

solutions to their problems in examples drawn from ancient dynasties. As all of this unfolds, the reader is rewarded with a detailed description of the social and political environment of the region, including the government administrative apparatus, the local elites who ran the state, the commoners who occupied the cities and countryside, and the manmade and natural disasters that increasingly befell them as the dynasty declined. The final chapters detail the rise of Li Zicheng, who emerged from the ranks of the commoners to lead an army that would besiege Henan and eventually overthrow the Ming dynasty.

Des Forges ends this extraordinary account with a conclusion that finally makes clear his thoughts on centrality as a motivating force in Chinese history. The past, it is explained, is comprised of a spiralling interaction of historical events and historiographical representations that “produce a kind of double helix containing the DNA of Chinese history” (p. 319). This is a rather grand claim, and to be fair Des Forges is the first to emphasize that it is just a theory. Yet having made that disclaimer he goes on to suggest that, for example, the student of foreign relations might profitably use the theory to understand not just the nomenclature, but also the deployment, of Chinese nuclear submarines. At this point I feel that Des Forges begins to overstate the causal relationship among historiography, history, and the present. Historiography, to be sure, has a way of giving order to the otherwise random events of the past, and I am prepared to accept that the present too (especially in China) was and is cognitively ordered by history. I am less inclined to believe that the present actually defers to the patterns of history, except when by chance the two meet on common ground. Nonetheless, it is still compelling to note just how often that common ground does occur, and this, if nothing else, makes Des Forges’s ideas worthy of serious consideration.

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Gregory J. Downey — *Telegraph Messenger Boys: Labor, Technology, and Geography, 1850–1950*. New York and London: Routledge, 2002. Pp. xiv, 242.

I received a telegram only once. It was a notification of a scholarship I had won and it was delivered orally, over the telephone. When asked, I agreed that I wanted a copy of the telegram, and it was mailed to me. Missing, of course, was the telegram messenger boy, replete with his natty uniform and bicycle. He was the victim of a myriad of changes in the social organization of communications. I, in fact, was surprised that it was still possible to send a telegram, but primarily I was impressed by its unstated importance, even in the attenuated form of the 1980s.

Only when I read Gregory J. Downey’s *Telegraph Messenger Boys* did I remember and make sense of all of this. Downey’s decision to enter the world of the telegraph by means of the boys who delivered the telegrams allows him to explore a wide range of fascinating questions about technology, labour, gender, age, organization, and, of course, space and time. The work of the messenger boy lasted a full

century from the 1850s to the 1950s, through dramatically different technological and social settings. The messengers were a necessary part of the process of sending a telegram, delivering the messages to their final destinations and, particularly after the early years of the service, selling and picking up telegraph messages around the city. Given what one would assume was the lightening speed of the telegraph — although Downey explains the limitations of the system — the messengers represented a potentially expensive bottleneck in the sending of messages.

The messenger is embedded in the technological and business history of the industry, a complex story in its own right. The means by which Western Union (WU) and its intracity partner, American District Telegraph (ADT), came to monopolize the industry and prosper through a myriad of political and economic storms is told with both skill and enthusiasm. The story is a compelling one, as survival was by no means assured. In the hands of men like Jay Gould, among many others, WU fought off competitors, the threat of a government telegraph system, and technological challenges, not the least of which was the telephone (with which they were able to develop a fascinating symbiotic relationship). At the same time, they excelled in cost management, making efficient use of both their infrastructure and their employees. Problems of capacity were addressed by finding material to send over telegraph lines on off-peak hours, such as news stories and night letters, while telegraph messenger boys were used for a range of tasks, creating a sizable contingent labour force, hired out for any number of odd jobs.

Why boys? Child labour was cheap, and the messenger boys certainly qualified on this score. Pay amounted to pennies per delivery and labour was organized in such a fashion as to have the boys absorb most of the cost and risks of telegraph delivery. When telegrams would come, which boys would be assigned to deliver them, and how remotely the recipient lived or worked were entirely unpredictable. The “soak” was the worst: an undeliverable or distant delivery that still only paid a few cents. The boys fulfilled other criteria as well. Of course, they had to be English-speaking and enjoy basic literacy. No less importantly, they had to navigate a wide variety of social spaces. They had to circulate in male spaces, delivering telegrams to businesses, bars, and even brothels if necessary. At the same time, they had to be non-threatening, for they had to enter the middle-class home as well, often acting as “a mobile surrogate for immobile women” (p. 109). Besides delivering wires, the messengers performed a range of tasks for women, picking up and delivering packages, escorting them through dangerous places, fetching husbands from the saloon, and even pawning items without the husbands’ knowledge. Employers broadcast the chivalrous deeds of their young employees and dime novels exaggerated them. The trope of the poor but street-wise messenger boy, serving and rescuing the helpless and immobile woman and achieving manhood and material rewards, spoke volumes about the gender system that had created this labour market in the first place. In one of the more insightful sections of the book, Downey explores the ways in which age, gender, and class allowed the boys almost universal access to a range of spaces.

Of course, the boys themselves were far from these idealized constructions. They presented many different problems for their employers. Not only did they have to

work quickly and cheaply; they were the public face of the telegraph companies. In the aftermath of the Civil War, they were fitted out in uniform — at the boys' expense whenever possible — as a means of advertising, providing the image of discipline and order, and acting as a kind of pass into private social spaces. A uniformed messenger boy could enter an office building without being challenged. But they were boys, and discipline was a constant challenge, particularly since much of their time was spent beyond the gaze of their employers. In the era of child-saving and debates about child labour, they also naturally caught the attention of social reformers. Segregating children from vice, of course, would have undermined the ability of the boys to do their job — circulating through the city unimpeded. Fearful of bad publicity, Western Union eliminated the youngest messengers, but in the twentieth century the problem of youth was redefined. Issues of moral danger retreated while concerns over educational opportunities, or lack of them, for the messenger boys took centre stage. Employers' old argument that messenger work acted as an apprenticeship for work as telegraph operators or — the boys having gained entry to business places — for other kinds of office work was readily challenged. This was, indeed, a dead-end job. On the defensive, Western Union responded with "continuation schools" that combined paid labour with education of a sort. The movement peaked in the 1920s and provides a fascinating insight into corporate responses to both social reform and the demands of their own workers, and into the boys' attempts to balance the demands and opportunities of work and schooling. On the heels of this movement came a peak in union activity by the messengers, itself an interesting story given their position on the boundary of the "adult" labour movement.

As all of these themes suggest, this rich book touches on a considerable range of topics. It is not a particularly disciplined work, and it spills messily out of Downey's efforts to constrain it with a discussion of the social construction of technology, time, and space. The insights are timely, as the "information economy" continues to require physical messengers. Curiously enough, Downey notes that it is still possible to send a "telegram" over the Internet.

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Elizabeth Faue — *Writing the Wrongs: Eva Valesh and the Rise of Labour Journalism*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002. Pp. xi, 249.

This is a well-crafted biography of Eva McDonald Valesh, an important labour journalist in the United States during the Populist and Progressive eras. Writing under the pen name Eva Gay, Valesh inspired Minneapolis workers with her exposés of factory life; as Elizabeth Faue shows, many of her writings have the flavour of first-person ethnographic reports. Valesh moved on to work in the fevered, muck-raking world of New York journalism and then to the more sedate offices of the American Federation of Labor, where she was instrumental in the production of the *American Federationist*. In her later years, she became a club woman and associate of some of