adhered to strict gendered conventions, with much of the physical and emotional labour burdened

upon women, who were primarily expected to care for both the corpse and its attendant sepulchre, as well as display their grief through restrictive mourning attire.¹⁶ This kind of 'women's work' was significant and could last for prolonged periods of time.¹⁷ As a result, women were believed to have a particular intimacy with, and responsibility over, death and dying. In contrast, cremationism did not require or value the same kinds of ritual and commemoration that had been the primary responsibility of women.

Cremationism simply did not prescribe a definitive role for women in the evolving culture of death. Therefore, for the women of West Hartlepool, it represented a challenge to the articulation and expression of their own authority and identity within local society, as caretakers of the dead, and the local culture of grief and memory. For some middle- and upper-class women, support for cremationism may have represented a kind of liberation from traditional gender roles, an expression of free will and a claim to autonomy, albeit within the confines of a patriarchal society. However, for non-metropolitan, working-class

women like the protestors in West Hartlepool, the imagined benefits of such liberation would simply not have been accessible. As restrictive and oppressive as they may have seemed to contemporary commentators, the conventions of traditional death culture often carried significant value and importance for local working-class women.

As self-declared 'mothers' and 'wives', the protestors in West Hartlepool also clearly emphasised their roles within the imagined family unit in their opposition to cremationism. This aspect of the protestors' identity was questioned by several commentators who expressed confusion as to why their 'maternal mind', should be so important in guiding their attitudes to contemporary death practices.¹⁸ For many commentators and cremationists, death and the disposal of the dead was ultimately understood as a collective, national, social, and even racial concern, which transcended the limited confines of the local community and the family unit; the dead belonged to everyone and were intended to work for all. However, for many in this period, traditional death culture and the site of the local burial ground reflected in death the familial ideal in life. Families were typically buried together within their local communities, either in the same grave or vicinity, producing a physical space for the continued articulation of familial identity; a sense of place and belonging from which the history of past generations could be traced. The protestors clearly

expressed a desire to preserve this space and the ideals it embodied, of a death spent in reunion with those they had loved in life.

However, the protestor's desire to proclaim and mobilise their status as mothers can also be seen to reflect emerging new conceptions associated with the expectations and anxieties of modern imperialism. As such, one particularly favourable commentator depicted the protest as a heroic event, in which the 'valiant two hundred' performed a 'patriotic service' against cremationism.¹⁹ Mothers were responsible for maintaining the British race, to give life to the next generation of British imperialists and ensure that they were ready to maintain the nation and empire against the perceived challenges of the new century.²⁰ This resulted in a new conception of the child, and by extension its mother, as an embodiment of Britain's future strength and security. The atomising destruction of cremation, by contrast, was seen by some as an assault on the idealised conception of Britain itself.

The process of disposing the dead has never been a purely perfunctory issue for society and has afforded as many opportunities as challenges. The contestation regarding cremationism during the West Hartlepool Incident clearly demonstrated the ways in which local people sought to mobilise and articulate complex identities within the space created by the dead, both physical and imagined.



Figure 3: Modern day Church Street, the centre of old West Hartlepool, down which Edward Turnbull retreated with a police escort while pursued by local protestors hurling both well-placed insults and stones

13. Ibid.

14. *Daily Telegraph and Courier*, (11 September 1874).

15. *Daily Telegraph and Courier*, (11 September 1874) and 'Cremation: Exciting Demonstration at West Hartlepool', *South Durham Herald*, (12 September 1874) and 'The Cremation Mob', *South Durham and Cleveland Mercury*, (12 September 1874) and 'Cremation at West Hartlepool', *Northern Echo*, (10 September 1874).

16. Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain*, pp.75-76.

17. Francis Vacher, *On the dead body as a possible source of infection*, (1876), Durham University Palace Green Library, ref: CRE/C/UK1/1876/1.

18. *Tralee Chronicle*, (11 September 1874).

19. 'Cremation in England', *Ballymoney Free Press and Northern Counties Advertiser*, (24 September 1874).

20. Anna Davin, 'Imperialism and Motherhood', in Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, ed, *Tensions of Empire*, (California, 1997), P.91.



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Please write to us at:
Symeon Magazine
Department of History
43 North Bailey
Durham
DH1 3EX

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