White Rose Research Online

eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk
Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York

Deposited via The University of Leeds.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/115825/

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Book Section:**
Chase, M (2017) George Howell, the Webbs and the political culture of early labour history. In: Laybourn, K and Shepherd, J, (eds.) Labour and Working-Class Lives: Essays to Celebrate the Life and Work of Chris Wrigley. Manchester University Press, Manchester, pp. 13-30. ISBN: 978-1-7849-9527-0.

---

This is an author produced version of a chapter published in Labour and Working-Class Lives: Essays to Celebrate the Life and Work of Chris Wrigley. Uploaded in accordance with the publisher's self-archiving policy.

**Reuse**
Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**
If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

# George Howell, the Webbs and the political culture of early labour history

George Howell (1833-1910) was the epitome of a nineteenth-century autodidact, having received an indifferent education, largely part-time, that ended when he was twelve. Successively a ploughboy, apprentice shoemaker and from the age of twenty-two a bricklayer, he doggedly built a career in labour movement politics, first achieving to public prominence as secretary of the London Trades' Council in 1861-62. He established a reputation as an exceptionally energetic administrator while the secretary (1865-69) of the Reform League. Howell was also the League's only paid official. Subsequently he became secretary of the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress (1871-75), in which capacity he was closely involved in discussions around the 1871 and 1876 Trade Union Acts. After three attempts to be elected to Parliament, he was finally successful for the north-east division of Bethnal Green in 1885, a seat he held as a 'Lib-Lab' for a decade.

His career was not without controversy, marked out almost from the start as politically astute but cautious and over-respectful of middle-class Liberalism. In itself that might not have fatally corroded his reputation; but historians, not least his only biographer Fred Lowenthal, have also emphasised that his was a career built on 'self-interest and diligence', never outgrowing 'the cautious radicalism of his early years'.[1] Howell's avowed stance as an 'Advanced Liberal' (the self-description he gave to *Dod's Parliamentary Companion* on arriving at Westminster) allegedly made him an anachronism, out of step with a new generation of working-class radicals, advancing under Fabian tutelage towards socialism.[2] The best that the Webbs ever wrote of him was that he was an expert manipulator.[3] Beatrice and Sydney's vicar-apostolic,

Royden Harrison, advanced the case against Howell further in the 1960s, arguing that Howell disregarded class loyalty and personal probity in pursuit of his political career.[4] There largely Howell's reputation rests, though a few commentators have been less condemnatory.[5] It is not the purpose of this chapter to unpick the case against, or rehabilitate, Howell. Instead it examines George Howell's historical writings and considers how far these reflected his political views and shaped his contemporary reputation. The chapter concludes by pondering what light their reception throws upon the subsequent historiography of labour.

Briefly, George Howell published three substantial historical works, all with leading publishers. *The Conflicts of Capital and Labour, Historically and Economically Considered, being a review of the Trade Unions of Great Britain, showing their origin, progress, constitution, and objects in their political, social economical and industrial aspects*, was published by Chatto & Windus in 1878. In 1891, midway through his parliamentary career, *Trade Unionism New and Old* was issued by Methuen. Finally in retirement Howell wrote the two-volume *Labour Legislation, Labour Movements and Labour Leader*s, published by Fisher Unwin in 1902. Although a prolific author, George Howell wrote only two other volumes, both legal textbooks, one of which was co-authored.[6] This suggests that Howell regarded his work as a historian as particularly significant. Reinforcing that sense, his prolific writing for serial publication included a preponderance of other historical work, including a 'History of Factory Legislation' and 'A Century of Social and Industrial Legislation'.[7] Howell was also the first biographer of Ernest Jones, the leader of the Chartist movement in its later stages and subsequently a prominent radical liberal, work that was serialised in 1898 by the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*. In addition he

wrote a substantial (but still substantially unfinished at his death) history of the London Working Men's Association.[8]

The extent of Howell's emotional investment in his historical writing is evident in his diaries and unpublished autobiography. He repeatedly fussed over the progress of each project, negotiations with publishers, and reactions to his work once published. To give just one example: his diary for the months February-May 1902 charts the progress of *Labour Legislation,* from the moment the advanced copy arrived from the printer ('delivered by post at $10^{\underline{40}}$' he recorded in a diary entry written twenty minutes later on 22 February). Howell dissected each review, for example from the *Daily Chronicle* (which claimed he misspelled 'Tolpuddle'), the *Atheneum* ('good, but just a little carping'), the *Daily News* ('excellent in tone and treatment, discriminating, yet most complimentary') and the *Manchester Guardian* ('by an ignorant, and evidently spiteful writer. I think I could name him – a low vulgar brute – has always been'). That October, looking back on the sixty reviews published so far, Howell noted with quiet hyperbole: 'It has been, I think, the best reviewed book of the century'.[9]

In all *Labour Legislation* received sixty reviews within eight months of publication. It was no ephemeral publication, but comprised over 500 pages, over two volumes. It had been commissioned by Fisher Unwin, one of the leading serious publishers of Edwardian England, for 'The Reformer's Bookshelf', a series that included Samuel Morley's *Life of Cobden* and volumes by L. T. Hobhouse and H. W. Massingham (editor of the *Statesman*). A second edition was issued in 1905. Howell's earlier books were similarly weighty: *Trade Unionism New and Old* had been commissioned by Methuen to launch its 'Social Questions of Today' series (subsequent contributors included J. A. Hobson and G. J. Holyoake). *Conflicts of*

*Capital and Labour* appeared under the imprint of Chatto & Windus, a prestigious house whose reputation rested mainly on literary works (including such canonical Victorian authors as W. S. Gilbert, Ouida, Algernon Swinburne and Wilkie Collins). A further indication of contemporary perceptions of Howell's work as an authoritative historian was unwittingly provided by Beatrice Webb herself, in relating how whilst writing *The History of Trade Unionism*, she and Sidney visited the Bodleian Library in search of source material. They were received by Bodley's Librarian himself, 'with a discourtesy, not to say downright rudeness … He, finally, repelled our enquiries with the remark that we should find all we required in Howell's *Conflicts of Capital and Labour*!'[10]

What might it have been about Howell's 1878 volume that so impressed Bodley's Librarian? *Conflicts* was not the 'exceedingly turgid' commercial disaster Leventhal supposed.[11] It was a 500-odd page treatment of workers' organisations, commencing with the argument that they first emerged in Anglo-Saxon England as the growing complexity of urban societies rendered family and kinship (hitherto 'the natural foundation of all social relations') no longer an effective regulator of behaviour. Called frith-gilds, they established 'a mutual responsibility as close as that of the old, and a protection even more complete and thorough'.[12] From this, initially pagan, beginning emerged the religious, social and craft gilds of the Middle Ages. From the fifteenth century, craft gilds (Howell argued) were subject to growing internal stress. This he ascribed to three linked processes: first the escalating marketisation of trade; second, the growing tendency for journeymen to be excluded from the internal governance of their gild, and third journeymen's diminishing opportunity to become masters on their own account. In consequence, 'special fraternities' of journeymen began to emerge. 'The origin of the modern trade unions from the journeymen

fraternities may be inferred from many peculiar circumstances, as well as the striking similarity of many of their features in several important respects'. These 'peculiar circumstances', argued Howell, derived primarily from the decay of apprenticeship and the efforts of the State to arrest apprenticeship's decline, notably by the Statute of Artificers of 1563 ('the 5th of Elizabeth'). The 'striking familiarity of their features' was most obvious in the language and ritual of gilds and the early trade societies. Howell was unequivocal: trade unions were 'successors to the old gilds' and 'modern trade-unionism cannot be properly understood or rightly appreciated except by careful study of their early prototypes'.[13]

He would later argue in the fullest statement of his political philosophy that unions encapsulated the principle that 'regulation originated with the *governed* rather than with the governors … [E]arlier interference with labour was *by mutual consent and arrangement* in the old guilds'.[14] Indeed, in the history of labour the 'two great forces … constantly at work, mostly at variance' had been 'legislation and associative effort. The latter is perhaps the older of the two', Howell surmised.[15] Trade unions constituted the best compromise between anarchy and coercion. As John Saville long-ago summarised Howell's stance: 'society has only the choice between freedom of contract and coercive status, and any infringement of the former can only lead to the extension of the latter'.[16] Howell's historical perspective concerning the antiquity of associational activity was a riposte to the prevalent view that English common law upheld freedom of trade as a central and inherent principle. This, for example, was the argument forcibly made by Sir William Erle, the judge who had presided over the notorious Wolverhampton tin-plate workers' strike case in 1851 (ruling that non-violent tactics, peaceful picketing included, constituted a criminal conspiracy to restrain trade) and who also

controversially chaired the 1868 Royal Commission on Trades Unions.[17]

In the second and subsequent parts of *Conflicts* Howell traced the shifting allegiances of the State as it sought initially (in the interests of public order) to protect journeymen but then, increasingly, to uphold the freedom of employers to engage whatever workers they wished for lowest wages possible. Howell analysed the impact of this shift on various occupations, grouping them into three categories: 'trades subject to the Statute 5th of Elizabeth' (the Statute of Artificers, 1563), especially woollen industry workers, hatters, shipwrights and tailors); 'trades incorporated by charter' (hosiery and cutlery) and 'trades not under legal restrictions' (principally calico, silk and cotton). Howell then traced the evolution of statute law regarding the combination of workers, culminating 'after a contest of nearly one hundred years' in the final repeal of 5th Elizabeth in 1814. 'Political economists assert that labour is a commodity, and that it is governed by natural laws like any other commodity', Howell commented at this juncture, but 'in all other cases the price of commodities is fixed by the seller, not the buyer; why is this refused in the case of labour?'[18]

The central theme of *The Conflicts of Capital and Labour, Historically and Economically Considered* was the uneven and heavily contested evolution of common law and parliamentary statute, as they impacted on workers' capacity to determine the price of their labour: 'From 1349, the date of the Statute of Labourers, to 1824 [the repeal of the Combination Acts], a period of 475 years, all legislation affecting labour was in its essential character in restraint of freedom of contract, labour being fettered by regulation and the labourer denied the rights of association'. Furthermore, the 1824 legislation offered only brief respite. An

amending act the following year meant that for a further half-century, trade unions operated in a legal penumbra. As Justice Erle's judgment in the 1851 Wolverhampton tin-plate workers' case showed, trade union officers and members remained vulnerable to 'persecutions' (Howell's term): six men had been sent to prison on that occasion, their sentences upheld on appeal. The contemporary message was clear: any labour legislation that rested on coercion could be shown to rest on principles that had not only failed in the past but which had been productive only of social tension and antagonism:

> Repressive laws are ineffectual, as well as dangerous and oppressive; their effect is demoralising on the mind; men's ideas of right and wrong become confounded, until a sense of injustice brings about the worst evils of violence, even to ferocity.[19]

In addition to this central thesis, Howell interweaved into *Conflicts* separate chapter-length historical treatments of apprenticeship and technical education, piecework, hours of work and overtime, the federation of trade unions, conciliation and arbitration, co-operation and industrial partnership and friendly societies. His subsequent books on labour history refined and extended his historicised understanding of why trade unions had emerged; but mainly they concentrated on up-dating and filling-out the depiction and analysis of the contemporary labour movement. The historical section of the 1891 *Trade Unionism New and Old* was shorter than *Conflicts of Capital and Labour*, the bulk of the later work being devoted to analysing the new unionism of the 1880s. In *Labour Legislation* (1901) the historical treatment was broadened to depict social history more generally, while at the same time incorporating personal reminiscences by the author. Unlike the rest of his

historical output, however, *Labour Legislation's* two volumes were unreferenced and carried no bibliography. This was unfortunate for Howell's posthumous reputation, since the book was widely regarded, then and later, as a crowning achievement in the career of its almost septuagenarian author.

Howell's concept of trade unions 'as successors to the old gilds' is open to criticism on a number of grounds. He exaggerated the extent to which economic activity in medieval and early modern towns was subject to gild control. His account was largely unmindful of the mining and metals industries; and he asserted, rather than provided firm evidence for, the continuity of gilds and unions. However, his history was neither haphazardly assembled nor a romantic story of labour's resistance to capital. Throughout the first part of *Conflicts*, and in its introduction and bibliography, Howell warmly acknowledged as the source for his evidence and argument an 1870 publication of the Early English Text Society on the early English Gilds.[20] He was particularly indebted to an essay, 'On the History and Development of Gilds', contributed to the volume by the German political economist, Lujo Brentano, based on extensive research undertaken by the latter in Britain in 1868-9. Brentano was a widely acknowledged writer on trade unionism, in both Britain and Germany, and is an author in whom there has been a revival of interest in recent years.[21] An historicist, Brentano believed that the laws operating in and on society were to be discovered by historical investigation. His key German-language work on trade unionism (which developed a case study of the British experience at its heart) refers explicitly to '[a] historical law, that the dissolution of an old order will in the absence of constraint at all times necessarily call forth the same organization in the form of guilds among the victims of the consequent disorganisation'.[22] Trade unions, Brentano concluded were '[i]n their origins and functions the guilds of the

present day. Like the former guilds English trade unions are no more than organizations of self-help by those with interests in common, intervening whenever State action fails to meet their common needs either totally or in part'.[23]

The attractions of this line of argument for Howell is a point to which this study will presently return. Howell freely recognised, however, that at a number of points Brentano's research was refuted in the editorial apparatus supporting the reprinted texts, prefacing which the German's essay had appeared. The editor in question was Joshua Toulmin Smith, a leading proponent of the campaign against state centralisation in Victorian Britain. Toulmin Smith saw in Anglo-Saxon England the fount of English liberties, and 'local Self-Government' as a force to keep in check the incursion of the State upon those liberties.[24] On these points of debate Howell, while conceding his debt to Brentano, generally preferred Smith's interpretation. The extent to which the distinctive anti-centralisation doctrine propounded by Toulmin Smith influenced Howell is beyond the scope of the present study. However it can only have intensified Howell's advanced anti-Statist liberalism; as he commented in 1894, 'according to the new gospel of socialism … manhood is to be crushed out of humanity, and the State is to regulate the desires, attainments, and needs of all, individually and in concrete'.[25]

This nuanced use of Brentano was overlooked by the Webbs who, in their *History of Trade Unionism*, dismissed George Howell as a historian of pre-industrial labour on the grounds that his work was 'a close paraphrase' of Brentano's essay, 'practically the whole of which appears, often in the same words, as Mr. Howell's own'. In the Webb's opinion, the only value of Howell's work lay in it being a 'thoroughly practical exposition of the Trade Unionism of his own

school and time'. The implication was clear, as a historical study it was negligible. More recently, in the official biography of the Webbs, Howell's historical efforts were swatted aside as 'simply a plagiarism from Brentano'.[26]

The status of Howell's research profoundly mattered to the Webbs. Although his works were included in the bibliography of their 1898 *History of Trade Unionism*, they were in a real sense a significant rival to the Webbs' study. First, not only was *Conflicts* the most substantial study of trade union history to have appeared prior to their own, it too bore the authority of emanating from within the labour movement. Second, Howell's use of Brentano reinforced a critical point of interpretational difference. The Webbs sought to demarcate trade unions off from gilds, ideologically and chronologically. In their view the industrial revolution and the class society it engendered constituted a profound discontinuity with all that had gone before: 'We assert, indeed, with confidence that in no case did any Trade Union in the United Kingdom arise, either directly or indirectly, by descent, from a Craft Guild'.[27] Furthermore, Sidney and Beatrice Webb rested their definition of *trade union* on the principle of permanency – that is to say, trades' combinations and organisations of an earlier period had little if any claim on the attention of the labour historian. Institutional continuity through to contemporary trade unionism was crucial. These are important claims, the significance of which needs to be examined.

Howell, like Brentano before him, never went so far as to state that there was a direct or, as it were, 'genetic' descent linking trade unions and guilds. In this respect he stopped well short of George Unwin, writing in the early 1900s, as well as certain modern historians of trade unionism (E. P. Thompson and the present author for example), who have argued that clear examples of

continuity can be identified.[28] Long before the Webbs' set enduring parameters for subsequent trade union history with their insistence upon the principle of permanency, Howell himself had been clear that early trade unions were 'temporary' and that 'the first permanent trade union' was the Brief Institution, an organisation linking textile workers in the West Country and Yorkshire's West Riding at the turn of the eighteenth century.[29]

It is not the purpose of this chapter to adjudicate between the Beatrice and Sydney Webb, and Lujo Brentano and George Howell, schools of thought in the matter of historical accuracy. It is necessary, however, to register why this difference mattered. Howell, following Toulmin Smith and the Anti-Centralisation Union that he had founded, was subscribing to a refinement of the long-established popular notion of the Norman Yoke – a belief that a wide range of fundamental liberties were established under the Anglo-Saxons but then suppressed or severely curtailed by the 'alien' Norman invasion of 1066, to which also could be traced the institution of the aristocracy. Though politically most potent in the seventeenth century, the Norman Yoke was a long time dying. It remained a notable ingredient in the politics of early nineteenth-century radicalism and Chartism; and its subsequent decline was both uneven and has been exaggerated by historians.[30]

The Norman Yoke was precisely the kind of woolly, unscientific thinking that Fabian historians were intent on rooting out. For them, refuting this concept was more than an issue of historical accuracy. It had always been closely associated with anti-Statist positions, as part of a cumulative argument that the powers of the British State (and the frequency with which it intruded on the lives of its subjects) had progressively extended since the Conquest and needed to be reversed. The Fabian conception of the State was not

one where government governed lightly: there was a fundamental point of political difference here between the advanced Liberal George Howell and the socialists Sydney and Beatrice Webb. For Howell, trade unions served to stave off socialism and consolidate individualism. Trade unionism was a means – or rather *the means* – through which to realise liberal reform and social cohesion.

Howell even went so far as to deny British Conservatism's customary 'claim to a monopoly of the legislation connected with factory legislation.' Such laws, he argued, were the product of a natural national sentiment and in reality constituted,

> the outgrowth of a pre-existing state of things, and of previous enactments for the regulation of apprentices, wages, hours of labour, and methods of work, dating back to the reigns of Plantagenets and Tudors. These, again, were partly due to the old guild-system which in still earlier times governed trade, and regulated labour'.[31]

Endemic social unrest earlier in the nineteenth century provided an historical window, Howell thought, onto the fate of a society where trade unionist activity was barely tolerated, if at all. A similar interpretation had been specifically applied to the Chartist period by Brentano, though it is doubtful whether Howell (who did not read German) was aware of this.[32] Biographical accounts of Howell routinely note that he had been a Chartist, joining in 1848 a National Charter Association branch in the Somerset village where he worked for a time as an apprentice shoemaker. However, the significance of this phase in his life for his later career has never been teased out. 'No more than an adolescent fancy', Leventhal calls it.[33] Howell himself barely discussed it in his published work.[34] Lecturing in 1896 on the progress of the working classes during

Victoria's reign, he confined his coverage of Chartism to recommending Carlyle's essay of the same title and a comment that Disraeli's novel *Sybil* 'has always been a favourite of mine'.[35] It is clear that even in 1848 Howell had little sympathy for the politics of direct action and was drawn instead to the example of William Lovett and the London Working Men's Association (the historian of which he later aspired to be). Far more significant, however, was a Chartist-related episode from his childhood, virtually ignored by Leventhal.[36] In 1839-40 his family lived briefly in South Wales while his father Edwin worked as a stonemason on a reservoir in the Afon Lwyd valley. The Howells rented a house facing onto the Monmouthshire Canal between Pontnewynydd and Pontypool. From there on 4 November, the six-year old George Howell witnessed at first hand the march of ironworkers and miners out of Pontypool to join the ill-fated Newport Rising. Not only that, but the young carpenter George Shell, the most-widely lamented and subsequently celebrated of the Chartist rebels who died at Newport, was a close friend of the Howell family.[37] In the extensive drafts of his unpublished autobiography, George Howell left several accounts of this friendship. The earliest begins, Shell 'lodged with us, or in the same house, I forget which':

> He often used to take me on his knee at meal times and would dance me up and down as I sat astride of his foot. On the very morning before he left on his fatal expedition he kissed me tenderly as if I were his own … The long procession passed our door. I was taken out to see the men as they marched by … George Shell … stepped out of the ranks to kiss me and to shake hands with old friends and neighbours … On the following day as I came home from school I heard the news, for I saw George's brother (so I was told) crying and raving like a madman at the news of

> George's death. I cried too, many cried, it was an ill-starred day for many in that place.[38]

Subsequent versions of the autobiography omitted the reference to Shell living in the same house as the Howells, but all included a vivid account of how he had paused at their home as the march headed to Newport.[39] A whole instalment of Howell's biography of Ernest Jones was also centred on the incident.[40] Hardly less significantly, Howell believed his father was almost caught-up in the movement. 'Mother expected to find father in the procession, for some of the men were pressed into it unwillingly'. However Edwin Howell had not been able to find his way home across the hills because of thick fog. In no-less than five versions of his autobiography Howell recounted at length his memories of the Newport Rising, emphatically describing it as 'ill-considered, badly conceived, and recklessly planned', but also as 'the one great event which I can recollect'.[41] He cannot have been unaware (from his extensive reading in adult life as well as interest in the history of Chartism) of how Shell's death had met an outpouring of grief and poetic eulogy that extended beyond his native Pontypool. This episode was the root of Howell's lasting anxiety about (and antipathy to) the efficacy and consequences of any industrial protest that originated outside the disciplinary framework offered by trade unionism. As a member of the Reform League's executive in 1867, for example, he opposed the organisation of regular demonstrations in Trafalgar Square. He also regarded the Hyde Park demonstration of 6 May that year with such deep misgivings that he put in place financial arrangements to support his wife in the event of his arrest and imprisonment.[42]

While the Webbs regarded Chartism as part of the discredited 'revolutionary period' of labour history, they never denied its

importance or effaced its existence. This stemmed from their insistence that the industrial revolution changed everything. They were clear that trade unionism was solely the product of modern industrialisation. Its authority rested on its very modernity, and its probity on having evolved as labour's front line of defence against the depredations of industrial capitalism. For Howell, on the other hand, the authority of trade unionism derived in substantial part from its antiquity, and its probity from its having evolved out of institutions that had themselves emerged because of the moral imperative in early urban society to restore the functions of that most natural of social institutions, the family. In the broad sweep of labour history, seen through Howell's generous optic, Chartism was an irrelevant, temporary blip. It is very telling that in writing the history of the London Working Men's Association, Howell stalled in 1838, leaving it uncompleted from precisely the point that Chartism commenced. Trade unionism was therefore a force for social cohesion, a means through which to integrate workers into society. In adhering to this belief Howell was following closely the thought of the Christian socialist J. F. M. Ludlow, secretary to the 1870 Royal Commission on Friendly Societies and from 1874 the Chief Registrar of Friendly Societies. (Ludlow in turn was Brentano's main contact point with British intellectuals, and the German dedicated his essay 'On the history and development of gilds, and the origin of trade unions'.)[43] *The Progress of the Working Classes*, the highly influential labour history of the 1832 to 1867 period that Ludlow wrote with the Owenite socialist Lloyd Jones, offered such a detailed account of the progress of social cohesion achieved through working-class self-help, that Chartism virtually disappeared from view, appearing merely as 'a form of violence, [which] was a miserable failure'.[44]

So were trade unions a necessarily assertive response by labour to industrial revolution and the political establishment, as the Webbs argued? Or were they, as Howell passionately believed, part of the historic fabric of society, descended from economic institutions – the guilds – that had once harmoniously united employer and employed, and protected the interests of consumers through their role in apprenticeship training and product quality control? Beatrice and Sydney Webb's belief was that trade union interests were to be vigorously pursued, against an increasingly outdated form of political and economic authority. For Howell, by contrast, trade unions were to be patiently advanced, including through reasonable dialogue with employers who in time might be partners in economic enterprise. He conspicuously dedicated *Conflicts of Capital and Labour* to the woollen manufacturer, newspaper proprietor and Liberal MP, Samuel Morley, 'a large employer of labour, and one who has at all times taken the deepest interest in all questions appertaining to the welfare of the working classes'.[45] Diligence and dogged reasonableness were the qualities he esteemed most in any labour organisation. For example, 'by its quiet persistent action' he wrote of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, 'has done much to better the condition of railway employees'.[46] Similarly he characterised the achievement of the 1871 and 1876 Trade Union Acts as the outcome of 'constitutional and methodical' organisation. 'The public mind was educated by meetings, lectures, publications, annual congresses, deputations to ministers, and interviews with members of Parliament, and by debates, bills, and petitions'.[47]

There is no doubt that the medieval and early modern section of Howell's historical works stuck closely to Brentano's schema. But the extent to which they did was not so egregious that it prevented Brentano from cordially corresponding with Howell, counting him among 'meine Freunde' in his autobiography, or inviting him to

advise and attend a conference of the Verein für Sozialpolitik (Germany's economics association) of which he was a founder member.[48] The economic historian H. S. Foxwell (the indefatigable bibliomaniac who assembled both London University's Goldsmiths' and Harvard's Kress libraries) was another correspondent and warm admirer.[49] We should note, too, the extent to which his contemporaries accepted the essence of Howell and Brentano's argument: for example H. de Beltgens Gibbins, author of influential school textbooks, and Margaret Fothergill Robinson.[50] Arnold Toynbee was similarly indebted, though he inclined to view co-operative societies as the fullest heirs to the guild tradition, as were the economists William Ashley and Alfred and Mary Marshall.[51] Frederic Harrison, the leading Positivist and member of the 1867-9 Royal Commission on Trade Unions, declared *Conflicts of Capital and Labour* 'quite invaluable' and was instrumental in securing the publication of a second and updated edition in 1890.[52]

Nor, among those most sympathetic to trade unionism, was Howell alone in his interpretation of the early history of association. Even John Burnett, soon to become Labour Correspondent to the Board of Trade, though rejecting the proposition of a connection between guilds and trade unions, called for the extension of conciliation boards 'in the spirit of the old guilds … for the good of the trade at large', adding that 'the cultivation and development of the modern guild on these lines should be a task reciprocally undertaken by unions of masters and men'.[53] As early as 1861, J. M. Ludlow had argued that 'the trade society of our days is but the lop-sided representative of the old guild, its dwarfed but legal heir', also emphasising 'the fact of the trade societies' struggle, being … five centuries old'.[54] Howell himself may have initially been prompted to seek out Brentano's work on reading the winner of the Trades Union Congress's 1875 prize essay competition. This cited Brentano, albeit

without submitting his ideas to a detailed account or scrutiny.[55] The work of a young Leeds lawyer William Trant, the essay in turn helped promulgate Howell's thesis, firstly when an extended edition was published in 1884, and then through several United States editions published by the American Federation of Labor.[56] Samuel Gompers, founding president of the Federation, himself credited the 'clear-cut analysis of trade unionism' offered by the Brentano-Trant-Howell axis as having influenced his thinking more 'than any other economic dissertation with the exception of Professor Thorold Rogers' *Six Centuries of Work and Wages*'.[57]

It is therefore worth taking Howell seriously as a labour historian, for the insight this throws on contemporary labour politics, on the evolution of the historiography of British labour and, even, for its intrinsic merits as history. Modern scholarship has to a significant extent vindicated Brentano's and Howell's perspective on guilds' origins, influence and longevity.[58] The dismissal of pre-industrial labour associations by the Webbs has similarly been challenged. Edward Thompson called for 'the Webbian walling of off trade unionism proper from guild traditions' to be dismantled as early as 1968.[59] In 1978 the distinguished labour lawyer Otto Kahn-Freund offered the view that the customs and regulations around British trade unionism 'must be seen as a survival of the very deep-seated pre-capitalist guild spirit'.[60] However, it was only in 1981 that the path-breaking work of John Rule began dismantling the Webbian walls; and the publication of Thompson's own detailed work on the field had to wait until the appearance of his collection *Customs in Common* ten years later.[61]

John Rule especially has illuminated how, far beyond the so-called industrial revolution, there existed a profound sense among artisans of possessing a property in skill and, in consequence, a considerable

cleavage in labouring identities between 'skilled' and 'unskilled'. This cleavage is everywhere apparent in Howell's thinking. It for example reinforced the Junta's hostility to those trade unions that lay outside the amalgamated societies. Howell was a classic example of a workman who had 'pursued knowledge under difficulties'. He was impatient with those who would leap over the exacting sacrifices of self-help, and instead make demands for immediate concessions from employers and the State: 'sooner or later, if the claims put forward are reasonable and just, they will be granted by the Legislature'. By 1891, and the publication of his *Trade Unionism New and Old*, this attitude had crystallised into a considerable hostility to the New Unionism. Howell cheerfully acknowledged that almost anything he wrote would 'as a matter of course' be 'severely handled in the Socialist and New Unionist newspapers and publications'.[62] It is pertinent to note in this context that Brentano found the New Unionist-inspired strike wave of the 1880s reminiscent of Chartism.[63]

Effectively the Webbs' 1894 *History of Trade Unionism* was an extended footnote to the Fabian Manifesto of the previous year, *To Your Tents O Israel*, which had called for labour to disassociate from the Liberal Party.[64] The corpus of historical work by Howell was in turn an irresistible target, suspect not only factually but methodologically and politically as well. A critical evaluation of George Howell's not inconsiderable output as a labour historian therefore underlines that the writing of history was an important part of the cultural context in which the labour politics of the period were worked out. The initially positive reception of Howell's historical endeavours, and their subsequent demise, is explicable in the changing political culture of the labour movement in the late-nineteenth and early 20th century.

Acknowledgments

Chris Wrigley helped shape my thinking about the 'pre-history' of trade unionism when he was the very supportive editor of my contribution in 2000 to 'Studies in Labour History', the Society for the Study of Labour History's book series. This particular research on Howell was first presented to the conference 'Trade Unions in British History', held at the University of Leeds in May 2009. I am grateful to all who participated for their interest and encouragement. Most recently I have benefited from very helpfully comments on this chapter by Shirley Chase and Richard Whiting.

---

[1] F. M. Leventhal, 'Howell, George (1833-1910)', in Joyce Bellamy and John Saville (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography, Volume 2* (London: Macmillan, 1974), 187-95 (p. 193); F. M. Leventhal, *Respectable Radical: George Howell and Victorian Working Class Politics* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1971), p. 217; F. M. Leventhal, 'Howell, George (1833–1910)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2012 [http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/article/34025, accessed 13 Nov 2015].

[2] Michael Stenton and Stenton Lees (eds), *Who's Who of British Members of Parliament: Volume II, 1886-1918* (Hassocks: Harvester, 1978), p. 182.

[3] Sydney and Beatrice Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism* (London: Chiswick Press, 1898), p. 473.

[4] Royden Harrison, *Before the Socialists* (London: RKP, 1965), especially pp. 143-6 and 202-5. See also the same author's 'Practical, Capable Men', *New Reasoner* 6 (Autumn 1958), 105-19, especially pp. 111-15.

[5] A. D. Bell, 'Administration and finance of the Reform League, 1865–67', *International Review of Social History*, 10 (1965), 385–409, defends Howell from Harrison's charges, insisting that 'no evidence in the [Reform] League records suggests dishonesty on Howell's part' (p. 398). Mark Curthoys, *Governments, Labour, and the Law in Mid-Victorian Britain: The Trade Legislation of the 1870s* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004), pp. 8-10, 95-6, 157-9.

[6] George Howell, *A Handy-Book of the Labour Laws ... With introductions, notes and ... forms, for the use of workmen* (London: Macmillan, 1876); Herman Cohen and George Howell, *Trade Union Law and Cases: A Text Book Relating to Trade Unions and to Labour* (London: Sweet & Maxwell, 1901).

[7] Bishopsgate Institute, London: Howell Collection [hereafter HC] 6/69 'A History of Factory Legislation' (cuttings from *Social Notes*, 20 May-30 June 1881); HC 6/134 'A Century of Social and Industrial Legislation' (assembled from the Co-operative Wholesale Society *Annual*, 1894), see also HC 6/146 'Labour Legislation during the Queen's Reign' (unattributed press cuttings, 1897).

[8] HC 10/3/1, bound volume of cuttings, 'Ernest Jones, the Chartist: Poet and Orator, Patriot and Politician', from the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, January-October 1898. *A History of the Working Men's Association from 1836 to 1850* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Graham, [1970]), assembled by D. J. Rowe from the uncompleted manuscript and from some of Howell's articles in *Reynolds's Newspaper*.
[9] HC 5/1/5, Autobiography Vol. E, section L, entries for 22 February, 3, 16 and 23 March 1902; Entry for 'natal year Oct 5th 1901 to Oct 5th 1902'.
[10] Beatrice Webb, *Our Partnership*, edited by Barbara Drake and Margaret Cole (London: Longmans, 1948), p. 87.
[11] Leventhal, *Respectable Radical*, p. 196.
[12] *The Conflicts of Capital and Labour, Historically and Economically considered, being a review of the Trade Unions of Great Britain, showing their origin, progress, constitution, and objects in their political, social economical and industrial aspects* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1878), pp. 3,4.
[13] *Conflicts*, pp. 9-105, quotations from pp. 9, 73 and 79.
[14] George Howell, 'Liberty for Labour', in Thomas Mackay (ed.), *A Plea for Liberty: An Argument against Socialism and Socialistic Legislation* (Oxford: OUP, 1891), pp. 109, 111 (present author's emphases).
[15] Quotation from HC 6/152 'Industrial Progress by Legislation and Association', [unpublished?] MS (1900).
[16] John Saville, 'Unions and free labour: the background to the Taff Vale decision', in Asa Briggs and John Saville (eds), *Essays in Labour History* (London: Macmillan, 1960), p. 320.
[17] William Erle, *The Law Relating to Trade Unions* (London: Macmillan, 1869), pp. 1-55, 58-9, 73, 76-7; Curthoys, *Governments, Labour and the Law*, pp. 30-1, 83-5, 101-2.
[18] *Conflicts*, p. 113.
[19] HC 6/146, 'Legislation During the Queen's Reign' (1897), fol. 1, unattributed press cutting dated 25 May 1897; *Conflicts*, pp. 141 and 146.
[20] [Joshua] Toulmin Smith (ed.), *English Gilds. The Original Ordinances of more than One hundred Early English Gilds … from Original MSS. of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries. Edited, with notes, by the late Toulmin Smith … with an Introduction and Glossary, &c., by his daughter Lucy Toulmin Smith. And a Preliminary Essay in Five Parts, on the History and Development of Gilds, by Lujo Brentano* (London: Trübner, for the Early English Text Society, 1870).
[21] Brentano's essay was also issued as a free-standing pamphlet, *On the History and Development of Gilds, and the Origin of Trade-Unions* (London: Trübner, 1870). E. P. Hennock,' Lessons from England: Lujo Brentano on British Trade Unionism', *German History* 11/2 (April 1993), pp. 141-60. See also James J. Sheehan, *The Career of Lujo Brentano: A Study of Liberalism and Social Reform in Imperial Germany* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1966); Lawrence Goldman, 'Civil society in nineteenth-century Britain and Germany: J. M. Ludlow, Lujo Brentano, and the Labour Question' in José Harris, *Civil Society in British History: Ideas, Identities, Institutions*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) and James Thompson, 'The reception of Lujo Brentano's thought in Britain, 1870-1910', unpublished paper, University of Bristol archive depository - http://rose.bris.ac.uk/dspace/handle/1983/915 (accessed 3 May 2009).
[22] Brentano, *Die Arbeitergilden der Gegenwart* vol. 2 (Leipzig, 1872), p. 315, translated and quoted by Hennock, 'Lessons from England', p. 149.
[23] Brentano, *Arbeitergilden* vol. 2, p.326, translated and quoted by Hennock, 'Lessons from England', p.150.
[24] Joshua Toulmin Smith, *Local self-government un-mystified. A vindication of common sense, human nature, and practical improvement, against the manifesto of centralism put forth at the Social Science Association* (London: Stanford, 1857), p. 37. See also O. Anderson, 'The Political Uses of History in Mid

Nineteenth-Century England', *Past and Present*, 30 (1967), 87-99 and 'Smith, Joshua Toulmin (1816–1869)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, Oxford: OUP, 2004. 3 May 2009 <http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/article/25873>.

[25] 'Liberty for Labour', p. 139; see also *Conflicts*, p. ix.

[26] Webb, *History*, pp. x and 12; Royden J. Harrison, *The Life and Times of Sydney and Beatrice Webb, 1858-1905: The Formative Years* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 217-18.

[27] Webb, *History*, p. 14.

[28] George Unwin, 'A seventeenth-century trade union', *Economic Journal* 10 (September 1900), 394-403, and *Industrial Organization in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904); E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin, 1991); Malcolm Chase, *Early Trade Unionism: Fraternity, Skill and the Politics*, new edition (London: Breviary, 2012), pp. 2-53; Malcolm Chase, ' "A sort of Corporation (tho' without a charter)": the guild tradition and the emergence of British trade unionism', in Ian A. Gadd and Patrick Wallis (eds), *Guilds and Association in Europe, 900-1900* (London: University of London Centre for Metropolitan History, 2006), pp. 187-198.

[29] See for example the assemblage of undated and un-attributed cuttings from Howell's journalistic output, 'Trade Unionism' (1878) - HC 6/39, fol.4. For the Brief Institution see Adrian Randall, *Before the Luddites: Custom, Community and Machinery in the English Woollen Industry, 1776-1809* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 131-48.

[30] Chase, *Early Trade Unionism*, pp. 5, 176; Paul Readman, *Land and Nation in England: Patriotism, National Identity, and the Politics of Land, 1880-1914* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2008), pp. 138-42, 156-7.

[31] HC 6/69 'History of Factory Legislation', fol. 2.

[32] Lujo Brentano, 'Die Englische Chartistenbewegung', *Preussiche Jarbücher* 33 (1874), pp. 431-47 and 531-50. The first English-language study to discuss Brentano's interpretation of Chartism was by his pupil, Gerhart von Schulze-Gaevernitz, *Social Peace: a study of the Trade Union movement in England … translated by C. M. Wicksteed, and edited by G. Wallis* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1890).

[33] Leventhal, *Respectable Radical*, p. 7 and see also *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, p. 187 and the Howell entry, which closely mirrors Leventhal, in Joseph O. Baylen and Norbert J. Gossman (eds), *Biographical Dictionary of Modern British Radicals, Volume 3: 1870-1914, A-K* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1988), p. 463.

[34] The sole exception was a short article, 'Labour Politics, Policies and Parties', in *Reynolds's Newspaper* 4 June 1905.

[35] Unattributed cutting in HC 6/139.

[36] Leventhal, *Respectable Radical*, p.2.

[37] Colin Gibson, 'George Shell's letter revisited: some perspectives on its use at the Monmouthshire Chartist trials', *Gwent Local History* 116 (2014), 33-49; D. J. V. Jones, *The Last Rising: The Newport Insurrection of 1839* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), pp. 33, 97-8, 107-9, 155-6, 205; Malcolm Chase, *Chartism: A New History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 111, 113-14, 116-17, 120.

[38] HC 5/1/1, Volume A, 'Autobiography of a Toiler', fols 27-8. Though written in later life, Howell based this version of his life on transcripts of letters written to a friend in America, 1870-1875 (annotation on folio a). For a detailed analysis of Howell's memories of 1839 see Malcolm Chase, 'A new account of George Shell and the Newport Rising', forthcoming in the *Gwent local History Journal*, 177 (2016).

[39] HC 5/1/1, Volume A, 'From Ploughboy to Parliament. The Story of an Active, Arduous and Strenuous Life', fol. 15; HC 5/1/1, Volume A, 'Rough draft of Autobiography Birth to 1855', fols 8-10; HC 5/1/2, Volume B, 'Memoirs of a busy

life, 1896', fols 5-6, 10-13; HC 5/1/3, Volume C, 'Autobiography of a Toiler', fols 6-7.
[40] HC 10/3/1, 'Ernest Jones, the Chartist', chapter 18.
[41] HC 5/1/1, Volume A, 'Autobiography of a Toiler', fols. 27 and 28.
[42] Leventhal, *Respectable Radical*, pp. 89-90.
[43] Lawrence Goldman, 'Civil society in nineteenth-century Britain and Germany', pp. 101-13.
[44] J. M. Ludlow and Lloyd Jones, *Progress of the Working Class 1832-1867* (London: Strahan, 1867), p. 296, see also pp. 88, 98 and 294.
[45] *Conflicts*, p. v.
[46] *Trade Unionism, New and Old*, p. 138.
[47] *Conflicts*, p. 126.
[48] HC 1/27, Brentano to Howell, 25 May and 28 August 1890; HC 1/29/part 1, Brentano to Howell 15 August 1892; Lujo Brentano, *Mein leben im Kampf um die soziale Entwicklung Deutschlands* (Jena: Diderichs, 1931), p. 49.
[49] Foxwell was instrumental in organising a testimonial fund for Howell in 1904, and persuaded Campbell Bannerman to award him a Civil List pension in 1906, Leventhal, *Respectable Radical*, pp. 213-14, 254n22.
[50] Henry de Beltgens Gibbins, *The Industrial History of England* (London, 1890), p. 26, and see M. Epstein, 'Gibbins, Henry de Beltgens (1865–1907)', rev. H. C. G. Matthew, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/article/33384, accessed 13 Nov 2015]; Margaret Fothergill Robinson, *The Spirit of Association. Being some account of the gilds, friendly societies, co-operative movement, and trade unions of Great Britain* (London: Murray, 1913) and see obituary in *The Times* 7 March 1914.
[51] Arnold Toynbee, *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution in England* (London: Rivington, 1884), pp. 178, 222; William Ashley, *Surveys: Historic and Economic* (London: Longmans, 1900), p. 259; Alfred and M. P. Marshall, *Economics of Industry*, 3rd edn (London: Macmillan, 1885) and Thompson, 'The reception of Lujo Brentano's thought in Britain', pp. 26-30.
[52] HC 1/27, Harrison to Howell, 18 March 1890; George Howell, *The conflicts of capital and labour, historically and economically considered …* 2nd edn (London: Macmillan, 1890).
[53] John Burnett, 'Trade unions as a means of improving the conditions of labour, in J. Oliphant (ed.), *The claims of Labour* (Edinburgh: 1886), pp. 7-8, 36 (7-39). I owe this reference to Thompson, 'The reception of Lujo Brentano's thought in Britain', pp. 23-4.
[54] J. M. Ludlow, 'Trade Societies and the Social Science Association: Part First', *Macmillan's Magazine*, vol. 3, no. 16 (February 1861), p. 316, and 'Trade Societies and the Social Science Association: Part Second', p. 362.
[55] 'Ithuriel' [William Trant], *First Prize Essay on Trades Unions* (Glasgow: William Love, 1875) pp. 8 and 12.
[56] William Trant, *Trades Unions: their origin and objects, influence and efficacy* (London: Kegan Paul, 1884); *Trade unions: their origin and objects, influence, and efficacy* (New York: American Federation of Labor, 1888); *Trade unions: their origin and objects, influence, and efficacy*, 'sixth edition' (New York: American Federation of Labor, 1893).
[57] Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor* (New York: Dutton, 1957), pp. 174-5; cf Gompers' remark, 'thousands of copies have been distributed gratuitously', to Trant, 16 May 1889, reprinted in Stuart B. Kaufman, *Samuel Gompers Papers, Volume II* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), pp. 205-6.
[58] Steven A. Epstein. *Wage Labor and Guilds in Medieval Europe* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) and 'Craft Guilds in the Pre-Modern Economy: A Discussion', *Economic History Review* 61/1 (2008), 155-74; Derek

Keene, 'English urban guilds, c. 900-1300: the purposes and politics of association', in Gadd and Wallis (eds), *Guilds and Association in Europe,* pp. 3-26; Bo Gustafsson, 'The rise and economic behaviour of medieval craft guilds an economic-theoretical interpretation', *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 35/1 (1987), 1-40; Jan Lucassen et al, *The Return of the Guilds*, Supplement 16 of *International Review of Social History* volume 53 (2008). See also Antony Black, *Guilds and Civil Society in European Political thought from the Twelfth Century to the Present* (London: Methuen, 1984).

[59] Quoted in *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History* 17 (Autumn 1968), 20.

[60] Otto-Kahn-Freund, *Labour Relations: Heritage and Adjustment* (Oxford: British Academy, 1979), p. 41.

[61] John Rule, *The Experience of Labour in Eighteenth-century Industry* (London: Croom Helm, 1981); E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin, 1991).

[62] *Conflicts*, p. 146; HC 5/1/4, Autobiography vol. D (1860-96), L/xii and see almost identically worded comment in L/ix.

[63] Hennock, 'Lessons from England', p. 154.

[64] *A plan of campaign for labor: containing the substance of the Fabian manifesto entitled 'To your tents, O Israel!'* (London: Fabian Tract 40, 1894).