

women and African Americans work, sleeves rolled up, with hot irons and a belt-powered mangle.

Shortridge's close readings of photographs—particularly of the interiors of businesses and homes—indicate that, like the railroad and military post, visual representation itself was part of life in Junction City. More such close readings would be welcome in a history that is at its best when the photographs are used as evidence rather than as illustration. Shortridge includes one arresting picture of a man (possibly an immigrant) at his popcorn stand as an illustration of a less prominent business. Yet the photograph itself tells a story about photography's role in affirming prosperity: the stand is right below Pennell's successful studio, and the vendor poses next to a board displaying samples of Pennell's tasteful portraits of middle-class ladies and gentlemen.

Readers interested in the built environment, photography, and local history will find much to praise in this book. Junction City emerges as prototypically midwestern in its civic values, community aspirations, and desire to define itself as a site of culture and commerce comparable to other cities, yet unique in the way the railroads and Fort Riley affected its development and contributed, in particular, to diversity within its social and economic life. The book testifies to the importance of photography to local histories, for the images show the townspeople both as they were and as they wished to be.

*Colliers across the Sea: A Comparative Study of Class Formation in Scotland and the American Midwest, 1830–1924*, by John H. M. Laslett. The Working Class in American History Series. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000. xiv, 314 pp. Maps, graphs, notes, bibliography, index. \$49.95 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

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J. H. M. Laslett is one of this country's most careful students of the lives of American working people. His books and articles have been of particular use for understanding class formation and the various, usually quite pragmatic, ways it has found expression. But there was always one vexing question that bothered Laslett, as it did all historians of working Americans. Was class formation in the United States unique or "exceptional"? Did American workers respond differently to the stages of industrialization than, say, British or German workers? Why, indeed, as Werner Sombert put it, was there no socialism in America? Or, and more basically, did Sombert's assumption accurately reflect the culture and ideology of American labor?

These questions require a comparative analysis, and, though Laslett cannot answer them definitively, he can raise them and test them against two important and representative groups of workers: coal miners in southwestern Scotland and Illinois in the formative years from 1830 to the 1920s. "Colliers across the sea" can sometimes be taken literally. Scot miners moved to Illinois and brought their class-based politics with them. Other times the phrase is almost metaphorical, meaning colliery on each side of the Atlantic and the differences and similarities between the two. Both meanings allow Laslett to confront the issue of American exceptionalism.

Predictably, his conclusions are original and forcefully made. The colliers in Scotland—not all of them Scot—evinced a high degree of class consciousness. So did the even more ethnically mixed colliers in Illinois. There were important differences, however, in the political means used to advance perceived class interests. Historians, Laslett concludes, who "judge the degree of class consciousness . . . solely by the presence or absence of an independent party of labor . . . wear the wrong set of glasses." It would be difficult to quarrel with that verdict. Although Laslett's book will not put the "exceptionalist" issue to rest, it will give it a much tighter definition and might even stall, or at least slow, some of the wilder excesses of those who have turned the issue into a kind of cottage industry.

At that, there are a few issues I would raise. For Laslett, socialism was the ideology of radical class consciousness. I am not so sure, but allowing his point, was the Labour Party in Britain genuinely socialist? My second question is more important—at least to me. In discussing the failure of the Socialist Party of America (SPA), Laslett emphasizes—rightly—the structural differences between the American and the British political systems. But nowhere (including his bibliography) does he mention Aileen Kraditor's too-long ignored book, *The Radical Persuasion*, which makes abundantly clear the astonishing smugness, condescension, and elitism of the SPA in its attitude toward American working people. It is worth asking if the colliers rejected the SPA or the SPA the colliers. Kraditor's book is not without flaws of its own, but I believe historians ignore it at their peril. Laslett could have put it to particularly useful service.

These are simple differences of opinion. *Colliers across the Sea* is a splendid achievement—carefully researched, elegantly written, innovative in approach and interpretation. Students of the Iowa coal towns that spawned John L. Lewis will learn much from it. More generally, comparative labor history now has a new model and a new standard.

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