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Frances H. Early

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boundless. He asserts in "The Argot of the Professional Dice Gambler," that

argots are more than specialized forms of language; they reflect the way of life in each of the numerous criminal cultures and sub-cultures; they are the key to attitudes, to evolutions of men and society, to modes of thinking, to social organization, to technology.

Historians will find that Mauer's perspective is more sociological than historical; accordingly, his interpretation of the past is intuitive rather than scientific. He claims, for instance, that ". . . since the sixteenth century the criminal sub-cultures of Europe have been systematically imported to the New World," but he attributes the higher incidence of professional crime in the United States to "the dynamics of frontier life." Mauer is equally vague about the sources of his evidence. Since he compiled his data in large regions across the United States without specifying individual cities, we are unable to draw comparisons between the criminal sub-cultures in various urban centres. With limited evidence of criminal argots in Toronto and Montreal, he makes facile assumptions about the Canadian underworld. His generalizations seem to be based more in myth than research.

Mauer's more recent introductions provide a valuable perspective upon his earlier interpretations, but the original prefaces are needlessly repetitive. The editors of this collection might have dispensed with these opening observations and spared the reader what becomes monotonous claims about the virtues of socio-linguistics.

Language of the Underworld is a book assembled as a tribute to a lifetime of a scholar's work. At \$30.00, however, it is a text which only oral historians of crime will possibly find worth the price.

Carolyn Strange
University of Ottawa

Review Essay

"Industrialization and Women's Work: A New Perspective on the Mill-Worker Experience in Ante-bellum Lowell, Massachusetts."

Dublin, Thomas. *Women at Work: the Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1979. Pp. 312. Illustrations, tables. \$7.50

Dublin, Thomas. *Farm to Factory: Women's Letters, 1830-1860*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1981. Pp. x, 191. Illustrations. \$17.50.

It is not everyone who could recount the oft-told tale of the famous Lowell mill workers with a fresh approach and with stimulating insights. It is to Tom Dublin's credit, then, that in his prize-winning monograph (Bancroft and Merle Curti Prizes, 1980), *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860*, he manages to do this. Dublin is a Marxist historian and has a strong commitment to women's history scholarship. Paraphrasing E.P. Thompson, he explains in his introduction that the largest purpose of his study is to show "human agency" in history, more specifically to reveal how people shape and control their fates, as well as how they are shaped and controlled by circumstances not of their own choosing. In this vein his study investigates "both the broad economic and social changes that led to a transformation of women's work in the first half of the nineteenth century and the attitudes and responses of women workers themselves that shaped and modified the larger processes" (p. 3).

Since Dublin's task, as he defines it, is to demonstrate the interdependent and dialectical relationship between material reality and human consciousness, it comes as no surprise to the reader to find the economic history of early industrialization in New England intertwined throughout the book with the social history of women who came to live and work in textile towns such as Lowell. Dublin's first concern is to set the stage: he tells the familiar story of the founding of the textile industry by the Boston Associates (a consortium of kin-related large merchants); the creation of paternalist factory towns replete with boarding houses, churches, lyceums, shops, and savings banks; and the recruitment of a labour force, the "daughters of freemen." From time to time throughout the book Dublin returns to the story of the textile industry as such so that the transformations occurring in the larger economy as well as in the industry itself are kept well in sight. Particularly useful is Dublin's discussion of technological developments and their effect on factory workers. He marshalls convincing evidence in Chapter 8, "The Transformation of Lowell, 1836-1850," to show that the "proletarianization" of the Lowell factory work force initiated in the 1840s was due primarily to changes in technology which allowed owners to water down skill levels, increase work loads, and reduce wages; Dublin also notes that the presence of Irish immigrants was a contributing factor in proletarianization.

Dublin's discussion of transforming economic forces in early nineteenth-century New England society, while competent, breaks little new ground. However, his treatment of the lives of Lowell mill workers bears closer

attention for he introduces a new thesis on the significance of the work experience *outside of the home* for New England women in this era.

Historians have generally viewed the early female mill experience as a brief interlude in the lives of single young women which did little to alter their rural-based values, expectations, and behaviour patterns.¹ Depending heavily on the somewhat romantic reminiscences of ex-factory women like Lucy Larcom and Harriet Robinson, the pro-corporation publication of the early 1840s, *The Lowell Offering*, and glowing accounts of foreign visitors like Charles Dickens and Harriet Martineau, scholars have tended to line up behind a “finishing school” thesis.² According to this view, mill women worked for several years; they improved themselves through various extra-curricular activities (lyceum attendance, benevolent societies, writing for *The Lowell Offering*, etc.), and took advantage of long summer vacations when the mills closed down to rejoin their family circles. When their stint was over most women returned to their rural homes, often to marry. This interpretation, again relying on stories in *The Lowell Offering* and on memoirs, also stresses the self-sacrificing nature of many mill women: they often sent money home to help their families pay off a mortgage, to take care of a widowed (or deserted) mother with younger children still to raise, or to supply tuition and living expenses for a college-bound brother. These women, in other words, maintained close emotional ties with their families and they contributed crucial funds to family economies.

This interpretation of the experience of Yankee mill women in the early stages of industrialization in America parallels in one respect the findings of Joan Scott and Louise Tilly in their research on women’s work and the family in Europe. They argue convincingly that women’s industrial employment in the initial phase of European industrialization represented an extension of the family farm economy: a single woman’s earnings went into the family pocketbook rather than into her own even if her work kept her geographically distant from her family.³

It is this thesis that Dublin challenges. He asserts that contrary to the received wisdom, Yankee mill women did not make significant contributions to their families-of-origin once they had left home to work in towns like Lowell. Instead, “The physical separation of women and their residence in a peer-group community of other young single women . . . encouraged their economic and social independence” (p. 41). Further, parents had never insisted on *all* of their daughters’ earnings even when they had lived at home. And since farming in this era was moving ever more rapidly from subsistence to commercial agriculture daughters were relatively “expendable” (p. 40). Once they had left home, “Parents encouraged their daughters, or at least appear to have given their approval,

and do not seem to have demanded that they place their earnings in the family” (p. 41).

Dublin’s major evidence for this thesis consists of information contained in four sets of letters written by women mill workers or family members of these women in the years between 1830 and 1861. Fortunately Dublin has edited and published these letters, *Farm to Factory: Women’s Letters, 1830-1860*. A careful reading of this correspondence does support Dublin’s contention that farm women sought an economic and social independency when they journeyed to live and work in towns like Lowell. The women who emerge from the letters exhibit a strong sense of responsibility for themselves. By and large they are self-reliant and self-confident individuals. Refreshingly, too, for those of us surfeited with much-cited examples of “true womanhood” in this era, they often possess an adventurous, fairly aggressive streak. The letters of Mary Paul, whom Dublin rightly dubs “a restless spirit,” spring to mind here. Paul left home at fifteen and led a migratory life until the age of twenty-seven when she settled down to marry. She never sent money home to her widowed father, though she maintained close emotional ties with him and expressed her sadness over her small earnings which gave her little ability to help support him. Her work and living experiences included a job as a domestic; factory employment; housekeeping; establishment of a coat-making business with a friend; and a sojourn in the utopian Associationist community in New Jersey, the North American Phalanx. Paul’s letters and those in the other collections make fascinating reading. It is fortunate that Dublin has taken the time and care to make these available for a general readership.

Dublin did not rely solely on these letters which, though numerous, represent the work experiences of only a few women. To support his notion of independent Yankee womanhood he also used company payroll records for one of the Lowell mills, the Hamilton, to trace 172 mill women back to their families-of-origin in three New Hampshire towns. With the aid of manuscript census records, assessment rolls, and the like, he discovered that these women came from families of middling property holdings, a high proportion of which remained in their communities year after year (1830-1850). Dublin infers from these findings that for such families “economic needs . . . could not have been a compelling force” in their daughters’ decisions to work in Lowell: “The evidence strongly suggests that most women themselves decided to work in the mills. They were generally not *sent* to the mills by their parents to supplement low family incomes but went of their own accord for other reasons” (p. 35).

While there is much to support this new thesis of the economically unencumbered, independent single young New England woman of the ante-bellum era, it is important to search further in letters, diaries, reminiscences,

travelogs and the like, before becoming completely converted. In regard to Lowell mill women in particular, the memoirs of Harriet Robinson cannot be discounted merely because they are tinged with nostalgia. For example, Robinson in her book, *Loom and Spindle or Life Among the Early Mill Girls*, quotes “a gentleman in the Detroit Public Library” who remembered the contributions Vermont women in Windsor County made to family economies: “They brought home some hard cash, which in many and many cases went to help lift a mortgage on the farm, or to buy something needed for the comfort of the old folks, or to send a younger brother or sister to the Academy” (p. 46). Robinson herself spoke of the good use to which mill earnings were put in rural communities: “The mortgage was lifted from the homestead; the farmhouse was painted; the barn rebuilt. . . Some of the mill-girls helped maintain widowed mothers, or drunken, incompetent, or invalid fathers” (p. 46). It seems important, too, to quote Robinson on another significant use for factory wages, already alluded to by the gentleman from Detroit:

Indeed, the most prevailing incentive to our labour was to secure the means of education for some *male* member of the family. To make a gentleman of a brother or a son, to give him a college education, was the dominant thought in the minds of a great many of these provident mill-girls (p. 47).

Robinson goes on to mention a statement by a President of Harvard who remarked that one-quarter of the male student body received their funds for schooling from women (p. 47).

Given these statements it appears that while Dublin’s interpretation of the behaviour, motives, and expectations of mill women presents a needed corrective to the older view of the dependent dutiful daughter, it may be that he has exaggerated the extent to which factory workers actually enjoyed “economic independence” with no strings attached. Probably, though, mill women would have sent more of their wages home in “hard times,” either in periods of economic recession or depression or at moments of financial crisis in family circles. As Dublin himself states and as the letters demonstrate, emotional bonds remained strong between daughters and members of their families. Such bonds would serve to reinforce a sense of economic obligation in the minds of many mill women, especially in periods of extreme family need.

Throwing the net somewhat wider to include Victorian New England women in general, Martha Saxton’s biography of Louisa May Alcott, *Louisa May*, makes an important point.⁴ Saxton shows that Alcott helped to support her family for economic reasons and for emotional reasons — a sense of personal failure and feelings of guilt.

Interestingly, Alcott maintained the provider role for her family at great personal loss well beyond the time when it was financially necessary to do so for family well-being. The dynamics which compelled this duty-bound daughter to sacrifice her own health and happiness for the sake of her family were complex but the theme of self-denial is also present in the lives of many other Victorian women of this era.⁵ For every Mary Paul, there was doubtless a Louisa May Alcott.

Even if many Yankee daughters did not make the rather total break with the family economy which Dublin feels was a dominant motif at least until the 1840s, they undoubtedly did change as a result of their work experience in Lowell. Certainly Dublin stands on solid ground when he argues that the labour-reform activity of Yankee mill women in the mid-1840s developed in large measure out of “residence in a peer-group community” reinforced by a relatively stimulating urban environment where wage-earning women had access to libraries and lecture series which featured well-known intellectuals, reformers, and trade unionists. His suggestion that an incipiently rebellious women’s culture was evolving at this time thanks, ironically, to paternalist institutional arrangements like the boarding house, is provocative (p. 128). More work needs to be done on this topic and the *Voice of Industry*, the labour-reform newspaper which Lowell mill women published for two years, provides a valuable source for further study.⁶

Dublin winds down his investigation of women and work in Lowell with a description and analysis of the “family labour system” which replaced the boarding house or peer-group community labour system in the years following the defeat of the 1840s labour-reform movement. Carefully sampled manuscript census records for 1860 of female mill workers and their families are used in conjunction with payroll records to show that the majority of women in the mills by the 1850s were Irish immigrants or daughters of Irish immigrants. Unlike the earlier work force, these predominantly single young women usually lived with their families, sometimes until well into their twenties. Their earnings, generally supplemented with the wages of other siblings and a father, went towards securing a bare subsistence living for family members. However, a large number of the female mill hands studied lived in families where the father was absent or dead. In such families the wages of daughters, especially those working in the mills, were absolutely crucial to the family economy. Indeed, daughters left school earlier than sons and stayed in the home longer in order to provide for family well-being. The theme of women’s self-sacrifice emerges once again and underscores the poignancy of the proletarianization process well under way by 1860.

In conclusion, Dublin’s work makes a significant contribution to the growing body of scholarship which deals

with the centrality of women's industrial work in the early stages of industrialization in America. Dublin is more successful in illuminating the culture and consciousness of Yankee women than of immigrant women because he has a rich collection of literary sources on Yankee women at his disposal. But a compelling picture of the immigrant daughter begins to emerge, too. Dublin has a sure feeling for non-traditional sources such as manuscript census returns and payroll records; the conclusions he makes about immigrant women from his analyses of quantitative data are judicious. For neophytes in social science methodology and for "experts" appendices supply detailed and useful discussions of sources and methods.

Women at Work and *Farm to Factory* come highly recommended. The former will be particularly valued by social historians who will appreciate Dublin's painstaking scholarship. The latter will make enjoyable reading for a more general readership. *Farm to Factory* would make an excellent supplementary text for an undergraduate course in women's history, family history, or women's studies.

Frances H. Early
 Department of History
 Mount Saint Vincent University

NOTES

1. See for instance Hannah Josephson, *The Golden Threads: New England's Mill Girls and Magnates* (New York, 1967).
2. Lucy Larcom, "Among Lowell Mill Girls: A Reminiscence," *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. XLVIII (1881), pp. 593-612; Lucy Larcom, *A New England Girlhood* (New York, 1961); Lucy Larcom, *An Idyl of Work* (Westport, Connecticut, 1970); Harriet Robinson, *Loom and Spindle or Life Among the Early Mill Girls* (Kailua, Hawaii, 1976); Charles Dickens, *American Notes* (Greenwich, Connecticut, 1961); and Harriet Martineau, *Society in America*, Vol. II (4th ed.; New York, 1837).
3. Joan W. Scott and Louise A. Tilly, "Women's Work and the Family in Nineteenth-Century Europe," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. XVII (1975), pp. 36-64.
4. Martha Saxton, *Louisa May: A Modern Biography of Louisa May Alcott* (New York, 1977).
5. See for instance Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1977), and Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens, Ohio, 1976). Instructive as well are the insights of Harriet Martineau, *Society in America*, Vols. I and II, especially Vol. II.
6. See Frances H. Early, "A Reappraisal of the New England Labour-Reform Movement of the 1840s: The Lowell Female Labour Reform Association and the New England Workingmen's Association," *Histoire sociale/Social History*, Vol. XIII, No. 25 (May 1980), pp. 33-54, and Lise Vogel, "Humorous Incidents and Sound Common Sense: More on the New England Mill Women," *Labour History*, Vol. XIX (1978), pp. 280-286.