The Respectability of Late Victorian Workers

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By

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For Oscar and Robert

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PREFACE

The present study has arisen from a concern that the respectability of ordinary Victorian workers—often spoken of by oral history respondents but frequently denied by opinion-makers of the time—has failed to receive the full critical scrutiny it deserves. Far from respectability filling the gap resulting from the dethronement of class as an explanatory framework, it has frequently been dismissed as little more than "smoke and mirrors," or has been treated as a sideshow in gender and specialist studies. The historiography, while often acknowledging the role of respectability in working-class lives, has not placed it centre stage as a coherent cultural narrative shaping and informing worker identities and world view(s). Indeed the respectability of working people has even been said to have been a sham or charade—the means to hoodwink both the State and social superiors and to protect a still largely unreformed popular culture from outside interference.

Working-class respectability has not only been unduly neglected and devalued as a topic in its own right but, despite E. P. Thompson and the lip service often given to "history from below," many studies of working-class history seem to have failed to deliver what they have promised in terms of understanding working-class experience and the creative role workers themselves had in the making of their everyday lives and culture. Sometimes this has been due to a reluctance to fully embrace new methodologies and non-textual sources although the situation is changing.[1]

1. Victoria Kelley, in her recent study of working-class cleanliness, is keen to recognise "the extent to which [working-class] women creatively expressed love, energy and initiative through their household practices" (p. 112), but the exploration of mothers' cultural agency and identity is hampered by the choice of sources. Although the analysis of soap advertising is to be welcomed, there is an over-reliance on a small number of working-class autobiographies and the comments of such well-known social commentators as Bosanquet, Bell and Pember Reeves. Curiously, although she recognises "that cleanliness and respectability are so closely intertwined" (communication with the author, 10 July 2006), the connection is not explored in any depth. See Victoria Kelley, *Soap and Water: Cleanliness, Dirt and the Working Classes in Victorian and Edwardian Britain* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010).

Since, as Edward Royle has reminded us, "All history is a matter of interpretation" not every reader is likely to be convinced by the arguments presented here; but it is nevertheless hoped that this study will stimulate further research into how workers experienced and negotiated their own lives.[2] The limits of a local study are obvious but the approach has the great benefit that a nuanced and detailed understanding of Victorian and Edwardian workers' lives and the contexts they interacted with is more likely to be realised. In the process of conducting such a local investigation a surprising number of ordinary individuals emerge from the shadows and inform the historical narrative.

A work of this kind incurs many debts of gratitude. The staff at the following libraries and archives have been unfailingly helpful in finding sources and answering queries: the Brotherton Library (Special Collections), University of Leeds, Leeds; the Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, York; the National Archives, Kew; York City Reference Library, York; and York City Archives, York. Rita Freedman and Joy Cann of York City Archives deserve special thanks for their assistance over a number of years, as does Sue Rigby of York Reference Library who kindly allowed me generous access to both catalogued and uncatalogued records. Aidan Turner-Bishop of the University of Central Lancashire, Preston, expertly helped me to navigate the Livesey collection, while Roger Logan of the Foresters' Heritage Trust went out of his way to track down valuable membership records and photocopy them for me. I am grateful, too, to Trinity College, Cambridge, for allowing me access to the Munby Papers and to the House of Lords Record Office (now the Parliamentary Archives) for permitting me to look at their records concerning Public Petitions. Joseph Terry and Sons of York generously made some relevant documents available from their archives while Richard Mangan of the Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson Theatre Collection kindly supplied me with copies of entries from the *Era Almanack*. Joy Caisley, who has charge of official publications at Southampton University, has been assiduous in answering my requests.

I also wish to thank a number of private individuals and smaller institutions. I recall, with pleasure, the welcome I received at St. George's, St. Lawrence and Scarcroft schools and St. Lawrence Working Men's Club. The Birch, Dent, Hunter, Kay and Morrell families have kindly allowed me to access and use private papers in their possession. The Kay family invited me into their home and made available both Grandfather

2. Edward Royle, *Revolutionary Britannia? Reflections on the Threat of Revolution in Britain, 1789–1848* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 6.

Kay's Diary and taped reminiscences recorded by John Kay. Mrs. Morrell hospitably allowed me to inspect a trunk of papers relating to William Wilberforce Morrell at her home in Highgate, London. Brian Walster, owner of the William Waller papers (discovered during a house clearance), kindly allowed me to peruse these uncatalogued papers during his visit to York City Archives and shared his knowledge of them with me.

A special thank you is reserved for Van Wilson who, on behalf of York Oral History Project, supplied me with a large number of transcripts of oral history interviews with York residents and whose many publications have recorded the views of former York residents. Mike Race, also of YOHP, provided me with interesting additional background information. I am extremely grateful to the YOHP for allowing me to use the transcripts. The YOHP material, combined with my own collection of oral history interviews, offer a rich insight into working-class attitudes and, indeed, make studies like the current one feasible. Consequently, this work is dedicated to the many residents of York, born in the Victorian or Edwardian periods, who courteously allowed themselves to be interviewed in the interests of posterity. Violet and Henry Wilson of Heslington Road, with their encyclopaedic knowledge of York, were especially willing on numerous occasions to answer queries over a cup of tea and make a non-native of York feel at home. Several residents, despite advanced age and infirmity, proved willing to put pen to paper and record their personal experiences in written form, thereby adding to the variety of precious source material by which we can seek to unpick the past.

My main academic debt is owed to Edward Royle, my supervisor during the preparation of the thesis from which this book is derived, who challenged me to ask the right kind of questions about the source material and who never lost faith in me. Professor Simon Cordery kindly read through, and commented on, the final draft for which I am extremely grateful. I also wish to thank professors James Walvin, (the late) Gwyn Williams and, especially, Hugh Cunningham whose seminars inspired me as an undergraduate at the University of Kent.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

£	pound sterling
s	shilling (1s = 5 new pence)
d	old pence (2.4 old pence = 1 new pence)
AOF	Ancient Order of Foresters
BIHR	Borthwick Institute of Historical Research
MOH	Medical Officer of Health
MOHC	Masters' Oral History Collection
NER	North Eastern Railway
PP	*Parliamentary Papers*
TNA	The National Archives (Kew)
UCLAN	University of Central Lancashire
VR	Visitation Returns
WMC	Working Men's Club
YCA	York City Archives
YCRL	York City Reference Library
YDTLC	York and District Trades and Labour Council
(Y)EP	*Evening Press* 1884-1904, *Yorkshire Evening Press* from 2 Jan1905
YBGPAC	York Board of Guardians Public Assistance Committee
YFMR	York Friends' Meeting Records
YFSAS	York Friends' Sabbath and Adult Schools
YG	*Yorkshire Gazette*
YH	*York Herald*, *Yorkshire Herald* from 1890
YOHP	York Oral History Project

INTRODUCTION

This study assesses the extent to which respectability was embedded in the lives of working people as a world view that helped them to meet the physical, spiritual and psychological demands of a Christian and increasingly market-led society—one which placed an emphasis on character and personal responsibility. As a leader article in the Foresters' Miscellany insisted in 1894, "Man is a responsible being. To rob him of his responsibility is to degrade him."[1] Although respectability cannot be discussed apart from socio-economic circumstances, economic reductionism and class conceptions of society have served to deflect attention from its character as a universal aspiration. Indeed, rather than resurrecting a class-based master narrative the intention is to explore the place of working people in the wider struggle of "decent" people from all classes to order their existence and achieve their due place in society.[2] If the book *Pilgrim's Progress* was a talismanic book during the period 1870–1914 this was no coincidence—for the struggle in question had a strong moral and, indeed, religious character.[3] Respectability offered a

1. Foresters' *Miscellany*, June 1894, quoted in J. R. Hay, *The Development of the British Welfare State, 1880–1975* (London: Longman, 1978), 17

2. The idea of a master narrative based on "decent people" seeking their proper place in society is advanced by P. Joyce, *Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 332. His focus, however, is not on respectability per se. Respectability as a narrative was informed and promoted by a discourse which enjoyed official or semi-official sanction and which contrasted decency, honesty and order with roughness, idleness and disorder. York Police Court Chaplain's Character Books had a heading "apparent character" which invited subjective moral categorisation of offenders using words like "decent," "respectable," "rough" and "degraded." Interestingly, the Chaplain was not above referring to an out of work Irish labourer as "respectable." See York Police Court Chaplain's Character Books, MSS, Y[ork] C[ity] R[eference] L[ibrary], Y365.663. For the Irish labourer reference, see Character Book, March 1897–May 1899, 58, 29 April 1898, entry for Michael McGlorne.

3. *Pilgrim's Progress*, one of the most widely available and popular texts of the Victorian period, was both an adventure story and a religious allegory which, in working-class hands, could be expressive of worker dignity and Protestant Christianity. As Jonathan Rose makes clear in *The Intellectual Life of the British*

practical strategy for coping with life but was also very much about expressing a sense of human dignity and self-worth.

The focus is on "the working classes" of York, but their lives, and the meanings that they attached to everyday life, are not intentionally refracted through the prism of class or (radical) labour history literature. Although evidence of social snobbery and in favour of "class based" cultural conceptions of society can be found in the sources, an interpretation which focuses narrowly on such material too readily leads to notions of cultural imposition by the middle classes from above and cultural resistance or subterfuge by workers from below. Respectability, as a pan-class cultural enterprise, becomes discounted in the process. Instead of seeing respectability as a battle between civilised reformers (whose ranks could include workers) and roughs (whose ranks were almost invariably thought to be workers), or between respectable middle-class culture and a degenerate working-class popular culture, it may be more appropriate to see the struggle in non-class and more personal terms as one between the rough and respectable elements within each individual as he or she adapted to new horizons and conditions of life. "Middle-classness" and "working-classness" consequently lose much of their meaning as cultural descriptors. While, undoubtedly, rough individuals and families could be identified within communities, the emphasis on the "otherness" of roughs was essentially about the internal quest to live up to certain standards and ways of living and to work out what counted as respectable in everyday life. In the process working people had to negotiate with, and select from, public notions of respectability—both those circulating in public discourses and those operating at community level—which could be both complementary and conflicting. Identities, partly in consequence, were sometimes contingent, shifting and even opportunistic, but many people were capable of creating stable and enduring self-identities which they self-policed as best they could.

Respectability—along with those other shibboleths of the Victorian age, "progress" and "improvement"—was closely associated in the Victorian public mind with a societal and cultural shift towards a more

Working Classes (London: Yale University Press, 2001), 104–5, it was a text that appealed to a diverse working-class readership, including workers involved in organised political struggle. When the Hungate Mission Schools, a York "ragged school," gave out copies of the *Pilgrim's Progress* as prizes in the 1860s both giver and recipient could share in the text's value as a morally uplifting read whatever other meanings were involved. For the book's use as a prize at Hungate Mission, see J. Walvin, *A Child's World: A Social History of English Childhood, 1800–1914* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982, repr. 1984), 133.

orderly, restrained and civilised society. For one York working man, William Waller, who rose from a poor and illegitimate coachman to a respected private asylum keeper and property owner, and whose life spanned most of the Victorian period, "progress" (his personal motto) took the form of material advance, self-improvement and an attachment to a religious-based respectability.[4] Although the emphasis on outward displays of respectability during the Victorian period opened the way for dissimulation and double standards, respectability was viewed by many Victorians as a powerful cultural and behavioural force by which people could be categorised and differentiated and by which individuals could make sense of the world.[5] The meaning of respectability may have been subject to interpretation and re-interpretation by individuals and communities, but public discourse consistently laid emphasis on industry, self-reliance, self-restraint (not least in sexual conduct), sobriety, thrift, honesty, morality, cleanliness, domesticity, and orderliness. A respectable citizen also looked the part—being of a tidy and clean appearance and self-disciplined in manner and speech. Roughs, by contrast, were likely to be disorderly in behaviour and speech and lacking any regard for hard work, thrift, morality and religion.

The boundary between what was rough and what was respectable may, in practice, have been more malleable than the stereotypes suggested—with some attributes given more weight than others—but the distinction was real enough and recognised at virtually all levels of society.[6] Evidence of inconsistency in behaviour may have had less to do with any intention to deceive and more to do with human frailty and the difficulties of negotiating the rules and expectations that could apply in different roles and social contexts.[7] Arguably, respectability was a variegated concept

4. See William Waller, "Journal of Religious Experiences," MS, in the possession of Mr. Brian Walster.

5. On double standards, see the secret life of Arthur Munby, a respected York solicitor and gentleman, whose life is discussed in D. Hudson, *Munby, Man of Two Worlds: The Life and Diaries of Arthur J. Munby, 1828–1910* (London: John Murray, 1972). For a working-class example, see the Diaries and Papers of Sydney Smith, naturalist, 1895–*c.*1935, MSS, the Knowles Collection, Y[ork C[ity] A[rchives], Acc. 378. On respectability as a key cultural division within society, see D. Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (London: Penguin, 2000), 92.

6. A. Davin, *Growing Up Poor: Home, School and Street in London, 1870–1914* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1996), 70–71. But it is possible that she exaggerates the malleable character of respectability and how easily a respectable "role" could be discarded.

7. P. Bailey, "'Will the Real Bill Banks Please Stand Up?': A Role Analysis of Mid-Victorian Working-Class Respectability," *Journal of Social History* 12

rather than an infinitely flexible one or one intended to allow the "shifty" working classes to go about their lives without undue outside interference. Many individuals no doubt fell short of the ideal in aspects of their lives, but the aspiration to be respectable could still be a powerful one. The ideal itself was far from being set in stone. Public discourses on respectability, especially where they were unduly influenced by moral pressure groups, may mislead the modern investigator. Betting and gambling, which were condemned by moral reformers and strict evangelicals of all classes, may, to other members of society, have been perfectly compatible with everyday respectable living. The area of common ground between moralists and those who bet and gambled—not always recognised at the time—may have been the recognition of the need for self-control and the preservation of financial independence.

While continuous personal narratives are elusive and the relationship between public discourses and cultural practices can be hard to fathom, respectability often appears to have had a deep cultural resonance at the individual and family level. Mary Ellen Clark, the daughter of a poorly paid stoker, was proud to call herself respectable and pointedly remarked that "Every family was not alright." Respectability for her family was associated with economic self-reliance and moral and physical self-control. She emphasised that parish relief and the workhouse were "not for the likes of families such as us" and she was keen to stress that "there were some wild ones but my family wasn't one of them." For her respectability was both an individual and family enterprise.[8]

For many contemporaries—and historians who have followed their lead—the Clark family was not representative of respectability among the Victorian or Edwardian lower classes as a whole. While bodies like the Charity Organisation Society recognised that members of the poorer sections of the working classes could be respectable, it was generally

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(1979): 336–53. Peter Bailey highlights respectability as a form of role play and seeks out (albeit with difficulty) examples of inconsistencies in working-class behaviour. This influential article has coloured much subsequent writing on respectability, e.g. Joyce, *Visions of the People*, 57, and has led to an emphasis on respectability's tactical, rather than ideological, character. Simon Cordery—*British Friendly Societies, 1750–1914* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 6, 99–103, 123—focuses on respectability as a deliberate defence mechanism against governmental interference in friendly society affairs, but judiciously avoids depicting respectability as simply a "veneer" intended to hoodwink middle-class observers.

8. M[asters] O[ral] H[istory] C[ollection], Mrs. Mary Ellen Clark, b[orn] 1883, transcript. Her father was certainly not a high earner. In 1900 gas stokers' wages were said to be "very low." See *Y[orkshire] H[erald]*, 24 February 1900.

thought that respectability within the working classes was located within an upper or elite stratum of workers —an "aristocracy of labour"—who had the economic means and corresponding mental outlook to be part of respectable society.[9] The fact that a proportion of the moral commentators who subscribed to this opinion were themselves from working-class ranks helped to make this "narrow" interpretation of the incidence of respectability compelling. Cases of respectability further down the social scale were consequently to be accounted for in terms of self-interest (the need for employment or charity), indoctrination or emulation of superior working-class or middle-class role models. The opinion that respectability had a limited social constituency among the working classes was applicable to women as well as men. The broad mass of housewives, far from aspiring to respectability, were depicted as having poor housewifery skills and little house pride.[10] To the extent that later Victorian workers were themselves inclined to a broader interpretation, seeing respectability as much more a universal imperative which they sought to subscribe to, this was perhaps an indication of just how "low" or different their standards and expectations were.[11]

In terms of the historiography, the view that respectability had a narrow social constituency has long seemed attractive both in terms of explanatory power and in the light of the historical evidence. For Marxist historians a "labour aristocracy," was a convenient device to explain why

9. For an example of contemporary usage of this phrase see G. J. Cayley's lecture at the York Institute of Popular Science and Literature, *Y[ork] H[erald]*, 6 February 1858. [Note: the name of the *York Herald* changed to *Yorkshire Herald* from 1890.] The discourse of the deserving and undeserving poor was long-standing and was applied to early nineteenth-century York paupers—see Sandra Lee Cummings, "Evangelicals in York: The Public Activities of a Group of Leading Churchmen, *c*. 1771–1865" (M. Phil, University of York, 1989), 175–76.

10. P. Stearns, "Working Class Women in Britain, 1890–1914," 102–4, in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, ed. M. Vicinus (London: Indiana University Press, 1972), 100–120. In commenting on contemporary opinions, Stearns draws attention to the fact that the failure to practise good housewifery skills particularly applied to those working-class women who were firmly working class but noticeably above the poverty line.

11. Elizabeth Roberts writes of "an overwhelming devotion to respectability" on the part of the working classes (at least in the geographical areas she studied) which influenced even the minority of "roughs." See her article "The Family," in *The Working Class in England, 1875–1914*, ed. J. Benson (Beckenham: Croom Helm, 1985), 4. See also Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, 92–93.

Victorian Britain had no proletarian revolution.[12] Other historians, while rejecting crude notions of middle-class cultural incorporation, indoctrination or even intimidation, have argued that the fact that a section of better-off workers (artisans) shared with the middle classes the language—if not altogether the same interpretation—of respectability was an important reason for the stabilisation of Victorian society from the time of the Great Exhibition onwards and the securing of a middle-class cultural hegemony.[13] Evidence that could be used in support of such an interpretation was, and is, not hard to find. Locally, as early as June 1848, more than 4,000 citizens of York petitioned Parliament to extend the franchise to "the more independent of the working classes."[14] Although which workers were being referred to in the petition is in fact open to interpretation, they could easily be cast as artisans.

For contemporaries, toying with the idea of extending the franchise to men at this social level, the rhetoric of the respectable and self-improving artisan was reassuring. Artisans, or at least a significant proportion of them, were portrayed as in the vanguard of the crusade to reform working-

12. The historian E. J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), 85, 272, identifies the characteristics of "a smallish minority," formed from the ranks of skilled workers, who represented an identifiable labour aristocracy that was more respectable than the mass of workers. See also the later study by John Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution: Early Industrial Capitalism in Three English Towns* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974). Foster similarly focuses on a labour aristocracy and its assimilation or isolation by the bourgeoisie in the interests of mid nineteenth-century societal stabilisation.

13. Geoffrey Crossick, *An Artisan Elite in Victorian Society* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), recognises the self-generated nature of much artisanal respectability but, nevertheless, argues (on p. 151) that "Elements in the value system were subscribed to by both sides of a middle class and labour-aristocrat consensus." His artisan elite was a skilled stratum largely separated economically, socially and culturally from workers below it. Douglas Reid, taking a similar approach, points to the emergence in mid nineteenth-century Birmingham of an "artisan reforming tradition"—the "prime movers" of which were highly skilled artisans—which was committed to the reform of popular leisure. See D. A. Reid, "Labour, Leisure and Politics in Birmingham, *c*. 1800–1875" (D. Phil thesis, University of Birmingham, 1985), 167.

14. Fifty-Sixth Report on Public Petitions, June 20, App. 1180, York Inhabitants, Extension of the Franchise. *Votes and Proceedings of the House of Commons*, Report of the Committee on Public Petitions 1847–48 (bound vol.), House of Lords Record Office (now Parliamentary Archives), HC/CL/JO/6263. Of course registered York Freemen, a proportion of whom should properly be regarded as "middle-class retailers," already had the vote.

class manners and create a responsible working-class citizenry. Rising incomes among such workers also seemed calculated to encourage, if not incorporation within the ranks of a supposedly hegemonic middle class, at least a spirit of cooperation with their social betters. Artisans might wish to assert a level of independence and dignity—and, in some cases, seek to improve the position of the working classes as a whole—but they were no threat to the society in which they increasingly had a stake. The equanimity with which the activities of York Co-operative Society were regarded was striking and revealing. Despite its ultimate wish to transform society into a community of independent producers, local dignities were happy to congratulate members on their efforts at self-help—at least until it became clear that the York society's success was undermining the position of more traditional small shopkeepers. Other working-class organisations, like the friendly societies, could show themselves willing to use respectability to prevent unwelcome interference in their affairs but, unlike in the early Victorian period, they were no longer regarded with suspicion. Reformist leaders of such organisations were, it seemed, to be distinguished from the mass of workers who, with their irreligious ways and attachment to a still barely reformed popular culture, were in need of redemption.[15] The apparent urgency of the task was such that the Salvation Army from the 1880s took their crusade to the heart of working-class

15. Robert Roberts, recalling his experiences as a child growing up in a Salford slum in the early years of the twentieth century, wrote that although "Very few people would, in fact, admit to not being Christians," it was nevertheless the case that "a drift towards secularism was already well under way." He also clearly saw the "upper working class" as more attached to organised religion than "the undermass" who "had defected generations earlier." See Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum: Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971), 138. Historians' attitudes generally have been influenced by such writings and contemporary, usually ecclesiastical, sources. S. Meacham, in *A Life Apart: The English Working Class, 1890–1914* (London, 1977), 16–17, maintains that "by 1880 ... religion [had] lost whatever slim hold it may have had upon the urban working class." Even Jeffrey Cox, a more sympathetic reviewer of working-class religiosity and a supporter of "diffusive Christianity," argues that in Lambeth, London, although the working classes "were not irreligious as a class ... religion may not have been very important for most individuals." See Jeffrey Cox, *The English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth, 1870–1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 104. J. N. Morris, researching another area of London, detects greater religiosity and "ethical self-restraint" among the labour aristocracy than the rest of the working classes. This is not far from Roberts' position. See J. N. Morris, *Religion and Urban Change: Croydon, 1840–1914* (Woodbridge, 1992), 13.

communities. Resistance to their message in York and elsewhere was—to Salvationists at least—confirmation that their mission to save souls was needed.[16]

Underlying the concept of a respectable elite of workers was a sense that economic and social differentiation was closely linked to cultural differentiation. Although some historians have detected a growing homogeneity among the working classes in the later nineteenth century, even members of the working classes seemed very aware that there were "natural" divisions and gradations within the working classes.[17] Contemporaries preferred the term "working classes" to "working class" for that reason. Any suggestion of a broader view of respectability—that workers *en masse* wished to be respectable—has to counter much contrary contemporary opinion. The widespread evidence of indifference to religion among the bulk of workers is particularly challenging because the morality that was central to respectability was strongly intertwined with religious belief. If respectability, for example, was "evangelicalism secularised," there was the problem of explaining how evangelicalism impacted on the working classes.[18] Sunday schools, however popular, hardly seem—or seemed—to provide the complete explanation. There is

16. See R. Hawkshaw, *York Salvation Army, 1881–1981* (York: York Salvation Army Corps no. 201, 1981).

17. See M. Miles and A. Savage, *The Remaking of the British Working Class, 1840–1940* (London: Routledge, 1994), chap. 2. Taking a longer period than the present study, on p. 21 they point to "declining differentiation within the working class." For York, specifically, R. I. Hills, in *The Inevitable March of Labour? Electoral Politics in York, 1900–1914*, Borthwick Paper no. 89 (York: University of York. 1996), 3, reaches a similar conclusion and refers to the "mounting homogeneity within the working class." As with Miles and Savage, he supports his contention by using marriage data to consider intra- and inter-social class mobility (see table and text, 4–5). On the tendency towards deskilling as a factor, see the summary of some of the historiography in A. J. McIvor, *A History of Work in Britain, 1880–1950* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 53–56. Whether or not such a process was taking place there is no denying that workers, as well as other classes, continued to detect differences within the working classes. "Biddy" Carrall, b. 1892, refers to the "grades" within the York working classes, See Miss Ethel "Biddy" Carrall, MOHC, transcript.

18. G. M. Young, *Portrait of an Age: Victorian England*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 5. On the impact of evangelicalism on Victorian values see also Ben Wilson, *The Making of Victorian Values: Decency and Dissent in Britain, 1789–1837* (New York: Penguin Press, 2007), ix–x. Evangelicalism cannot simply be ignored, since, as Sandra Cumming makes clear, Evangelicals emphasised personal responsibility, good character and the importance of family for all social groups. See Cumming, "Evangelicals in York," 175–77.

also the problem of explaining why poorer workers might wish to be respectable since they lacked the economic and occupational status of more skilled workers and could not easily (if at all) aspire to a domesticity based on a comfortable home with the dutiful wife at home looking after the children.

Even where historians, such as Elizabeth Roberts, have shown themselves willing to embrace the notion that the mass of workers genuinely aspired to respectability, viable explanations to account for this seem to be largely absent and there has been a tendency to cast respectability among the poorer classes as amounting to little more than the wearing of half-decent clothing and a willingness to burnish the front doorstep.[19] Why, however, the poor should wish to practise even this kind of token respectability seems far from clear. One recognised authority on the subject of respectability, the historian F. M. L. Thompson, while believing that working-class respectability was both significant and widespread, has given few clues as to its origins and reasons for success, and ominously has emphasised the relativity of respectability, with the (very) poor "clinging to respectability according to their own lights."[20] For him there remained "a superior working class world" which represented a more rigorous brand of respectability than was to be found among the generality of the working classes.[21] He does, however, also point out that, although the middle classes used respectability to build identity, respectability was not their creation.[22] His contention that respectability

19. G. Best, in *Mid-Victorian Britain, 1851–75* (London: Fontana Press, 1985), 286, encourages such an interpretation when he states that "In the lower social strata it [respectability] did not cost much" (cost being not merely a monetary matter). Yet he qualifies this statement later in the same paragraph by pointing out how even modest displays of respectability required considerable self-discipline. Elizabeth Roberts, in *A Woman's Place* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), has little to say about the origins of respectability. On p. 14 she briefly points to the Bible, the Pauline tradition, work discipline and Methodism, while on p. 39 she is unsure whether domestic ideology, as practised by female workers, had working-class or middle-class roots.

20. See F. M. L. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society* (London: Fontana Press, 1988), 199–200, 353, where he makes it clear that the great majority of workers practised respectability; indeed, on p. 200 he suggests that 70-90 per cent of the Victorian working classes came to be respectable. On the origins of respectability Thompson simply refers on p. 355 to "a bundle of self-generated habits and values derived from past customs and present responses to living and working conditions." For the quote about the poor and respectability, see p. 354.

21. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society*, 354.

22. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society*, 355.

among the working classes was neither imitative nor imposed is a further reminder of the shift in the historiography away from the notion of middle-class cultural coherence, supremacy and "social control." Society and the different social levels were too fragmented for that to be the case.[23] Explanations that assign to the middle classes the prime responsibility for the promotion of respectability may in any case be too wedded to the idea of culture as an expression of class to fully acknowledge the development of a general cultural "climate" tied to a search for individual respect. Respectability, as Brian Harrison has pointed out in his seminal study of the temperance movement, was tied to a universal value system that could allow members of different social groups to work together in the common interest.[24]

Although the social control thesis—with its middle- and upper-class manipulators—long ago lost credibility, the greater regulation and the disciplinary effect of an industrialising society, which are often associated with the Victorian middle classes and the promotion of work discipline by factory employers, are still seen to have some relevance. "Orderliness," however, was perhaps as much a consequence of the rise of respectability as its cause. In York, at least, the police had an easy time winning the confidence of the great majority of citizens and the city had a reputation for being an orderly city well before the York police reached a stage of efficiency and proficiency.[25] Although Mary Ellen Clark's reference above to the workhouse may suggest that the New Poor Law of 1834 had achieved its aim of re-moralising the working classes, it is best to avoid the unwarranted assumption that the poor were forced to be respectable out of loathing for the post 1834 poor law regime. While the workhouse was disliked because it represented loss of liberty, the inability to maintain oneself (and, where applicable, one's family), family breakup and an attack on respectability (not least because, for reasons of economy and practicality, those who had lived hitherto blameless lives could be housed alongside the truly disreputable), it was only one ingredient of workers' individual and collective cultural history, experience and memory.[26]

23. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society*, 360.
24. B. Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians*, 2nd ed. (Keele: Keele University Press, 1994), 28. Interestingly, his archetypal respectable working man (p. 27) looks as though he would have qualified as a full-blown member of the "labour aristocracy."
25. R. Smith, *Police Reform in Early Victorian York, 1835–1856*, Borthwick Paper no. 73 (York: University of York, 1988), 26, 36.
26. Elizabeth Hurren and Steve King, in their study of pauper burials, warn against seeing the new poor law as marking "any fundamental and vigorous discontinuity"

Feelings of self-respect were not a sudden "invention" of the Victorian period and may have been accentuated by the cultural shift in the late eighteenth century away from "corporate" understandings of identity towards those based on the "uniqueness" of the individual self and the centrality of the personal narrative.[27]

Self-help, one of the axioms of the Victorian age, reflected the conceptual and cultural move towards a more individualist society in which individuals were often freer than in the past to make their own decisions and have a sense of their own agency and responsibility. According to Mary Poovey "disciplinary individualism" became, in the Victorian period, "the normative model of agency" for most Victorians.[28] By the 1860s individuals were being generally seen as "responsible (economic and moral) agents" who governed and managed (self-regulated) themselves.[29] Opposition to the poor law in York and elsewhere may have been accentuated by this kind of "reconceptualisation of the social domain," but, for workers, the issue was more to do with its perceived harshness and frontal assault on the liberties, individual rights and dignity of the poor.[30] Opposition was, in any case, part of a wider and more deeply rooted, though uneven, mobilisation by members of the working classes which took many different forms, overtly political and otherwise. The 1830s and 1840s, which, significantly, witnessed a considerable rise in the popularity of friendly societies, certainly was a time of working-class agitation and resentment at attacks on their respectability and status in society. Remarkable was the vigour with which York freemen defended

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in poor people's attitudes. See Elizabeth Hurren and Steve King, "'Begging for a Burial': Form, Function and Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Pauper Burial," *Social History* 30, no. 3 (August 2005): 323–24.

27. See D. Wahrman, *The Making of Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth Century England* (London: Yale University Press, 2004), chap. 7. He dates the cultural shift to the late eighteenth century.

28. Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830–1864* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 111.

29. Poovey, *Making a Social Body*, 22.

30. Poovey, *Making a Social Body*, 22. Also see p. 107 on the intentions behind the New Poor Law. The latter "forced the poor to discipline themselves so that they could rise from an impoverished and dehumanized aggregate to a state of free—that is, self-disciplined—market agency." The new workhouses ("bastilles") represented family break-up, the sale of possessions and the loss of individuality—see Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), 267–68. The sale of possessions had implications for personal and group identity.

their franchise rights during the Reform Bill crisis of 1830–32.[31] They were ultimately defending their individual rights rather than corporate privileges, although it could be hard to separate the one from the other. The York Temperance [Teetotal] Society of 1836, which was born at the height of the unrest against the New Poor Law, preached a message of individual responsibility, and soon supplanted the existing paternalistic "Moderation" temperance society. Respectability among workers was, in part at least, an expression of worker agency and a growing desire for cultural autonomy which was more broadly based than any radical subculture.[32] Health of Towns Associations of the 1840s, which appeared in York and other towns, failed to gain more working-class support partly because they were the propagandist tools of sanitary reformers rather than an expression of popular feeling.[33] York friendly societies of the 1830s and 1840s, which engaged in genuine as well as calculative expressions of loyalty to the State, sought honorary members from a higher social position as a boost to their income and status but had no intention of allowing them control over the societies. For friendly society members there was a tension between self-help, relying on individual action, and collective self-help which might be necessary but which could mistakenly be interpreted as harking back to an older form of social relations. Trade unions, similarly, had to reconcile the individualism of the free agent with the necessity for collective self-defence. Socialism failed to appeal in the

31. The threat to the freemen's vote is briefly discussed in A. J. Peacock, George Hudson, 1800–1871: *The Railway King*, vol. 1 (York: A. J. Peacock, 1988), 14–15.
32. On respectability within a radical sub-culture, see T. R. Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism in Mid-Victorian England* (London: Croom Helm, 1976).
33. The prime mover of the York Working Men's Health of Towns Association was Thomas Laycock M. D. who had written the local Health of Towns Report, although William White, a well-known York chemist, was the first secretary. Those local working men who did lend the Association support may have done so less out of concern for public health, which was often poorly understood at the time, than because Laycock was prepared to incur the wrath of George "Railway King" Hudson. Hudson won a series of elections for the local Tories in the 1840s—partly by means of bribery and intimidation—and, especially as Lord Mayor, represented the "establishment" at that period. On the York Health of Towns organisation, see *Y[orkshire] G[azette]*, 1 May 1847, YH 1 May 1847 and A. J. Peacock, "George Leeman and York Politics, 1833–1880," 242 and 253 n. 54, in *York, 1831–1981: 150 Years of Scientific Endeavour and Social Change*, ed. by C. H. Feinstein (York: William Sessions, 1981), 234–54. On the general public apathy and ignorance surrounding the public health agitation in the later 1840s, see C. H. Hume, "The Public Heath Movement," in *Popular Movements, c. 1830–1850*, ed. by J. T. Ward (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1970), 183–200, esp. 197.

late-Victorian and Edwardian period less because of strategic failures than the fact that working men, like other members of society, valued the self and family above community. Mutualism was often individualism mediated by circumstances. Individualism expressed through competitiveness may have been muted inside the workplace for compelling economic reasons, but was often endemic within the neighbourhood—even expressing itself in competition between neighbours over household goods and standards of housewifery.[34]

The present examination of respectability among York workers seeks to understand respectability as a lived cultural experience that shaped individual and collective worker identities. Specifically, the study addresses two fundamental questions. How widespread was respectability among the working classes? What were the characteristics of this respectability? Both questions can only be answered by relating the claims of respectability to the meanings and exigencies of working-class life and prevailing understandings of gender and other forms of cultural, economic and social categorisation. The social dimension to respectability means that there is a need not only to try to capture respectability as a personal universe of meaning, but also to investigate and understand how it was validated and brokered by family, street and neighbourhood. Only then can we begin to appreciate respectability as a "world view." The study consciously questions *a priori* assumptions about the role of class, occupation, gender and poverty in cultural formation.

It may be that any signs of growing homogeneity among workers in the late nineteenth century are to be explained more in terms of a developing cultural homogeneity centred on respectability, than a decline in the conditions of labour. It also seems reasonable to hypothesise that respectability was just as important to workers in terms of identity formation as it was to members of the middle classes (or other social

34. Defending the anti-competitive practice of "a fair day's work" in the workplace was primarily an act of individual self-defence. The desire to avoid "showing up" the older or less efficient worker (and thereby potentially increasing the numbers of the unemployed), made economic sense to the individual worker. Efficiency after all could be subjectively assessed and difficult to sustain, while employability was often associated with workers below 40 years of age. Ross McKibbin, though referring to a slightly later period, over-emphasises the idea of work-mates collectively seeking to look after each other as "workmates." See Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918–1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 131. For the rivalry between housewives as expressed in household possessions, see J. Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain, 1890–1960: Gender, Class and Ethnicity* (London: Routledge, 1994), 160-61.

groups). If particular members of the working classes may not have practised what they preached, and found it hard to live up to the ideals that respectability represented, this, too, was perhaps just as true of the middle classes. There is equally no reason to assume that respectability, in the hands of the poorer classes, necessarily had to be a paler and more circumscribed, or derivative, kind of respectability.

A re-assessment of the role and meaning of respectability in working-class life seems long overdue. Simon Cordery's and David Neave's work on friendly societies seems to show that such societies were not, as once thought, the exclusive preserve of better-off workers.[35] Callum Brown's investigation of religion in nineteenth-century Britain, reflecting a growing re-evaluation of working-class religiosity in the literature, raises fresh doubts about the alleged lack of morality and religion among the working classes of the period.[36] Detailed and often impressive studies of aspects of working-class life, such as motherhood, childhood and women's gossip, which take a more "history from the bottom up" approach, comment, too, on the practice of respectability even within poorer neighbourhoods.[37] Yet even where the widespread practice of respectability is detected, its nature and the cultural processes at work often seem to remain elusive. Anna

35. Simon Cordery, in *British Friendly Societies*, 68, claims that "the friendly society movement encompassed the broad range of working-class ... people." David Neave concludes that "in the rural East Riding ... a large proportion of labourers did belong to a friendly society." See D. Neave, *Mutual Aid in the Victorian Countryside, 1830–1914* (Hull: Hull University Press, 1991), 72. Neave, however (see p. 98), may exaggerate the mutual and collectivist aspects to working-class culture.

36. Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001), 195, refers to "the robustness of popular religiosity" from the 1750s to the 1950s. Hugh McLeod, although "struck by the degree to which Christianity was at least passively accepted by the great majority of the population and to which it helped to shape people's world-picture," nevertheless sees a religious crisis developing in the late nineteenth century as society headed in a more secular direction. See Hugh McLeod, *Religion and Society in England, 1850–1914* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 2 (quote) and, esp. chap. 4, for "the religious crisis." Ben Wilson, in *The Making of Victorian Values*, x, ignores the growing revisionist consensus and is happy to repeat the older view that the whole period from the 1850s onwards was a period of religious decline.

37. E. Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); A. Davin, *Growing Up Poor*; and M. Tebbutt, *Women's Talk? A Social History of "Gossip" in Working Class Neighbourhoods, 1880–1960* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995).

Davin, for example, has seemed far from clear as to what kind of respectability she was dealing with. For her:

> It implied some acceptance of bourgeois ways, even if reshaped to fit the possibilities of working class life. At the same time, it retained earlier overtones of artisan independence.[38]

The relevance of "bourgeois ways" or "artisan independence" to the poor, in particular, is not at all self-evident. The legacy of the older historiography is unmistakable.

In undertaking a detailed study of respectability within the contexts of everyday life, compromises inevitably have to be made in terms of the geographical area studied and the time frame undertaken. Whether or not the city of York is typical even of other provincial cities is a matter for further research, but the city is of manageable size and no less worthy of study than places more closely associated with industrialising Britain. Although long regarded as an economic backwater, York, by the late nineteenth century, was home to factory workers as well as small workshop producers and large numbers of domestic servants. As elsewhere, periodic rapid urbanisation had, by this period, contributed considerably to the health and environmental problems facing the City Council. While overcrowding was not a significant problem, York had slums which were said to be as bad as those in London.[39]

The decision to confine the discussion to roughly the period 1870–1914 owes something to the sources available, but also reflects the fact that, during this period, the debate about the place and role of the working classes within respectable society gained fresh impetus as the franchise was extended. The culture of respectability, whether or not it was seen as more closely associated with middle-class than working-class identity formation, was potentially well suited to a democratising society made up of autonomous, moral individuals.[40] Victorian social commentators in public discussions unambiguously linked respectability with claims to citizenship. To be respectable, and, even more crucially, to be seen as respectable, was not only desirable in itself but the mark of the moral and responsible citizen. As was made clear at the time of the Second Reform

38. Davin, *Growing Up Poor*, 70.
39. B. S. Rowntree, *Poverty, A Study of Town Life*, 4th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1910, repr. Garland, 1980), 158.
40. As Young explains, in *Portrait of an Age*, 22: "Like Roman citizenship, it [respectability] could be indefinitely extended, and every extension fortified the State."

Act (1867), only workers who met the test of respectability could expect to gain the franchise. Mr. W. D. Husband, the leader of the York Conservative Party, speaking at the numerously attended inaugural meeting of the York Working Men's Conservative Association, explained that the vote "was placed within the grasp of every working man by honest industry and frugal habits." In contrast, the franchise was "not for those who had no self-respect, and whose conduct was reckless." If Husband, partly with his audience in mind, was able to foresee a large proportion of working men qualifying for the vote, many of his contemporaries, whether representatives of middle-class or working-class constituencies, were less sanguine — certainly in the short term.

By 1914 the terms of debate were beginning to alter as the focus of attention gradually shifted away from an emphasis on personal responsibility and "character" towards more impersonal forces. A number of factors, including the extension of the role of the State (even into family life), undermined what has been described as "the moral self" and "the ideal of individual moral authority."[41] If people were bad, this, it was increasingly recognised, had more to do with the evil environment in which they lived than personal failings.[42] Concomitantly, to the extent that self-respect depended on the recognition of workers as full and equal citizens, great strides were being made. Locally, through voluntary activity like the York Workpeople's Hospital Fund and membership of bodies like the City Council, York Board of Guardians and the Board of York County Hospital, working men, through their own initiative, were becoming a recognised and equal part of civic and civil society. The movement in support of York County Hospital, in particular, was a good example of workers' desire for participation and independence and of their determination to share in the control of charitable organisations from

41. M. J. D. Roberts, *Making English Morals: Voluntary Association and Moral Reform in England, 1787–1886* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 286–87, is primarily interested in middle-class opinion and moral reform initiatives, but one could argue that there is no reason why the shift of opinion starting to occur around 1914 should have affected only the middle class.

42. Rowntree's *Poverty* study was a significant landmark in this shift in public opinion and probably directly influenced the attitudes of the York Medical Officer of Health and officials of bodies like the York branch of the Charity Organisation Society. The move away from individual responsibility has some parallel in the economic sphere as larger economic enterprises developed more "impersonal" forms of industrial relations and the State showed itself more willing to countenance and legitimise such arrangements.