

Education, Travel and the ‘Civilisation’ of the Victorian Working Classes

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Michelle M. Strong has produced a very detailed analysis of educational tours by working-class travellers in the last four decades of the 19th century. The book consists of five chapters, four of which discuss travel to the Paris exhibitions of the second half of the 19th century, in 1861, 1867, 1878 and 1889 and to the Vienna exhibition in 1873. It critically examines some of the organisations established to promote working-class engagement in educational activities and rational recreation.

The major part of the book is about the visits made by British artisans, skilled working-class men, to Paris while there were major international exhibitions taking place there. The primary aim of these working-men's tours was to visit the exhibitions. In keeping with Victorian values of self-improvement and rational recreation, exhibitions were regarded as suitable subjects of the working-class traveller's gaze as they were deemed to be educational. The first of the tours examined by Strong was to the Paris Exhibition of 1861, initiated by Joseph Paxton, since 1854 a Liberal Member of Parliament. As well as being an MP, gardener and architect, Paxton was President of the London Committee of Working Men.

One of many organisers of excursions and inclusive tours to London for the Great Exhibition, Thomas Cook was already well-known by Paxton. Cook was particularly proactive in promoting the concept of travel as having an educational as well as socialising role for the working-classes. Indeed, in his own memoirs, Cook acknowledged the role of the Mechanics Institutes' exhibitions, one of which was held in Leicester near his home, to which rail excursions were organised in 1840 as the inspiration for his own first Temperance trip from Leicester to Loughborough a year later.⁽¹⁾ Strong highlights the role of Thomas Cook and provides a useful discussion and analysis of his consistent support for working-class travel as a means of self-improvement and education through the first-hand experience of new ideas, places and technologies. The fact that workers saved up for the trips and took pride in their appearance and behaviour, wearing their best and clean clothes, was also important. For Cook, the railway provided a new technology not just of movement but of seeing and learning. Through his journal *The Excursionist*, Cook encouraged his travellers to write about their experiences by keeping travel diaries, perhaps more significant as a way of preserving memories and impressions in an age before the popularisation of photography. In 1851 in his *Exhibition Herald and Excursion Advertiser* Cook reproduced an essay with the title 'Why should working men visit

the exhibition', probably the winner of a competition held in Bolton for working men.⁽²⁾

Following his Great Exhibition tours, Cook ventured abroad, taking a small group to the Continent, intending to visit the *Le Exposition Universelle* in Paris in 1855. This was Cook's first escorted expedition abroad although he was unable to organise transport directly to Paris and made a financial loss on the initiative.⁽³⁾ However, Strong does not examine this precursor of the successful workingmen's tours of the 1860s, even though some of the exhibition travel clubs of 1851 carried forward a surplus in their accounts towards the costs of attending the Paris exhibition in 1855.⁽⁴⁾ It would be interesting to know to what extent 1855 was a prototype for the subsequent exhibition tours abroad?

Cook then was the ideal partner for Paxton in organising the trips to the Paris Exhibition of 1861, for both his ideological commitment and his practical experience of arranging tours. For Paxton and Cook, both from artisan backgrounds, improvements in working-class living standards and democracy would come through cross-class alliances and cohesion rather than the class conflicts in the years before the Great Exhibition. Despite this emphasis on working-class participation all the tours that took place saw a significant role played by middle-class reformers.

The 1861 tour was known as the 'Working Man's Excursion' and took mostly artisans, many of them from the northern industrial areas of England. Unfortunately the hoped-for interaction between French and British workers was not possible because of authoritarian police control in Paris during the Second Empire of the emperor Louis-Napoleon. As fraternal gatherings were inadvisable in these circumstances, even if they had been possible, there was no contact with French workers.

The Working Men's Club and Institute Movement (WMCIU) was founded in 1862 by Revd. Henry Solly with the objective of providing rational recreation and cross-class cohesion (p. 9), in contrast to the social club organisation it has evolved into which is overwhelmingly concerned with entertainment. In 1866, a year before the third Paris exhibition, the International Workingmen's Association (IWA) was created (p. 43). Strong explains that by exposing British working men to French culture and craftsmanship, artisans' tours to the Paris exhibition would address the IWA's commitment to the intellectual improvement of the working class (p. 44). No longer involving Thomas Cook in the travel arrangements, the Universal Tourist Company was created to take working men to the 1867 Paris exhibition for a fixed, all-in price. This organisation and the WMCIU took thousands of British men to Paris for 30 shillings for a week during 1867 (p. 56). Many, 5,000 of them, stayed in specially prepared lodgings for men of their class in the Workman's Hall. This was similar to the accommodation for mechanics made available for the Great Exhibition in London in 1851.⁽⁵⁾ Thousands of working men formed 'a peaceable invasion of Paris'. The exhibition trips were seen as a sort of working-class Grand Tour, promoting peace between nations. Still hampered by the authoritarian French regime, there were still some problems with organising fraternal association with Parisian workers. For example, George Holyoake, the socialist and co-operator, had hoped to organise a Cooperative Congress in Paris to coincide with the exhibition but the French authorities refused to host this (p. 57).

The Society of Arts recruited artisan reporters to document their experiences, not just of the exhibition but of Paris too. Selected artisans, usually skilled workers serving apprenticeships in their individual crafts, were sent. The Society met their travel expenses by collecting funds from civic organisations and wealthy benefactors with a matched grant from the Lords of the Council of Education. With these funds the Society of Arts gave the reporters free travel and lodgings in Paris. For producing their reports the writers received a £3 stipend (p. 62). The artisan reporters were drawn from a range of industries and trades. Some of them were trade unionists and long-standing political activists, including a few former Chartists. Other reporters had no involvement with the labour movement at all. The group therefore represented a range of political and social outlooks from within the skilled working class. Permission to take time off had to be sought from their employers and in most cases this was willingly given. The extracts taken from some of these artisan reports are perhaps the most interesting part of the book. Working-class authors are an under-represented group in 19th-century travel writing and literature. This raises the question as to why these reports have not been reproduced and published with commentaries? This would add much to our understanding of the

attitudes and perceptions of skilled British working men as well as their observations of Parisian life in the 1860s. The reports show how travel abroad enabled the writers to construct their own identity against both a French and a ruling-class Other (p. 61). Self-awareness developed in situations where difference was made apparent. The subject matter of the artisans' reports covered such diverse topics as comparisons between British and French manufacturing methods, technical training and apprenticeships, and the role of the French state which was seen as sinister in terms of British notions of freedom. Above all the artisans' experiences challenged existing stereotypes of the 'dirty French' embedded in British minds since the Napoleonic wars at the beginning of the 19th century. The British visitors were surprised to notice that French people were mostly clean and neatly dressed, that the women were less care-worn than English working-class women and were never seen out dressed in rags or drunk (p. 77). They were also impressed by the observation that French foremen dressed in the same style as ordinary workmen (p. 86). Another highlight, one campaigned for by those who wished to encourage rational recreation in Britain was that Parisian museums and art galleries were open on Sundays, a day when the whole family was free to visit together. It would be interesting to compare the British artisans' reports with those of French workmen who visited the London exhibition of 1862 to see if the French had similar experiences, perceptions and emotions.

Reflecting the popularity of the idea of visiting the Paris exhibition and willingness of working men to travel, the places for artisan reporters were oversubscribed. Those not selected and subsidised and many more who did not consider being reporters had to save and plan to make their trips possible. As in the months leading up to the Great Exhibition, Strong tells us savings clubs were established in large firms. This allowed potential travellers to accumulate enough money to cover their travel and lodging costs and make up for lost earnings while they were away. The thousands of people who did this joined the WMCIU tours and demonstrated as much commitment to the project as the Society of Arts' artisan reporters. More information about the organisation of savings clubs could have established a link between these later exhibitions and the legacy of the Great Exhibition. Were the same employers or groups involved as in 1851? Was there a geographical connection between them or the types of industry the savers worked in? The travellers were all male travelling alone or in groups of workmates. Strong explains this when she points out that the profoundly masculine tours reflected male group solidarities and the fraternal conventions of trade societies. The Workman's Hall, like much of the accommodation for workingmen in London in 1851, was for male lodgers only. This distinguishes the exhibition tours from leisure trips and the middle-class family holiday. Some women did go to Paris but most of them travelled independently of the trips aimed at working men. A few others travelled with their husbands, as evidenced by the humorous dialect book *Th' visit to th' greight Parris eggshishun of Bobby Shuttle un his woife Sayroh*, fiction but doubtless having a recognisable grain of truth.⁽⁶⁾

These tours were not promoted as holidays or leisure trips, the emphasis was on education and self-improvement in accordance with middle-class prejudices against idleness and the principles of rational recreation which justified them. Even so the travellers spent time on tourism activities and site seeing, just as visitors to London had done in 1851. This was encouraged and those on the organised tours were issued with a copy of *Black's Guide to Paris and the International Exhibition* to help them in their exploration. It was the first extended break from work many of them had experienced. Artisan reporter, Charles Hooper, a cabinet maker at home, wrote in his report that it was 'the first and only fortnight's holiday I ever had in my life' (p. 67). Despite some of the tourists having a report to produce, the experience was clearly regarded as a break from the routine of work.

The Society of Arts wasn't just about promoting exhibitions and travel. The organisation was committed to improving education for the working-class, not just for altruistic reasons but to enhance the quality and competitiveness of British industry and to solve antagonisms between capital and labour (p. 62). The Society encouraged cross-class alliances in order to diffuse class conflict.

A shared key objective of the artisan reporters and other working-class travellers to the five exhibitions discussed by Strong was the demand for recognition of their humanity and the dignity that would come if or when they achieved social equality to complement the political equality they were beginning to move

towards as the franchise was extended to include some working-class heads of household from 1867.

Although the exhibition tours were patronised by working-class men and were seen as part of their struggle for active citizenship, Strong emphasises that they also promoted the interests of capital. It wasn't just workers who benefited from the tours, they were of value to their employers too. This value was added, as well as by expanding the knowledge and skills of their employees, by winning and maintaining popular support for middle-class values and objectives (p. 3). Although the tours involved the patronage of middle-class reformers there was class-conscious instrumentality on the part of the working men who took part who hoped to enhance their esteem, gain political and social equality and secure a better position in the labour market.

The tours took place against a background of rising concerns about economic competition with Britain from newly industrialising nations abroad and also of growing democratisation at home (p. 11). The pedagogic function of exhibitions was a tool for both individual and national improvement. Education was a way of socialising citizens so that they were self-regulating. Exhibitions as well as museums, schools and libraries were places where the working class would learn to behave in public. The Museums Bill of 1845 and the Libraries Act of 1850 facilitated the creation of locations for rational recreation and informal pedagogy so by the time of the Great Exhibition in 1851 many people were accustomed to these means of autodidacticism. Leisure sponsored by the upper classes sought to diffuse the radical potential of working-class groups and communities. This became more important from 1867 when 3,000 male heads of working-class households were newly enfranchised. For socialists education was important as a means of preparing the working class for its future role in government.

In 1889 the Technical Instruction Act allowed local authorities to support technical and manual instruction. The Society of Arts had introduced its own system of accreditation and examinations to enable workers to demonstrate their skills and knowledge and have evidence of their accomplishments to show to employers. This official acknowledgement of their abilities also boosted self-esteem and investment in industrial and social processes. Education was not just to benefit workers but needed to be responsive to the changing commercial and technical needs of industry (p. 101). Calls for free education for all began to be taken seriously and Education Acts provided for elementary education in Board Schools from 1871.

In the fifth chapter of the book there is a change of topic from exhibitions abroad and the text moves on to discuss an organisation devoted to providing mainly education but also travel opportunities for working-class youth. The Young Men's Christian Institute founded by Quintin Hogg in 1882 was a day school for boys off the Strand in London. It later opened for evening classes for young men and boys of working age and was renamed the Regent Street Polytechnic. As part of its pedagogic mission the Polytechnic offered its students the opportunity to travel as part of their education. This included trips abroad. As the Polytechnic grew working-class youth began to be outnumbered by those of more middle-class backgrounds. Strong gives a full account of the conflicts this produced within the organisation as poorer boys began to be pushed out and opportunities for travel becoming monopolised by those who had ready money rather than those who had to save long and hard. Though not discussed in this book, this was a similar case to other organisations promoted by middle-class reformers to assist working people with their education and provide opportunities to travel, notably the Mechanics Institutes earlier in the 19th century, the Cooperative Holiday Association a little later, and, in the 20th century, the Caister Socialist Holiday Camp and the Workers' Travel Association.

The main body of the text is followed by a rather incongruous conclusion that discusses the late Jade Goody of Big Brother fame and her personal desire to travel after her realisation that there was much in the world of which she had no knowledge or experience. This was because of the lack of opportunity in her early life, evidence of continuing social inequalities in the 21st century. Student trips and work experience abroad are also given as examples of the continuing pedagogic role of travel. The conclusion seems to be divorced from the rest of the volume both in content and context. Perhaps it would have been more appropriate as a post script or left out altogether as it distracts from rather than adds to the book's argument.

Education, Travel and the 'Civilisation' of the Victorian Working Classes is an interesting work covering the under-researched topic of educational tourism and makes a significant contribution to the subject. There are problems with the structure of the book, however. The chapters on workers' travel and tourism to Paris and the exhibitions evince a clear and coherent theme, with chapter four illustrating the culmination of the ethos of these trips in the Technical Education Act of 1889. As a self-contained piece of work the first four chapters could stand alone. The fifth chapter on the Regent Street Polytechnic seems to break the unifying thread of the text although it is an excellent piece of scholarship that could be a paper in its own right. The effect of this followed by the incongruous conclusion gives the book a disjointed feel, but this should not detract from the excellence of the content. A new work on working-class history is to be welcomed. Professor Strong's scholarly research is meticulous as is her breadth of reading. She has an important story to tell.

Notes

1. John Pudney, *The Thomas Cook Story* (London, 1953), p. 53.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Thomas Cook's Exhibition Herald and Excursion Advertiser*, 1 (31 May 1851), p. 2.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Piers Brendan, *Thomas Cook 150 Years of Popular Tourism* (London, 1991), p. 65.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Susan Barton, *Working-Class Organisations and Popular Tourism* (Manchester, 2005), p. 68.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Barton, pp. 60–1.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. J. T. Staton, *Th' visit to th' greight Parris eggsibishun of Bobby Shuttle un his woife Sayroh*, (Manchester, 1867).[Back to \(6\)](#)

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