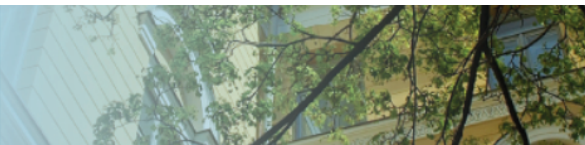


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## **Why and How did Workers Write and Publish their Autobiographies in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe?**

In 19<sup>th</sup>-century western Europe, the working class became proficient for the first time in a wide range of literary skills. Without formal tuition, without ghost-writers or literary credentials, a group of remarkable individuals set out to write their own stories. The profusion of working-class autobiographies in the 19th century is one clear indication of their growing self-awareness, and mastery of the printed word. The bibliography compiled by David Vincent and his colleagues lists no fewer than 801 working-class autobiographies written in Britain between 1790 and 1900.<sup>1</sup> They provide a personalised history of the working-class in this period, a time when the oral transmission of that history had begun to decline, and before modern oral history had been invented. This paper is based on a study of a few working-class autobiographies produced in Britain and France during the 19th century, and of the general culture of their authors.

Proletarian autobiographers were an articulate élite. In spite of their exaggerated modesty and humble origins, they wrote of personal struggles which had led to success. Some had become trade unionists, others journalists, and most described the hard road towards individual and collective emancipation. Their writing expressed the ambiguous ideology of ‘self-improvement’ - ambiguous because it was expounded by middle-class writers, promising upward social mobility which would blur or cross class boundaries.

Of a total of 93 autobiographers I have analysed, 18 were born in the 18th century, and another 45 between 1800 and 1839. Thirty grew up in the second half of the 19th century or the early 20th century. A large number – almost 30% - were published only after 1914. So although the corpus spans a century, most works refer to the second part of it. I have consulted 22 French autobiographies, and 68 for Britain, which was a far more prolific source of worker-autobiographies. In fact, the 1866 edition of the Larousse Dictionary described autobiography as an English invention, still rare in France.<sup>2</sup> 81 works consulted were written by men, only 12 by women. They were published either in book form, in newspapers, or as a brief life history to introduce a collection of poems. Their characteristics have much in common with the Swedish corpus of peasant autobiographies analysed by Britt Liljewall.<sup>3</sup>

Autodidacts were condemned to improvise. Their formal schooling was, by definition, sparse and intermittent. They stole time to read and write, and they carved out moments of privacy from the continuous stream of demands from families or employment. By exploiting working-class networks or the generosity of relatives and assorted patrons, they manufactured their own culture. In spite of the need for middle-class patronage, ‘self-culture’ was still seen as a means to the independence and emancipation of labour. It is a paradox of *autodidaxie* that out of this very dependence on bourgeois help was to come self-reliance and the desire for emancipation. Only the successful autodidacts present us with these contradictions. The fate of those who tried the road to self-improvement, but failed, defeated by poverty or other pressures, can only be imagined.

## 1. Narrative strategies

Working-class autobiographers searched for the means to legitimise their writing efforts and, almost inevitably, they imitated literary figures from the world of high culture. Yet the derivative nature of their literary projects encountered sneers rather than applause. The unschooled worker who doffed his cap to the prestigious authors of the past had pretensions which the cultivated élite might regard as a mockery of the literary canon. Bourdieu accurately characterised the paradoxical situation of the autodidact in search of acceptance:

The traditional kind of autodidact was fundamentally defined by a reverence towards high culture which was the result of his brutal and premature exclusion from it, and which led to an exalted and poorly directed devotion to it, inevitably perceived by the agents of official culture as a sort of caricatural homage.<sup>4</sup>

They wrote autobiographies for different purposes, to warn, to instruct, to record, to preach. Some were inspired by nostalgia, some by vanity, others by anger. They wrote at different times of their life, some taking advantage of a prison sentence, others reflecting on their past in old age, others taking new stock of themselves as a result of a personal trauma, a few writing to re-assess themselves, and resolve what we might now call a mid-life crisis. I will consider three common literary strategies that dominated their autobiographies. These models are not exhaustive neither are they incompatible with each other.

The commonest autobiographical idiom in the first half of the century, in Britain at least, was the **spiritual autobiography**. The ancestor of the genre is usually recognised as St. Augustine, but for the writers who concern me, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* was the strongest influence. The spiritual autobiography traditionally told a story of youthful depravity and moral degeneration. This usually induced a phase of suffering, loss of direction, and mental prostration and alienation, the nineteenth-century equivalent of the Augustinian fall and *peregrinatio*.<sup>5</sup> Then the autobiographer experienced a spiritual crisis, resolved by a sudden, dramatic conversion. Self-regeneration and moral self-improvement could now begin.

Autobiographers in this tradition were principally concerned with the salvation of their soul, and their main subject was their private relationship with God. From 17th-century English Protestantism, and from the Bible itself, they inherited language and metaphors in which to describe their own spiritual odysseys. They relied heavily on models of the exodus, a paradise lost, aimless wanderings in the wilderness, redemption, and finally the sight of the promised land to interpret their own misfortunes and revivals.<sup>6</sup> Their references to Bunyan and the Bible operated as a kind of code, demonstrating their entry into an élite spiritual community.

The autobiography of James Hopkinson, the Nottingham cabinet-maker, relied on the idea of a spiritual conversion. Hopkinson took up his pen in 1888, induced to reflect on his past by the shock of his wife's death. He considered himself 'as a frail Barque launched on the ocean of time'. His account of childhood and his years of apprenticeship is a repentant confession of drinking and lying, and his own

involvement in fights with other apprentices. Then, at the age of 18, Hopkinson experienced his conversion:

I cannot tell, like some can, the exact time I found liberty. It appeared to me to be like the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day. However this I know that a very great change had come over me. And instead of desecrating the sabbath I began to enquire like Saul of Tarsus Lord what wilt thou have me to do. I soon found my work in the Sunday school, and as I loved it I soon began to make myself useful.<sup>7</sup>

The New Testament provided the classic metaphor of a sudden illumination, which changed the direction of Hopkinson's life-journey, on his personal road to Damascus. Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this mode of writing expired. Autobiographies became more positivist and scientific. They referred neither to God nor the salvation of the soul, but saw personal development rather in terms of the growth of the power of reason. A second popular style adopted by autobiographers was that of **the historian**. Autobiographers like William Lovett consciously assumed a responsibility for recording their own history. No-one else, they knew, would provide the kind of working-class history they wanted to leave behind them, and a few were well aware that no adequate history of the Chartist movement had appeared by the end of the century. 'It is extremely unlikely' wrote William Adams, 'that any competent and satisfactory narrative of a stupendous national crisis will ever now be given to the world'.<sup>8</sup> The 'stupendous national crisis' was, of course, Chartism, and Adams set

about to give its history, sketching its leading figures, and citing previous autobiographies of Chartists as he did so. Radicals like him set out to balance the public record, giving their version of their own role in British radicalism. At their worst, they offered little more than anecdotes about the public celebrities they had known, as Linton the engraver did, recounting his casual acquaintance with a string of European revolutionaries, like Mazzini and Herzen.<sup>9</sup> At their best, they offered a kind of alternative political history of the century, from the Reform Bill agitation of 1830-32 to the radicalism of the 1880s.

A third autobiographical stance was **to demonstrate a success story**, when success was to be measured in material terms. This, of course, was quite compatible with the autobiography-as-spiritual odyssey and with the autobiography-as-alternative history. Radical historians of their own movements often finished their careers as successful journalists or teachers; they had escaped the necessity of grinding manual work. One function of the autobiography was to demonstrate how this was done. Like the autobiography as spiritual odyssey, the autobiography as material success story had a pedagogical purpose: it stood as an *exemplum* for the next generation, teaching the path which led forward and upward, and the virtues required to tread it successfully. Thomas Burt, the Northumberland miner, advertised his success in his subtitle: ‘Pitman and Privy Councillor’, and his autobiography actually concluded with Burt’s election as Member of Parliament for Morpeth in 1876. John Hodge was a puddler in a Glasgow blast furnace who became Lloyd George’s Minister of Labour in 1917. His autobiography was entitled ‘Workman’s Cottage to Windsor Castle’, since he considered as the pinnacle of his career an invitation to spend the night as a house guest of the royal family.<sup>10</sup> In France, the best example in this category is the

autobiography of Jacques Laffitte, which boasts of his successful *montée* to Paris, and his ‘arrival’ in his ‘gilded mansion’ on the fashionable *Chaussée d’Antin*. Laffitte was concerned to impress the reader with the author’s overpowering sense of self-importance.<sup>11</sup> His vanity was characteristically male, expressing the pride of men whose sense of self-worth was intricately bound up with a public career and the exercise of political power. The autobiography of the self-made author was in this sense a highly gendered text.

It had a linear narrative structure, with the account leading on to greater and greater achievement, in spite of hardships encountered. It revealed little about the intimate, emotional or even the family life of the author. As Marianne Farningham, born in 1834 and the daughter of an artisan, discovered to her chagrin, this was an almost exclusively masculine genre:

My father’, she wrote, ‘gave us two monthly magazines published by the Sunday School Union, the *Teacher’s Offering* and the *Child’s Companion*. In one of them was a series of descriptive articles on men who had been poor boys, and risen to be rich and great. Every month I hoped to find the story of some poor ignorant GIRL, who, beginning life as handicapped as I, had yet been able to live a life of usefulness, if not of greatness. But I believe there was not a woman in the whole series’.<sup>12</sup>

The woman’s role was to support and comfort the so-called self-made man.

Like Liljewall's Swedish peasant writers, worker-autobiographies tended to avoid introspection and personal revelations.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, writing an autobiography fulfilled an inner need. Autobiography was a step in the process of defining one's identity, both as an individual and as a member of a group or class. Philippe Lejeune described autobiography as principally the 'history of a personality', and envisaged the autobiography as a pact which the writer makes with himself or herself.<sup>14</sup> The purpose of the pact, Lejeune argues, is to redeem a flawed destiny, and to rescue a personality which has doubted its own value.

The problem for these 'new writers' was to find a suitable language and style in which to 'make themselves'. Jacques-Etienne Bédé's editor, for example, lists the author's many grammatical mistakes, wrong use of tenses, incorrect agreements and bad spelling.<sup>15</sup> Christopher Thomson, a ship's carpenter, apologised for 'the natural roughness of this book', and was 'well aware that to the critic, and to the refined in literature, his Book will appear a crude and faulty production'.<sup>16</sup> Their apologetic descriptions of their humble status and lack of qualifications for the job were ways of articulating a genuine difficulty. J. Taylor, the Sunderland blacksmith, bluntly apologised for 'a blacksmith's hammer comes easier to my hand than a pen, and I doubt my ability to strike any literary sparks from the anvil of my life'.<sup>17</sup>

A few more experienced writers knew how to capitalise on confessions of modest talent. They insisted on their inadequacy as writers, and the lack of intrinsic interest contained in the story of their dull, working lives. W. E. Adams was a Chartist, who became newspaper editor and a leading light in the English republican movement. He



seemed to have lived anything but a humdrum existence. Nevertheless, he called himself a mere ‘social atom’, and explained

I call myself a social atom - a small speck on the surface of society. The term indicates my insignificance. I have mingled with no great people, been admitted to no great secrets, met with no great adventures, witnessed no great events, taken part in no great transactions. In a word, I am just an ordinary person.<sup>18</sup>

Autobiographers protested, with suspicious vehemence, that they only took up the pen because their friends had for some unknown reason insisted that they should.

Self-taught writers were naturally self-conscious, and aware of the existence of a long literary tradition, which they had to adapt for their own ends. Bédé, who led a strike of Paris chairmakers in 1820, wrote his life as a carefully contrived melodrama. Bédé continually addresses God or destiny in a romantic style reminiscent of the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century novelist Ducray-Duminil (‘O dreadful fate!’, etc.). A well-crafted *mise en scène* frames his father’s death which opens the story. In a terrible storm, with thunder crashing, a heavy beam tragically fell on him in his mill. At the sight of this accident, his uncle swooned and ‘almost lost his life’.<sup>19</sup> Bédé’s narrative reads like a novel throughout. He entitled it, in the style of Ducray, ‘Etienne et Maria ou le Triomphe de l’Amitié’ (Etienne and Maria or the Triumph of Friendship). He provided the triumphant ending which the genre demanded: in 1820, with the devoted support of

his ally Maria, he was released from a prison sentence with a royal pardon. The *dénouement*, however, has a final novelistic twist. Until the end, Bédé concealed the real identity of the beloved Maria who worked loyally for his release from jail. The reader learns that Maria is not in fact Bédé’s wife, but the wife of a comrade Bicheux, to whom the work is dedicated, and Maria’s real relationship with Bédé can only be surmised. Historians of labour have exploited Bédé’s work as a valuable source for early 19th-century labour struggles, but they have not always appreciated the narrative strategies which order the text.<sup>20</sup>

Autodidact writers struggled to find a narrative mode appropriate to their message and their abilities. English romantic poets and novelists had several conscious or unconscious imitators. Ellen Johnston, factory hand and daughter of a Glasgow stonemason, read many Walter Scott novels in the 1840s at the age of about 13, and gave herself the role of a Scott heroine. ‘I fancied I was a heroine of the modern style’, she wrote, because ‘by reading so many love adventures my brain was fired with wild imaginations’.<sup>21</sup> She identified herself with Scott’s fictional heroines, and sustained herself with idealised images of courtship and married bliss. Scott provided the only means available to articulate female desire. She

waited and watched the sun-set hour to meet my lover, and then with him  
wander by the banks of the sweet winding Clutha, where my muse has often  
been inspired when viewing the proud waving thistle bending to the breeze, or  
when the calm twilight hour was casting a halo of glory around the enchanting  
scene.<sup>22</sup>

The realities of factory and family life were far removed from these romantic images. Johnston's haunt was not the sweet-winding Clutha, but the rather less salubrious Paisley Canal. Instead of the lover who made her happy at the sunset hour, she met one partner who left her in 1852 not with a halo of glory, but with the burden of an illegitimate daughter. The harsh realities of the factory, the canal and her tormenting stepfather are in stark contrast to the romance genre in which Johnston elaborated her own female identity.

Working-class writers, therefore, were an articulate but inexperienced minority. A few wrote to demonstrate that they had achieved respectability. Others wrote to educate others in a spirit of militant defiance. Their work was inevitably derivative, as they improvised a literary style and a narrative structure to announce their presence alongside the paragons of 'legitimate' culture.

## **2. Writers and their publishers**

In France, the publication of autobiographies only took off after 1848, and reached a peak in the period between 1870 and 1914. In 1888, the critic Brunetière complained about the invasion of 'littérature personnelle', and its egotism, 'le développement maladif et monstrueux du MOI'.<sup>23</sup> This accelerated rhythm of autobiographical production may reflect increasing opportunities for social mobility in the latter half of the century.

The majority of autobiographies published appeared within the author's lifetime. Most of those considered here were published in book form, either in Paris, London or Glasgow, or perhaps locally. Publication was easier to achieve in Britain than in

France, if Agricol Perdiguier's experience is anything to go by. His first attempt to publish *Mémoires d'un Compagnon* was rejected by *La Presse*, whose editor Girardin told the author his work was of no interest. It was eventually published as a book, but with a print-run of only 500 copies.<sup>24</sup> About one in seven autobiographies appeared first in a journal - often a local newspaper. Workers' autobiographies were not always written or published 'spontaneously' - they were solicited by the press. In 1906, for instance, after the formation of the Liberal-Labour coalition, *Pearson's Weekly* invited newly-elected Labour Members of Parliament to write their life stories, under the headline 'How I Got On'. The series developed during the year, as writers were also invited to nominate the most influential books in their life: a clear indication of the popularity of working-class self-improving autobiographies, and the importance of reading to them.

The popularity of other examples of the genre can be inferred from their publishing history, and it often reflected the political reputation of the author. The autobiography of the Chartist Thomas Cooper, for example, went into four editions in the 1870s. The autobiography of Joseph Arch, leader of the agricultural labourers, recruited the Countess of Warwick as patron, was accepted by Hutchinson, and had three editions in 1898. The book was widely reviewed, usually in a patronising or frankly hostile tone, although it received praise from left-wing journals including the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Daily Chronicle*.<sup>25</sup> In France in the 1840s, workers' writing was published in workers' periodicals like *La Ruche Populaire* and *L'Atelier* (although even the worker-poets needed the sponsorship of intellectuals like Lamartine and George Sand).

Working-class writers could not make a living out of writing. They needed patronage, and many died in poverty. Willie Thom, the Scottish poet and autobiographer, was championed by Charles Dickens and moved to London, but his published verse was a commercial flop. He returned to Scotland and died there in poverty and alcoholism.<sup>26</sup> They were at the mercy of publishers sensitive to the tastes of their middle-class readership. Editors might resist passages which carried too explicit a challenge to prevailing orthodoxy. J.C. Prince's poem *Death of a Factory Child* was never reprinted in that author's collected works for this reason.<sup>27</sup> Thomas Cooper was asked not to mention Chartism in his *The Purgatory of Suicides*, and he struggled for publication until he returned to Christianity and was supported by Charles Kingsley.<sup>28</sup> John Bedford Leno sang and printed several editions of his own verse, but he was exceptional in setting up his own print-shop and thus securing financial and political independence.<sup>29</sup> Working-class writers had no control over the literary media, and they had an uneasy relationship with middle-class publishers. Nevertheless, working-class autobiography was a genre which aroused considerable public interest, some favourable and some alarmist, and it could be commercially profitable. Only a tiny proportion of working-class autobiographies published in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Britain and France were privately published.

Working-class writers were untutored and unsophisticated, but however uneducated they were in a formal sense, they brought a great deal of cultural baggage to the task of writing. They had inherited or acquired a sense of correct literary tone, and they adopted linguistic or stylistic modes encountered in their own reading. They plundered their existing capital of images, metaphors, and narrative techniques for the style best suited to the expression of their own individual identity. Middle-class

publishers and aristocratic patrons were prepared to sponsor publication of their writing as long as it reinforced, rather than threatened, the ethos of self-improvement.

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<sup>1</sup> John Burnett, David Vincent & David Mayall, eds., *The Autobiography of the Working Class: an annotated, critical bibliography*, 2 vols., Brighton UK (Harvester), 1984-7, vol.1.

<sup>2</sup> *Grand Dictionnaire Larousse*, 1866 ed., vol. 1, p. 979.

<sup>3</sup> Britt Liljewall, '<Self-Written Lives> or Why did Peasants Write Autobiographies ?' in Klaus-Joachim Lorenzen-Schmidt & Bjørn Poulsen, eds., *Writing Peasants: Studies on Peasant Literacy in Early Modern Northern Europe*, Odense (Landbohøistorselskab), 2002, pp. 210-38.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction: critique sociale du jugement*, Paris (Editions de Minuit), 1979, pp. 91-2.

<sup>5</sup> Avrom Fleishman, *Figures of Autobiography: the language of self-writing in Victorian and modern England*, Berkeley CA (California UP), 1983, pp. 58-69 & 104.

<sup>6</sup> Linda H. Petersen, *Victorian Autobiography: the tradition of self-interpretation*, New Haven CT (Yale UP), 1986, pp. 1-10.

<sup>7</sup> Jocelyn Bety Goodman, ed., *Victorian Cabinet-Maker: the memoirs of James Hopkinson, 1819-1894*, London (Routledge Kegan Paul), 1968, pp. 3-5 and 39.

<sup>8</sup> William Edwin Adams, *Memoirs of a Social Atom*, 2 vols., London (Hutchinson), 1903, vol.1, p. 154, first published in 1901-02 in the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle* edited by Adams from 1864 to 1900.

<sup>9</sup> William James Linton, *Memories*, London (Lawrence & Bullen), 1895.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Burt, *Thomas Burt, MP, Pitman and Privy Councillor. An Autobiography*, London (T. Fisher Unwin), 1924; John Hodge, *Workman's Cottage to Windsor Castle*, London (Sampson, Low & Marston), no date ?1927.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Laffitte, *Mémoires de Laffitte, 1767-1844*, ed. Jacques Duchon, Paris (Firmin-Didot), 1932.

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- <sup>12</sup> Marianne Farningham, *A Working Woman's Life: An Autobiography*, London (J. Clarke), 1907, p. 44.
- <sup>13</sup> Liljewall, '<Self-Written Lives>', p. 231.
- <sup>14</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique*, Paris (Seuil), 1975; and his *On Autobiography*, ed. P. J. Eakin, Minneapolis (Minnesota UP), 1989.
- <sup>15</sup> Rémi Gossez, ed., *Un Ouvrier en 1820: manuscrit inédit de Jacques-Etienne Bédé*, Paris (PUF), 1984, pp. 45-9.
- <sup>16</sup> Christopher Thomson, *The Autobiography of an Artisan*, London (Chapman), 1847, pp. vi-vii.
- <sup>17</sup> J.W. Taylor, 'How I Got On –Life Stories by the Labour M.P.s', *Pearson's Weekly*, London, 3, 1906, p. 771c.
- <sup>18</sup> Adams, *Memoirs of a Social Atom*, vol.1, p. xiii.
- <sup>19</sup> Gossez, *Un Ouvrier en 1820*, p. 73. See the review by Michael Sonenscher in *History Workshop Journal*, 21, summer 1986, pp. 173-9.
- <sup>20</sup> Among them Mark Traugott, ed. and trans., *The French Worker: Autobiographies from the early industrial era*, Berkeley CA (California UP), 1993, pp. 47-8.
- <sup>21</sup> Ellen Johnston, *Autobiography, Poems and Songs, by E.J., the Factory Girl*, Glasgow (Love), 1867, p. 7.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.
- <sup>23</sup> Philippe Lejeune, 'La Côte Ln27', in *Moi Aussi*, Paris (Seuil), 1986, pp. 264.
- <sup>24</sup> Jean Briquet, *Agricol Perdiguier, compagnon du Tour de la France et représentant du peuple, 1805-1875*, Paris (Rivière), 1955, pp. 359-65.
- <sup>25</sup> Pamela Horn, *Joseph Arch (1826-1919): the Farm Workers' Leader*, Kington (Roundwood Press), 1971, p. 208.
- <sup>26</sup> Owen Ashton & Stephen Roberts, *The Victorian Working-Class Writer*, London (Cassell), 1999, pp. 46-57.
- <sup>27</sup> Brian Maidment, ed., *The Poorhouse Fugitives: Self-taught poets and poetry in Victorian Britain*, Manchester (Carcanet), 1987, pp. 284-6.
- <sup>28</sup> Nigel Cross, *The Common Writer*, Cambridge (CUP), 1985, ch.4.
- <sup>29</sup> Ashton & Roberts, *The Victorian Working-Class Writer*, pp. 76-96.