

Walter Licht. *Getting Work: Philadelphia, 1840-1950*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992. Pp. xiii, 317. Cloth, \$39.95.

In this monograph Walter Licht, labor historian at the University of Pennsylvania, explores the dynamics of seeking, getting, and losing employment in a major American city over a period of a century. Licht opens with a description of the nature of Philadelphia business and industry—product diversity; a variety of work sites, including factories, small manufacturers, artisan shops, sweatshops, and the putting out system; specialization in operations and products; and a preponderance of noncorporate small-to-medium-sized family-owned firms. He then traces the entrance of workers into the job market and the efficacy of various institutions in getting work—schools, unions, apprentice programs, employment bureaus, and help-wanted ads. Licht urges a revival of the apprenticeship system "on a massive scale" to meet present-day job-training needs. Educators may or may not be surprised to learn that industrial education served rather poorly as a source of training and placement in Philadelphia employment.

Chapter five on "Firms" presents sketches of the hiring patterns of twenty Philadelphia enterprises, including some well-known names—the John Wanamaker department stores, Stetson hats, the Baldwin Locomotive Works, and the Insurance Company of North America. Most had their origins between 1790 and 1850; fourteen still exist. Personnel arrangements went from the informal to the highly structured and unionized. While presenting interesting case studies and anecdotal information, this chapter somehow fails to support the rest of the book. By the author's own admission, the data on these firms "militate against generalizations" other than that Philadelphia hiring was generally quite unsystematic. In fairness to Licht, one can only go with the extant sources, and there are thousands of other businesses, many now extinct, for which little if any information exists.

The longest chapter, "The State," looks at local government as the city's largest employer and the highly politicized nature of this job market. This chapter could have been trimmed with no loss of its message; there is a long, somewhat irrelevant discussion of efficiency expert Frederick W. Taylor, the personnel reforms of Stetson and Wanamaker, and the antiunion activities of the Metal Manufacturer's Association of Philadelphia.

The author pauses frequently to focus on specific segments of the labor market—African Americans, women, and immigrant groups. Unsurprisingly, blacks fared the poorest in private and public employment opportunities until recent times.

The writing is workmanlike, though hardly compelling. Except for dramatic strikes, labor history often makes for heavy going, and *Getting Work* is no exception. Licht's research appears thorough, indeed exhaustive, and the reader does not escape here, with tedious recitations of statistics and survey results. At the very beginning of the book there are sketches of the lives of four real Philadelphia workers, but only a fleeting effort is made thereafter to integrate flesh-and-blood people into the picture.

Ironically, some of the book's strongest prose is in side comments. The introductory paragraph to the chapter on "Schools and Work" is a perceptive and witty statement on the "perpetual" crises of American education—the never-ending litany of reports on the failures of the schools. "Faced with recurring diagnoses, suggested cures, and confused debate, historians can only greet the latest best-selling jeremiad with both skepticism and bemusement." And the author sensibly points out how "people who are used to getting their way" have trouble understanding how often finding work hinges on membership in groups that have achieved power—whites, males, the educated, for example. ("If I made it, why can't everyone?")

As a teaching tool, this book could be assigned only in upper-level college labor and urban history or public policy courses. Survey instructors could also cull some of its major conclusions for lectures.

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