

**[Cheryl Schonhardt-Bailey](#)****Book review: James Vernon, politics and the people****Article (Published version)  
(Refereed)****Original citation:**

Schonhardt-Bailey, Cheryl (1995) *Book review: James Vernon, politics and the people*. [Journal of economic history](#), 55 (1). pp. 172-173. ISSN 0022-0507  
DOI: [10.1017/S0022050700040705](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050700040705)

© 1995 [Economic History Association](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/3431/>

Available in LSE Research Online: August 2012

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

new primary material, but in places the links to the secondary literature, particularly to recent revisionist work, remain sketchy.

*Commoners* is a major contribution to an emerging view. Far from giving the coup de grace to vestigial rights, enclosure destroyed a viable and effective agricultural system and proletarianized many commoners who had previously benefitted significantly. In the process the cooperative solidaristic village with negotiation and intercourse frequent across class lines was destroyed forever. As in all great tragedies our hero is doomed from the outset. How could the commoners stand against a parliament of property owners and lawyers? The issue here is not the relative efficiency of competing systems (though perhaps Neeson should have reflected on this conventional presentation) but the redistribution embedded in privatization. Tragically too, the burden of events weighed ominously even on the victors. The English proletariat emerged feeling tricked and cheated. Iron entered its soul to embitter class relations. Neeson's conclusion finds an echo in the historical construction of gender. Men and women, as well as men from different backgrounds, interacted around the management of the commons. Enclosure contributed to an emerging gulf between the sexes, to the increasing dependence and marginalization of women. Here, as elsewhere, gender was made in the same bitter crucible as class.

JANE HUMPHRIES, *Cambridge University*

*Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, c. 1815–1867.* By James Vernon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Pp. xviii, 429.

The central question in this book is, as James Vernon freely admits, not an original one: why is it important to study the politics of the disenfranchised in order to understand the evolution of the British political system during roughly the first three quarters of the nineteenth century. Vernon has written a so-called deconstructionist study that focuses on visual symbols, the oral tradition, and the popular printed media in five English parliamentary constituencies (Boston, Lewes, Oldham, South Devon, and Tower Hamlets). In so doing, he rejects (explicitly) the tradition of socialist historians (of whatever hue) who have portrayed a political system that increasingly fractured along class lines, and (implicitly because he never cites them) the new school of liberal political economists who identify themselves with rational-, social-, or public-choice theories. Such an attempt is timely because both schools of thought are presently undergoing a quasi-identity crisis—the demise of communism has left the class conflict interpretation of history out in the cold, and increasingly public-choice theorists are seeking to extend their economically determinist models to incorporate political institutions and ideologies.

Vernon's approach emphasizes the continuity of the British political system in which new institutions such as political parties emerge slowly and do so at the local level only by accommodating themselves within traditional, and largely symbolic, forms of organization. Similarly, the traditions of popular participation in local politics through the mass meeting and the practice of open voting were preserved well into the nineteenth century and became the vehicles through which a new system emerged that only gradually "privatized" politics by taking it into the home, a process which culminated in the adoption of the secret ballot. Ultimately, however, the reliance on tradition and the process of politics is unsatisfying: people are radicals or conservatives simply because they seem to have always been so. The argument largely ignores economic change, despite the fact that at least one of the constituencies (Oldham), and most probably a second (Tower Hamlets), owed their existence to industrialization. Vernon does not for instance explain why Oldham's factory owning MPs found common cause with the disenfranchised.

A second peg on which Vernon seeks to hang his argument is the position of women in local politics. Gender is perhaps a strange peg to choose, and Vernon is at times guilty of the very tokenism that he seeks to avoid by emphasizing the role of women. The problem is that at the end of the day we can all agree on one thing, women played a very little part in political life throughout most of the nineteenth century.

Vernon's central argument, that there was a strong element of gradualness in the way in which concepts such as political parties were grafted on to local political life, has much to recommend. Unfortunately, however, the book is a missed opportunity. At the moment there appear to be two schools of writing on the emergence of the nineteenth-century British political system that are not talking to one another. On the one hand there is the work of Patrick Joyce, Geoff Eley, and Vernon who have sought to redefine the meaning of class and political culture within the tradition of discursive social history. On the other hand there is the work of Gary Cox, John Phillips, and others whose methodology speaks another language entirely. It would, for instance, be interesting to see Vernon's assessment of Phillips and Wetherell's recent study of municipal politics in the borough of Shrewsbury, and vice versa. Unfortunately, under the current rules of engagement, neither side is inclined to take on the other.

CHERYL SCHONHARDT-BAILEY, *London School of Economics*

*The Rise of Popular Literacy in Victorian England: The Influence of Private Choice and Public Policy.* By David F. Mitch. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992. Pp. xxiii, 340. \$34.95.

After stagnating at around 50 percent from 1750 to 1833, the literacy rate among England's young adults rose to 95 percent by 1900. Was this a response to the pull of working-class demand or to the push of an elite that required, subsidized, and supplied public schooling? David Mitch's impressive book pursues this question with patient consistency and delivers balanced conclusions. Along the way, Mitch surveys several subliterations in the history of how and why literacy rose and offers cautious judgments on the importance of several influences conjectured by earlier writers.

Part 1 concerns the ways in which private demand for schooling became increasingly widespread among the working classes. Chapter 2, on the benefits of literacy in the workplace, goes straight to the commonly presumed link between occupational change and the spread of literacy. A careful reckoning finds that changes in the occupations of young adults raised their own literacy only 7–10 percent, out of the total rise of about 45 percent between 1841 and 1891 (or between 1840 and 1900). This excludes any feedback of each generation's literacy on the literacy of their children, an effect that is treated later in the book. Chapter 3, on literacy as an equipment for living, ranges broadly across the themes of social history, especially the interaction between working-class literacy and the rise of a cheap popular press. The account here is full of nuance, without featuring any particular conclusion. Chapter 4 rounds out the private-demand side with a careful weighing of five possible effects of "family" on children's ability to read and write: the effects of fathers' occupations on the literacy of brides and bridegrooms, the parental-income elasticity of school enrollments and literacy, the interactions between fertility decline and families' demand for education, the impact of mortality decline on educational investments in each child, and the effect of their parents' literacy on the literacy of adults. Of these, only the last is assigned a major causal role. It, plus the expansion of the supply of cheap newspapers, is credited with raising literacy by 0–15 percent.

The three chapters on the rise of public schooling and its link to literacy are a balanced and informative synthesis of Parliamentary evidence and scholarly publications. Mitch's accounting acknowledges the achievements of both the private fee-paid instruction that