

Comptes rendus — Book Reviews

François Bédarida — *Will Thorne. La voie anglaise du socialisme*. Paris: Fayard, 1987. Pp. 297.

The “unknowns of history,” the title given to the series containing this biography, are not household names, but they have, according to the editor, “inspired, if not incarnated, a current of thought, ... a political event, and shed light on their times.” The career of Will Thorne, the founder and longtime head of the London Gasworkers’ Union and one of the first labor MPs, doubtless reveals the struggles fought by the “new unionism” of unskilled workers and more generally the “moderation” of the English worker, who according to Harold Laski “makes the British working class the despair of doctrinaires and the hope of reasonable people.” Less brilliant, less cultivated than his contemporaries Ben Tillet, Tom Mann, and John Burns, Thorne’s greater moderation and sheer durability better qualify him as representative of his time and place.

At least this is the view of François Bédarida, a French specialist in British history and particularly British labor history. This is both the strength and weakness of the book: Thorne is put into the context of the “New Unionism” of unskilled workers of the 1880s and into that of the subsequent events affecting British labor history, but Thorne the man makes but the palest of appearances. He is rather the prism through which the past century of British labor history is perceived. Admittedly, the difficulties in approaching him in any other way are enormous: Thorne left no papers that survived, and the author has had to rely on Thorne’s own autobiography, extended interviews with his daughter (then eighty-one), and assorted records in trade union and party archives. It is precisely this paucity of source material that explains the lack of attention previously given to Thorne. Aside from the scholarly work of Giles and Lisenne Radice (*Will Thorne: Constructive Militant* (London, 1974)), which however places inadequate emphasis on Thorne’s political — in contrast to his trade union-career, and from references in various biographical dictionaries, there is little that has been published.

The author clearly succeeds in placing his subject in its context: Thorne’s class culture, which was urban, oral (he was illiterate until the age of thirty-two), and atomistic (no clubs, church, sports, or — at first — politics). Thorne spent most of his life in London’s East End, in the constituency of West Ham, where he was in turn gasworker, union organizer, union head, and member of Parliament. Made aware of the difficulties faced in labor organizing, we learn about the workers’ lack of solidarity and political apathy; and their deference to middle class values, which resulted in a tradition of Conservative West Ham MPs whose campaigns promised high tariffs, imperialism, nationalism, and unlimited hours for pubs.

Thorne embarked on his political education when he joined Henry Hyndman’s Social Democratic Federation (SDF), which espoused a vulgar Marxism, and when he became the object of Eleanor Marx’s concern with reaching out for authentic proletarian support. Trade unionism was early on wedded to political activity, and the insistence on combining these “two tracks” to working class emancipation, socialism and syndicalism, remained a constant in Thorne’s life. And it is Thorne’s awareness of the need for, and his part in the implementation of, a political role for labor that reflects the movement of socialism from intellectuals to the masses. Obviously Thorne, like other working-class militants schooled in this party, ranging from John Burns to Ernest Bevin, had rejected the SDF’s repudiation of trade union action.

As a consequence, Thorne never became a doctrinaire; the only valid concepts were those confirmed by experience, and his Marxism served only as an “historical framework of reference in which the ascending march of humanity is registered” (68). In his attempts to organize his fellow gasworkers, we see how the economic boom of 1888-91 and the campaign for the “eight-hour day” encouraged labor militancy and led to the great gasworkers’ strike that made the Union a reality in

1889. Thorne's slow and steady effort is contrasted to Tillet's impulsiveness and Burns's flamboyance. He benefitted from eight years of cooperation, and even of friendship, with Eleanor Marx, who on her part relished "her union" of gasworkers and allowed her ties with it to channel her activity. She founded a women's section of the Gasworkers' Union and served as its Secretary. Together with Engels, she was eager to win these new unions over to socialism.

Thorne's originality, then, lay in his refusal to dissociate trade union and political activity. His constituency of West Ham holds the distinction of being home to the "new unionism" (with the establishment of the Gasworkers in 1889), of electing one of the two first socialist MPs (Kier Hardie in 1892; John Burns, representing Battersea in the same year, was the other), and of being the first municipality in the United Kingdom to be governed by an all-socialist administration. Perhaps the most interesting chapter in the book is that providing a portrait of a "proletarian town," with its attendant health problems, its lack of religion, and its pubs as "center(s) of working class culture." But the meager gains derived by workers from these successes and the return of higher unemployment guaranteed the beginnings of opposition to Thorne from his political left.

Resentment, too, was expressed when Thorne gave unflinching support to Britain's role in World War I and to his demand, over objections of pacifists in the Independent Labour Party, that Russia remain in the War (although he condemned British intervention in the civil wars that followed). Also resented was his condemnation of the proposed international socialist congress in Stockholm, and later, his support of Ramsay MacDonald's National Union government (however short-lived that support) and his curious friendship with Lady Astor, all of which opened him to charges of holding a "chair in the Establishment." His Union, too, had shifted considerably to the right. But he had earlier opposed revolutionary syndicalism, had hated strikes however often he had led them, was to refuse a title, and hence his moderation was, and was to remain, of long standing. All things considered, Thorne is an admirable choice to embody the reformism of British labor.

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J. F. Boshier — *The Canada Merchants, 1713-1763*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987. Pp. xiv, 234.

Twenty-five years ago we were all hunting for the bourgeoisie of New France: if we could find it, we thought that would mean New France had been a normal society, the development of which was blighted by the British Conquest of 1763. If it was nowhere to be found, that, we believed, would signify New France had been an Ancien Regime society incapable of change and destined for backwardness in the twentieth century. In those days, most eighteenth century merchants were to us still mysterious names in official correspondence. Little by little, the traders in the documents reclaimed their forgotten identities. The *dictionary of Canadian Biography* project spurred on this effort and is in part the fruit of it.

Meanwhile, J.F. Boshier, a Canadian historian of France, was pursuing an entirely different line of inquiry that would one day converge with the inquiries of we earnest seekers-out of the Canadian bourgeoisie. In his book, *French Finances, 1770-1795: From Business to Bureaucracy* (1970), he investigated the human "inside" of an important part of Ancien Regime French government. While he found that by 1795 French finances were run by something that we would recognize right off as a civil service, what he found in 1770 was a crowd of private men with money, well-connected relatives, and often with purchased offices, doing the King's business. On one level this enabled him to turn Ancien Regime historiography on its head by showing that the dead hand of the State did not blight private enterprise but rather that the State was in the altogether lively hands of businessmen. More important in the context of this review, the study revealed the existence of a vast network of