

Review for Oral History Journal, Spring 2010, Volume 38 No.1, p.124-125

David Walker, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow UK

Life at the ICI: Memories of Working at ICI Billingham

Margaret Williamson (ed)

Teeside Industrial Memories Project, May 2008

Atkinson Print 2008

140pp, £9.99, paperback

The looming departure of Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI) from their 90 year old Billingham plant prompted the formation of the Teeside Industrial Memories Project (TIMP) to record 'the words of the people who had worked there.' Trained and guided in oral history methodology by Dr Margaret Williamson of the University of Teeside the TIMP interviewed more than 80 former employees who had held a variety of positions in the Company from the 1930s to the present century. *Life at the ICI* begins with a brief history of the development of the plant written by Julian Phillips followed by a series of twelve thematically defined chapters that draw on the worker's testimonies to help explore their experiences. Topics covered include the style of training received, the type of work undertaken, as well as discussions about industrial relations, safety issues, Company welfare benefits, and reflections on the demise of the firm within the area. The narratives are illustrated throughout by images drawn mainly from the ICI photographic archive at Beamish Museum and supplemented by those provided by respondents. A series of useful appendices provide information on the list of contributors and their dates of service as well as charts showing how ICI was organised both nationally and locally with maps of the site and surrounding areas. *Life at the ICI* contains plenty of useful information about the development of the plant, its processes, and how the firm was organised. However, its main strength lies in the fact that it allows the voices of those who actually worked in the plant to be heard – something that most books dealing with the British chemical industry have so far failed to do.

The introduction to each chapter provides some context for the testimonies which are then presented under several sub-headings. Given the size and complexity of the Billingham site this presentation style is helpful in delivering necessary signposts to the reader. Many older workers will empathise with the memories whilst today's generation may be taken aback to learn how things used to be. For example, one former office secretary of the late 1950s and early 60s recalled that her job was "a bit like being a housewife - you had to look after the men." (p.31) Another worker with 39 years service recalled "I was told that ICI was a very secure place. You had a job for life there and, as it happens, I was there for life" (pp.121-122). Billingham had several divisions manufacturing a variety of products and the testimony is arranged to explain how each one operated. Indeed, in addition to the descriptions of the day-to-day work patterns there are also accounts of some of the dangers associated with chemical manufacture. Potential hazards are graphically spelled out such

as that found in the production of phenol. "If you get it on you it will burn you. It's very serious burns like acid burns and if that doesn't kill you it will stop your liver functioning so you die anyhow. I think if you got your hands covered you were as good as dead" (p.43). Such testimony provides a rich seam for the researcher of work and the workplace although the testimony does seem to focus more regularly on the steps ICI took to prevent accidents (Chapter 6). Little mention is made here of the potential dangers associated with long term exposure to certain chemical fumes or dusts or of the adverse impact that shift work had on the health of the workforce – a ubiquitous feature of the industry. Indeed, *Life at the ICI* it is more benign in style and content than Nichols and Beynon's *Living With Capitalism*, their 1970s indictment of a multinational chemical employer. For example, in *Life at the ICI* a former worker states that "the CCF (Fertiliser) Plant was in the condition a six-foot snowstorm would have left it with the amount of dust and product residue" (p.44). No further comment is made here whilst in *Living With Capitalism* the workers testimony is supplemented by information that the Billingham fertiliser plant was forced to close by the Factory Inspector because 'men were working in dust up to 2 feet deep' and that following a twelve day clean up ICI pled guilty to a breach of the 1961 Factories Act and fined £50. Nonetheless, this is a well researched and presented book and for those interested in the history of trade unions or management and control it also delivers some insight into the range of paternalistic and welfarist strategies employed by ICI since the 1920s and how the workforce responded. For those who wish to delve deeper the recordings and transcripts have been archived at the Beamish Museum and Teeside Archives.

808 words