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Introduction

Lewis Darwen, Jack Southern and Andrew Hobbs

This volume commemorates the 170th anniversary of the Preston strike and Lock-Out of 1853-54, undoubtedly one of the more famous industrial disputes of the nineteenth century. This divisive nine-month stand-off between the textile operatives and mill owners garnered national attention, creating thousands of column inches in local and national newspapers. It brought Charles Dickens to the town, who wrote about his experiences in *Household Words*, and it probably influenced the writing of his novel *Hard Times*. Elizabeth Gaskell, too, followed the dispute closely and used it as inspiration for her novel *North and South*. Further afield, Karl Marx, following events from America, saw in the Preston operatives the makings of the proletarian revolution. 'The eyes of the working classes are now fully opened', he wrote in the *New York Daily Tribune*: 'they begin to cry: "Our St. Petersburg is at Preston!"' Marx was wrong about this, of course, and not only because the dispute ended in miserable defeat for the operatives. He was also wrong because the dispute was widely remembered as a cautionary tale; an ignominious mistake. This was no glorious, inspiring defeat for the working-class, like Peterloo, nor were there any martyrs like those of Tolpuddle. Indeed, despite contemporary interest, the dispute had largely faded from public consciousness by the turn of the twentieth century. It was not revived until the publication of H. I. Dutton and J. E. King's generally well received study '*Ten Per Cent and No Surrender': The Preston Strike*, 1853-4, published in 1981. In many ways this volume continues where Dutton and King left off, building on four decades of scholarship to ask new questions and present new understandings of the dispute and its legacy.

While the Preston dispute was for much of its history hardly remembered as a significant moment in working-class collective action, it continued to feature in the pages of historical scholarship. This was in large part on account of interest in the works of Dickens and Gaskell. As early as 1908, Matz featured the lock-out in his analysis of Dickens' reportage.[1] Wanda Neff's 1929 V*ictorian Working Women* marked a notable attempt to transverse literary and historical studies, as well as being a study of women by a female academic. Despite some harsh reviews, T.H. Marshall likened her approach of combining history and literature to 'interrupting the clear outline of a map with watercolour sketches of the scenery'. Neff's analysis of women and work was on a forward-thinking range of sources,[2] and the lock-out a brief part of a wider discussion, again linked to Dickens, of female apathy toward trade unionism.[3] Neff built on Hutchins' 1915 analysis of working women, which presented a complex relationship between female cotton

[1] B.W. Matz, 'Dickens as a journalist', *Fortnightly Review* 83:497 (1908), 817-832.
[2] T.H. Marshall, review of Neff, *Victorian Working Women, Economica* 27 (1929), 369–71.
[3] W. Neff, *Victorian Working Women* (London, 1929), 34.

operatives and unions.[4] She also offered a forthright discussion of the significance of literary presentations of cotton operatives, their image had 'come to stand, in popular opinion' for Victorian women generally.[5]

The vast majority of other academic works tended to rely on Henry Ashworth's account of the lock-out whilst discussing various subjects.[6] There was a resurgence around the mid-1960s, linked to the rise in popularity of 'history from below' and the growing interest in working class Victorian literature, most notably Carnall's 1964 examination of the dispute in relation to Dickens and Gaskell.[7] It is notable that several other studies that built on the relationship between Victorian fiction writers and a host of working-class subjects similarly make reference to and discussion of Preston.[8]

Interest in the Preston lock-out reemerged with the debates around class and more broadly labour history through the late 1970s and 1980s. Revisionists, such as Patrick Joyce and Gareth Stedman Jones took new approaches to the notion of class, solidarity and working-class consciousness. As Neville Kirk outlined, such ideas were part of a shift in approaches to historical studies of working-class communities from various 'positions', often seen as post-structuralist.[9] The form and function of labour history more generally was also widely debated within these parameters. Zeitlin proposed a broader approach in 1987, conceptualising labour history as 'the the history of industrial relations, understood broadly as the changing relationships between workers, trade unions, employers and the state,'[10] but this was effectively a throw-back to older approaches. Katrina Navickas has suggested, labour history such as Zeitlin proposed had somewhat of a repetitional issue, effectively 'us and them', whilst much of the revisionist approaches took the notion of class and 'deconstructed' it 'out of existence'.[11] Dutton and King's *Ten per Cent and No Surrender* was published in 1981 but was effectively finished and submitted to the publisher by the end of 1979.[12] The writers had largely been insulated from the ideological debates in labour history through their academic backgrounds. Although at the time King had an interest and some ideas broadly in the field, it was not an area that he had worked in. Dutton was regarded as a more traditional economic historian. Although unable to fully recall now, King suspects that the pair made a conscious decision to stay clear of such debates and focus on 'interesting stories' rather than theoretical work.

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[4] B.L. Hutchins, *Women in Modern Industry* (London, 1980).
[5] Neff, *Victorian Working Women*, 20.
[6] See for example P.W. Slosson, *Decline of the Chartist Movement* (New York, 1916) and E. Royle, *Victorian Infidels: The Origins of the British Secularist Movement, 1791-1866* (Manchester, 1964), 139.
[7] G. Carnall, 'Dickens, Mrs. Gaskell, and the Preston Strike', *Victorian Studies* 8:1 (1964), 31–48.
[8] K.J. Fielding, '"Hard Times" for the present', *Dickensian* 63:353 (1967), 149.
R. Gilmour, 'The Gradgrind School: Political Economy in the Classroom', *Victorian Studies* 11:2 (1967), 207–24; P. Brantlinger, 'The Case against Trade Unions in Early Victorian Fiction', *Victorian Studies* 13:1 (1969), 37–52.
[9] N. Kirk, 'In Defence of Class: A Critique of Recent Revisionist Writing Upon the Nineteenth-Century English Working Class', *International Review of Social History* 32:1 (1987), 2–47.
[10] J. Zeitlin, 'From Labour History to the History of Industrial Relations', *Economic History Review* 40:2 (1987), 159–84.
[11] K. Navickas, 'What Happened to Class? New Histories of Labour and Collective Action in Britain', *Social History* 36:2 (2011), 192–204.
[12] Robert Poole interview with John King, 10 February 2023.

Ten Per cent was widely acknowledged to be the first real modern attempt to reappraise the dispute. Strangely, and perhaps too modestly, Dutton and King declared the lock-out 'not of outstanding importance' or 'a crucial turning point', which led Joyce to question the point of the study. He also found issues in their study's insularity and overly narrative nature.[13] Morris made similar arguments, praising the potential usage for a range of scholars, but finding it 'odd', 'old fashioned' and lacking 'curiosity' in it's failure to engage with theoretical concepts.[14] From a more traditional labour history perspective, Taplin found that Dutton and King analysed the dispute with 'flair and perception', and largely praised the focus, and use as a case-study of the wider economic and social history of the northwest.[15] McCord also praised the style, whilst suggesting some issues of the framing of the dispute and understanding of the wider context.[16] Bagwell was also glowing in his praise, remarking that 'this book sets a new standard of excellence in British industrial relations history'.[17] Bythell likewise saw some of the criticisms as the study's main strength, whilst acknowledging that the scope was somewhat limited, he declared the study a 'model of how local history should be written.'[18]

Despite this apparent narrow scope of the study, *Ten Per Cent* continues to be utilised by historians and other scholars interested in a range of subjects.[19] Alongside the related article 'The limits of paternalism',[20] the narrative that Dutton and King established presents a detailed but malleable subject through which to frame wider-studies. These have included amongst literary scholars, but more broadly the continued interest in labour history as well as working-class social history generally.[21] This is perhaps the truest strength of both the book and more broadly the subject, in that it had such a wide impact, was so widely reported, and had such a strong cultural resonance that it serves as a microcosmic episode of mid-Victorian Britain. The Lock-out is also rare for the collection of ephemera that Dutton and King utilised. The scrapbooks compiled by (or for) millowner Henry Ashworth and apparently strike leader George Cowell, include the

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[13] P. Joyce, review of *'Ten Per Cent and No Surrender': The Preston Strike 1853-54*, *Social History* 8:3 (1983), 400-402.
[14] R. J. Morris, review of '*Ten Per Cent', Urban History Yearbook* 10 (1983), 201–02.
[15] E. Taplin, review of *'Ten Per Cent', Victorian Studies* 26:4 (1983), 451–52.
[16] N. McCord, review of *'Ten Per Cent', Economic History Review* 35:2 (1982), 314–15.
[17] P. Bagwell, review of *'Ten Per Cent', Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 130:5309 (1982), 293–94.
[18] D. Bythell, review of *'Ten Per Cent', English Historical Review* 99:390 (1984), 206.
[19] It would be needless to list every piece that has referenced 'Ten Per Cen't since its publication, however, see for example Sonya Rose's study of gender in Victorian Britain, and Malcolm Chase on trade unionism: S.O. Rose, *Limited livelihoods: Gender and class in nineteenth century England.* (London, 2003) and M. Chase, *Early trade unionism: fraternity, skill and the politics of labour* (London, 2017.
[20] H.I. Dutton and J.E. King, 'The limits of paternalism: the cotton tyrants of North Lancashire, 1836–54', *Social History* 7:1 (1982), 59-74.
[21] See for example Reid's overview of Labour history that includes some of the key debates around various topics, and cites '*Ten Per Cent'* as one of the only studies of the cotton industry: A.J. Reid, 'A New Paradigm for British Labour History', *History Compass* 3:1 (2005).

knobstick sketches, alongside other sources such as the broadside ballads composed and sung during the dispute and the union balance sheets, offering a rich and diverse source-base.[22]

An issue that Taplin highlighted was the treatment of women. He suggested that 'sadly, the usual male assessment based on male sources and tinged with male prejudices. Women's history requires much more thorough research before it can be accurately written.'[23]

The stages of the dispute

> 'It should be remembered that this was not a strike in Preston, but a lock-out.' (strike leader George Cowell, *People's Paper*, 15 October 1853)

> 'The Preston strike, turn-out, lock-out, or whatever name its advocates and authors choose to call it…'
> (*Preston Chronicle*, 15 April 1854)

Contemporaries were often uncertain how to define the Preston dispute of 1853-4. Was it a strike or a lock-out? The distinction was not always benign. Strike leaders, as Cowell's statement above indicates, were keen to remind the public that the ongoing struggle was a lock-out and therefore the fault of the employers. Historians have tended to choose either one or the other term, or, like the title of the present study, have cumbersomely used both.[24] The reality is that the dispute was both a strike and a lock-out at different points. It is necessary to outline chronologically the main developments of the dispute, from its beginnings in the summer of 1853 to its end in May 1854, as it had important implications on interactions between strikers and non-strikers.

The struggle in Preston was not an isolated episode. It occurred against the backdrop of a series of strikes in various trades across the country by workers seeking higher wages.[25] In Lancashire, a movement began among textile workers in the spring of 1853 for the reversal of wage reductions enacted by employers during the depression of 1847-8. Workers demanded, now that trade was good again, that their wages be restored. Preston was initially on the periphery of the movement. In April 1853 the town's spinners issued a circular to their employers demanding higher wages on the grounds that trade was prosperous, but it was

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[22] See for example the Lock-out bill posters, LA/DDHS/75/11, the scrapbooks, LA/DDPR/138/87a, LA/ DDPR/138/87b, and DDX 1291/141, the operatives' financial reports, LA/ DDPR/138/86, the Harkness collection of ballads.
[23] I.M. Taplin, review of *'Ten Per Cent',* 'North West Labour History', http://www.nwlh.org.uk/?q=node/138.
[24] For example, Dutton and King went for 'strike' in the title of their book, whereas historians such as Neville Kirk and Harold Perkin refer only to a 'lock-out'. Studies which do not focus specifically on the Preston dispute have tended to go with lock-out: N. Kirk, *Change, continuity and class: labour in British society* (Manchester, 1998), 67; H. Perkin, *The origins of modern English society* (London, second edition, 2002), 327.
[25] H. Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism* (Basingstoke, 1992), 47-49.

not until June that Preston's weavers, much larger in number, echoed their calls. By this time operatives in most towns had been campaigning for higher wages for several months, the most notable of which action took place in Stockport. Here, textile operatives, claiming that their wages were below the district average, began their agitation in March 1853. The employers, working in association, steadfastly refused to negotiate, and when they failed to answer a series of wage demands issued at the end of May the operatives turned out on strike for a general ten per cent increase. Their aims were embodied by the mantra 'Ten Per Cent and No Surrender', which soon caught on elsewhere.[26] This was the first strike of the dispute, and the outcome was therefore closely monitored across Lancashire. Delegates representing trade unions across the region met in Stockport shortly after the strike commenced and agreed to provide contributions to support the out-of-work operatives. They also agreed to refrain from going on strike themselves until the dispute was concluded. In the event, the strike lasted just short of two months and resulted in a victory for the operatives. Following the dispute, most employers in other textile towns also conceded to the workers' 'Ten per cent' demands, including at Preston where probably no more than six employers were still refusing to budge by the beginning of August 1853.[27] All the large employers in Preston had agreed to give the ten per cent. Towards the end of August a few thousand workers turned out at the small number of firms which stubbornly refused to concede, and while tensions were high most observers appear to have believed that the dispute would not continue for long.

Yet, this is not what happened. Instead, the Preston Masters' Association, a faction which included all the main mill owners in the town, suddenly and unexpectedly announced in the second week of September that they were going to lock up their mills in one month's time. Their lock-out manifesto, issued on 15th September, was signed by thirty-five firms. Each agreed to forfeit £5,000 if they acted against the collective. Many of the signatories were employers who had previously granted the ten per cent, including Preston's largest firm, Horrockses, Miller and Co. We do not know precisely why the Masters' Association took this course, but the issue was about more than wages. As stated in the manifesto, the masters were compelled to act in response to a 'designing and irresponsible body, [with] no connection to the town', having cultivated 'a spirit of tyranny and dictation' among the operatives.[28] They blamed, in effect, agitators from outside Preston for sowing disharmony. The essential issue, as Dutton and King argue, was 'one of mastery.'[29] The closure of the mills on 15th October marked the formal beginning of the lock-out. It is important to note that not all Preston's employers were in the Masters' Association and supported the lock-out. At least 14 mills, constituting something in the region of one-quarter of the total in the Preston area, continued to work on terms acceptable to the operatives. Most of these, however, were small firms, and so

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[26] *Manchester Courier*, 11 June 1853. The phrase 'Ten Percent and no Surrender' seems to have originated in the strike declaration issued by the Stockport weavers' committee in early June 1853.
[27] J. Lowe, 'Account of the strike in the cotton trade at Preston in 1853, in *Trade Societies and strikes: Report on the committee on trades' societies appointed by the national association for the promotion of political science* (London, 1860), 208-263.
[28] *Preston Chronicle,* 17 September 1853.
[29] H.I. Dutton and J.E. King, *'Ten per Cent and No Surrender' : The Preston Strike, 1853-1854* (Cambridge, 1981), 40.

a rather larger proportion of Preston's textile operatives were locked out. The number is unclear. Contemporary reports gave numbers ranging from 17,000 to 23,000. In any case, the proportion was something over 80 per cent of the entire textile factory workforce.

The lock-out phase of the dispute lasted until February 1854. The Masters Association tested the resolve of the locked-out operatives in the second week of December 1853, when they invited them to apply to resume their labours. However, very few took up the offer. In the meantime, several employers who had closed their mills in October 1853 but had not signed the Masters' Association's September manifesto reopened in January. On 8th February the Master' Association, sensing that some workers were ready to end the dispute, issued a statement that their mills would be reopened the next day. We do not know quite how many returned to work, as both sides of the dispute made unreliable claims, but it is clear that the vast majority of operatives stayed out on strike. The masters, however, decided to keep their largely empty mills running, and it was at this point that they started to import 'knobstick' labour from other districts in Britain and Ireland. Thus, the Preston dispute of 1853-4 began as a series of isolated strikes at a small number of mills in August/September 1853, became a general lock-out involving most textile operatives in October 1853, and then once again became a strike in February 1854, though this time on a much larger scale than during the previous summer. This final phase of the dispute continued until early May, when the operatives finally accepted defeat and returned to work at pre-lockout wages.

Contents of the special issue

This chronology of the dispute is the core of Dutton and King's classic book, an almost wilfully narrative history at a time of high theoretical disputes in the historical profession. As King said in 2023, 'I've got a feeling Harry [Dutton] and I said we're going to do it differently, we're going to tell stories, interesting stories, and we'll leave other people to do high falutin theoretical work'.[30] In retrospect he acknowledges that this lack of theoretical underpinning was perhaps a weakness of the book, along with the focus on male trade union leaders. The contributors to this volume benefit from more than 40 years of subsequent scholarship, in particular gender and women's history, and the cultural turn. While acknowledging the importance of Dutton and King's book in putting the Preston dispute on the map of nineteenth-century historiography, this volume challenges some of the claims, fills a number of gaps and expands on their work to present new knowledge. We aim to produce an account of the dispute which never forgets that most of the locked-out workers were women and children, that the workers were the moderates and the mill-owners the extremists, yet the conduct of the 'turn-outs' was less respectable and more violent than previously acknowledged, and that Irish workers were far more than strike-breaking 'knobsticks'. The atmosphere and culture of the strike, in particular its literary culture, is explored in more depth, recovering the voices of

[30] King interview.

ordinary Preston workers. In another work of historical recovery, two previously forgotten literary works inspired by the dispute are added to the account, and set alongside the novels of Dickens and Gaskell.

Besides the subsequent literature on the dispute, we have also benefited from sources beyond the four scrapbooks held by Lancashire Archives (which King rightly describes as 'amazing source material') and reports in Lancashire newspapers. This special issue relies on a wider range of newspapers now searchable in digital databases, Irish census and workhouse records, and a series of nineteenth-century commentaries on the strike and lock-out published in this country and abroad. New methods such as creative use of cartoons produced during the dispute, for a modern-day animated film, show the historical insights that can be gained from such approaches.

The first three essays challenge received wisdom about the Preston lock-out from three angles: women's experiences and activities, violence, and Irish involvement. John King acknowledges that 'the role of women is probably the biggest single defect of the story that we told'.[31] Janet Greenlees begins to address this gap by highlighting how equal strike pay for both sexes reflected the equal value placed on women's paid labour, and their involvement in the dispute. As she thinks through the 'lived reality' of women's lives during the strike and lock-out, she argues that households in which parents and children all received strike pay may have been able to survive, and even thrive, with less alcohol-fuelled violence and more time for leisure and education. This essay demonstrates the benefits of a more gendered approach to histories of trade unionism.

Another myth of the dispute, its peacefulness, is challenged by Lewis Darwen, who is more reluctant than Dutton and King to dismiss everything in Ashworth's account or accept everything in the union leaders' claims. Middle-class journalistic commentary and fiction, and the speeches of the union leaders, are set alongside court reports and other testimony, revealing surprising levels of violence and threats of violence – with many instances of verbal and physical abuse given and received by women and girls. Darwen argues that the dispute could not have lasted so long because of intimidation alone, but that such informal discipline meant that fear of assault, and the derogatory, ostracising label of 'knobstick', may have stopped many workers from returning.

Máirtín Ó Catháin believes that the 'foundation myth' of the 'Irish knobstick' can be traced back to the Preston lock-out. He picks this myth apart by taking a longer view of Irish workers in this Lancashire cotton town, from the 1840s into the 1850s, finding them on both sides of a series of disputes, in which they were cast as heroes and villains. By tracing many of the workers back across the Irish Sea, he demonstrates that many of those imported by the mill-owners to break the strike were Protestant, and possibly skilled, or at least trained, textile workers, thus complicating the caricatures of unskilled Catholic paupers.

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[31] *Ibid.*

The next four papers bring the techniques of cultural history and literary studies to bear on the dispute. Andrew Hobbs's study of the balance sheets produced every week by each union examines these publications as cultural artefacts in their own right. They are valuable historical sources for any study of the lock-out, but they are also so much more. They fascinated middle-class commentators as windows into the unintelligible world of working-class culture and labour organisation, confounding preconceptions of workers as illiterate, innumerate, uncultured and inarticulate. They confirm the involvement of women, and the importance of threats, intimidation and humiliation to the running of the dispute. They were produced by union leaders, but most of the material was written by district collectors and delegates in Preston and throughout Lancashire; Hobbs argues that working-class voices in mills, pubs and homes can be heard in them despite many layers of mediation.

Some locked-out workers, women and men alike, supplemented their strike pay by writing, singing and selling ballads about the dispute. The superb collection preserved by Lancashire Archives also allows working-class voices to be heard in a relatively unfiltered way, in addition to the balance sheets. Simon Rennie analyses these ballads as labour in themselves, as political communication (subversive enough for their singing to be banned by Preston magistrates) and as expressions of solidarity and community. Again, they include threats and violent language against mill-owners and strike-breakers, and offer further clues to the emotional tone of the dispute.

Charles Dickens was second only to Ashworth in defining the popular narrative of the lock-out and strike, and his journalism and novel, *Hard Times*, are used as comparators for two other fictional treatments of the events in Preston, by the old radical, Samuel Bamford, and an anonymous author, possibly Rev Charles Marriott, a vicar with Christian Socialist sympathies. Robert Poole and Michael Sanders find that the middle-class ideologies of Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell (whose novel *North and South* was also inspired by the Preston lock-out) prevented them from acknowledging that mill-owners could be unruly militants and unions could be the voice of reason. Robert Poole examines the first fictional treatment of the dispute, a series of dialogues by Bamford in *Cassell's Illustrated Family Paper,* which, like Dickens and Gaskell, features a strike rather than a lock-out. Poole shows how Bamford projected his personal experience from the Peterloo era onto the Preston dispute, revealing his ignorance of how unions and labour politics had changed since his youth. *The Strike,* an anonymous novel clearly inspired by the lock-out, was published in 1855. It is the only literary work to include a lock-out rather than a strike, only one of the ways in which it approaches the reality of the events more closely than Dickens or Gaskell. It evinces a better understanding of trade unions and of the organisation of disputes, yet, even in the hands of the author most sympathetic to the workers, a strike is not allowed to succeed.

The lock-out's power to inspire two major nineteenth-century authors, and more besides, suggests that it was a significant historical event. Dutton and King made few claims for the importance of the Preston strike and lock-out (leading Patrick Joyce to ask, 'why study it then?'); yet these novels suggest it was highly

significant.[32] Jack Southern's essay sifts the conflicting narratives: was the dispute soon forgotten, celebrated or used by Ashworth and his disciples as a lesson in the folly of strikes? Did it mark the end of an era of violent, political/industrial protest and the start of a standardised pay system, or was it merely a shameful failure? The first non-political, purely economic strike? Or a principled stand for the right to combine as workers? The subsequent colourful careers of some union leaders cast a shadow over the effective way they had led the strike, assisting Ashworth and others in their revisionist narrative. Yet, Southern argues, other memories of the dispute continued to inspire. Lancashire workers exported many successful aspects of union organisation to the Fall River cotton industry in Massachusetts, while nearer home, prolonged strikes in Padiham and Colne in the following decade suggest that some workers at least took courage rather than despair from the Preston lock-out.

In the final essay of this special issue, animator Sarah Ann Kennedy-Parr describes how she used the anonymous cartoons from Ashworth's scrapbook in the Lancashire Archives as raw material for a short film about the Irish women brought into Preston as 'knobsticks' or strikebreakers. Tying together the personal (her Irish family roots) and the creative, she challenges and expands previous interpretations of these mysterious drawings, finding parallels with the migrants and refugees of today.

There are other contemporary resonances, of course. This special issue was prepared during a time of renewed union organisation, prolonged disputes, and wide public support. Most of the contributors have been involved in industrial action at their universities, demanding the restitution of previous pay levels or fighting to protect their jobs. Legal restrictions on industrial action in the twenty-first century are in many ways harsher than those during the 1853-54 lock-out, although this is not to suggest that we have suffered as much as those in Preston who were locked out of work during the winter of 1853-4. Our experiences, and their experiences of all workers in capitalist economies, follows a long history of collective action among working men and women. We hope this volume, by bringing together new perspectives and challenging old assumptions about the Preston strike, will contribute further to our understanding of this story.

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[32] Joyce, Review of *'Ten Per Cent'*, 401.