

Book reviews

Máirtín Ó Catháin

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BOOK REVIEWS

Working in Cork: everyday life in Irish Steel, Sunbeam Wolsey and the Ford Marina plant, 1917–2001, by Liam Cullinane, Cork, Cork University Press, 2020, xvi + 304 pp., €39.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-78205-413-9

The great social documentary journalist and historian Studs Terkel, who died in 2008, wrote that work is about a search ‘for daily meaning as well as daily bread’. His oral history collection of interviews from which this perspective came, *Working*, appeared in 1974 – the same year, as Liam Cullinane notes in this book, that a strike at the Guinness plant in Dublin threatened a shortage of the black stuff in pubs across Ireland. Though we are accustomed to thinking of that older world of work as less atomized, if not entirely meaningful, it still seems for many of us a relatively recent contactable, almost tactile past. As Cullinane’s book shows, however, even just the age profile of the contributors indicates that this past is fast receding with the workers whose lives experienced it. This, in itself, reminds us of the primary – indeed, foundational – role of oral history – that of curation, as something that remains a vital, if somewhat hackneyed to say, purpose of the discipline. For that alone, this work is indispensable. 5 10 15

Working in Cork comprises eight chapters, the first three covering the historical context of the factories at the heart of this work, followed by three chapters examining working life in each: Ford Marina, Sunbeam Wolsey and Irish Steel. The final two chapters then provide broader thematic discussions around employment, inequality and emigration, and gender, status and resistance. The work is based on 66 audio interviews with former employees of the three factories, the majority collected by Miriam Nyhan for her study of the Ford Marina plant produced in 2007, though the author conducted 24 interviews himself and accessed others via local history projects. It is, however, a tribute to the narrative construction of the book that there is little or no sense of the varied origins of the oral history materials at the centre of it. The work flows well and provides a much-needed interpretation of a valuable and neglected topic. 20 25

Cullinane highlights early on in this study the tremendous paucity of histories in general of Irish working-class life, though this is probably more pronounced in the Republic than in Northern Ireland. More pointedly, however, he underlines the relative absence of factory studies in particular and the fact that this comparative approach to factories is the first (though hopefully not the last) of its kind. What emerges is a story of not one but two towns, Cork and Cobh (pronounced ‘Cove’), the latter of which was on an island in the Cork harbour estuary and was home to an Irish steel plant. In spite of being a nationalized industry with early trade union recognition, somewhat in contradistinction to Cork’s two private car manufacturers, Cobh’s Irish Steel workers evince noticeably less warm nostalgia for their old workplace. Undoubtedly, and as Cullinane demonstrates, this is in part tied to the subsequent fortunes of Cobh as a place haunted by de-industrialization whilst Cork grew and diversified during the Celtic Tiger years. Indeed, the history of the present if not the recent past suffuses much of this study in general, something that is paradoxically oral history’s perennial strength and weakness as a source, method and final product. 30 35 40

One of the more interesting aspects of this book is the discussion around protection-
ism and its generally positive impact on sustaining these three factories. This contrasts 45
with much that has been written about the tariff-driven economics of successive
twentieth-century Irish governments up until the 1960s. If, of course, for a time it
operated  like the Republic of Ireland's corporation tax regime does today  to help
attract and anchor businesses, it nonetheless did rather less for workers, who continued
to emigrate in large numbers to find work, albeit some of it **was** provided in Ford's 50
Dagenham plant.

It is, though, the workers' memories that sparkle most in this book, most notably in
the central spine looking at life in the three very different factories. They combine
humour with pathos and show the ordinariness as well as the drama of the working lives 55
within the plants. Cullinane here has produced a very democratic history in the service
of his living sources and allowed them to speak not merely for themselves but for
a long-silenced Irish working-class experience.

Máirtín Ó Catháin
University of Central Lancashire

 mso-cathain@uclan.ac.uk 60

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