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The Narratives and Legacies of the Preston Lock-Out

Jack Southern

Abstract

This article examines some of the complex legacies of the Preston lock-out of 1853–1854. It primarily explores the aftermath of the lock-out, as well as the academic and popular memory of the dispute, framed largely around the narrative of millowner Henry Ashworth. It considers the influence of notions of ‘political economy’, and how the dispute was utilised as a malleable tale to caution against the apparent follies of trade unionism. It utilises the idea of dominant narratives to also explore the subsequent reputations of George Cowell and Mortimer Grimshaw, the most famous strike leaders. In doing so, it highlights the reputational aftermath of the strike and how it shaped their post-dispute careers. It also considers some of the less tangible results of the lock-out, such as the lessons learned and longer term and geographically disparate results.

A lock-out – the sole work of the master or masters, the grand *coup d'état* of the capitalist- is, according to its extent, a *paralytic stroke* inflicted upon trade and commerce. It is, in all respects, a declaration of war against society, which is fancied by some to consist of the rich and luxurious few, but which must everlastingly consist of the comparatively poor and hard-living many. It is a dragonnade of humble and peaceful homes. The rape of the Sabine mothers was hardly more ruthless, and certainly not more immoral. It is a moral massacre of innocents. More pitiless than sword or gun, it shrinks not from inflicting the worst horrors of a siege. “Famine!” is its watchword. It falls upon the helpless, and deliberately makes them houseless and hopeless.¹

So wrote George Potter in ‘Strikes and Lock-Outs, From The Workman’s Point Of View’, published in the *Contemporary Review* in August 1870. Potter, a carpenter and joiners’ trade union leader and founder of the *Bee-Hive*, a trade union newspaper, was a leading figure of the late Victorian Labour movement. A year after ‘Strikes and Lock-outs’ was published, he was elected president of the Trades Union Congress and chairman of its Parliamentary Committee. Like many of his contemporaries who emerged as ‘respectable’ union leaders, he was a radical Liberal who sought arbitration and conciliation rather

¹ G. Potter, ‘Strikes and lock-outs, from the workman’s point of view’, *Contemporary Review*, 15 (1870), 32–54.

than class warfare.² Later, he ran unsuccessfully as a Liberal candidate in Peterborough in 1874 and as 'Gladstonian and Labour' candidate in Preston in 1886. 'Strikes and Lock-Outs' is a combination of his ruminations on the nature of, and differences between, strikes and lock-outs. Potter wrote from first-hand experience as he became a leading figure during the London building trades disputes of 1859–1860. Their effect on him is clear in his visceral depiction of strikes and lock-outs quoted above. Stating that he originally intended to outline leading disputes in various trades up until contemporary times, Potter instead begins with what is framed almost as the epoch of the labour movement: the Preston strike of 1853. In an account he claimed would be verified by Thomas Mawdsley, Secretary of the Northern Association of Operative Cotton Spinners, he described the uniqueness of the event:

Since the great Preston lock-out in 1853, we have had neither strike nor lock-out extending over a whole town or district ... Strikes and lock-outs are, indeed, only too common in the cotton trade; but they are generally limited to one or more mills at a time, and, though disastrous as far as they go, are not seriously felt, nor deeply impressed upon the public mind, although sometimes of several months' duration.³

As well as highlighting the significance that Preston had to the trade union movement, Potter also reiterates the many complexities of the aftermath of a strike, in that industrial disputes, especially those that last for a significant period, do not simply 'end'.⁴ Even if they are somewhat good-natured, they create experiences that resonate amongst communities. They produce tangible and intangible results depending on success and failures: legacies, memories, both official and unofficial narratives, 'affect', as well as potentially social, political, and economic change.⁵ Often these are contested. By nature, industrial disputes involve multi-faceted and complex groups of actors, each with their own input, results, and reflections on the events that, to use Colfino's concept, create forms of 'memory', 'the ways in which people construct a sense of the past', that evolve to become forms of shared knowledge.⁶ The way this 'public memory', and various cognate terms are constructed, distributed, and contested is thus central to how people understand the past, as well as shaping the aftermath of events.⁷ At the 100th anniversary of the

² S. Coltham, 'George Potter, the Junta, and the Bee-Hive', *International Review of Social History* 9:3 (1964), 391–432.

³ Potter, 'Strikes and lock-outs', 41.

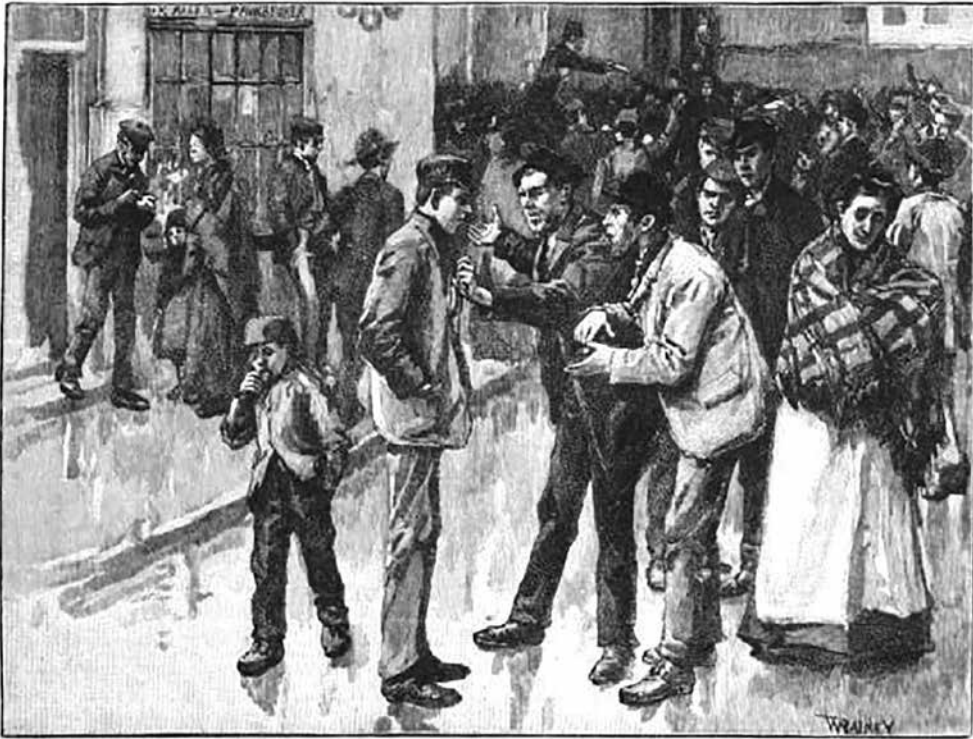
⁴ J. Winterton and R. Winterton, *Coal, crisis, and conflict: The 1984–85 miners' strike in Yorkshire* (Manchester, 1989).

⁵ 'Affect is generally understood as a kind of energy or intensity circulated among individuals by virtue of their contact with events, objects, and others': M. Houdek and K.R. Phillips, 'Public memory', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication* (2017).

⁶ A. Confino, 'Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method', *American Historical Review*, 102:5 (1997), 386–403.

⁷ For a detailed analysis of the development of 'public memory' as a concept, see Houdek and Phillips, 'Public memory'.

Figure 1: 'Scene during the Preston strike'



Source: *Cassell's History of England*, Vol. VI. *From the Death of Sir Robert Peel to the Illness of the Prince of Wales* (London, 1909), 157
https://www.gutenberg.org/files/61502/61502-h/61502-h.htm#Page_157.

lock-out, the *Manchester Guardian* remarked in an overwhelmingly negative piece that it 'was a lock-out rather than a strike but the distinction was not then so finely drawn', that was broken by 'imported raw labour' from Ireland who were 'drunken and filthy' and it was 'not a pleasant story' but one that had a 'memory' that 'lasted long'.⁸

This article attempts to interrogate some of the legacies of the strike and lock-out as a way of questioning how and why shared knowledge and public forms of memory could and did change. It is argued here that the Preston dispute was seen as significant to contemporary British society but was largely utilised as a cautionary tale of the follies of the working-class population, and this is reflected in the subsequent careers of the main actors involved, as well as in some of the more intangible legacies. Some elements of the dispute were symbolised and mythologised, and its meaning changed over time. It also

⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, 8 May 1954.

had an emotional resonance. To use Amato's notion, these emotions were 'embedded in unique social situations, institutions, and movements' situated in the times they took place.⁹ In May 1856 the *Manchester Guardian*, for example, remarked that Preston was 'the most disastrous strike ... which has left marks, still uneffaced, upon the factory workers, the shop keepers, and indeed we may say, the whole population of Preston'.¹⁰ Cassell's would include it in the 1909 edition of *History of England* as a key event in the reign of Victoria, to the extent that a sketch of a street scene during the strike, later purported to include Cowell and Grimshaw, was included as a plate (Figure 1).¹¹ The strike, they state, ended with the operatives 'deserting' the leaders, widespread 'destitution and pauperism' and the 'ruination' of shopkeepers and the town's economy. The event, a 'bitter controversy', 'suicidal contest', and 'a painful subject', they suggested 'would be long remembered'.¹² Yet this was not the case, and as historian and son of a Preston cotton merchant A.J.P. Taylor would argue, it was soon 'forgotten – not mentioned even by the Webbs'.¹³

The Dominant Narrative

Although the strike has maintained a significant presence in the local popular memory of Preston, how much of this is the result of the attention brought by Dutton and King's *'Ten per cent and no surrender': The Preston strike, 1853–1854* in the 1980s, and how much is due to a continued 'folk memory', is unclear.¹⁴

Certainly, it is peculiar how an event that was of such contemporary national interest faded from public memory so quickly, but attempts to downplay its significance began soon after it ended. Just two years after the strike, in an overwhelmingly negative piece, *Blackwood's Magazine* would declare that

The Preston Strike of 1853 began a few months after Russia had crossed the Pruth; and although it lasted about half a year, the public mind was too much occupied with Vienna negotiations and the impending war to pay much attention to a mere quarrel between a few thousands of work-people and their employers. The consequence was, that one of the most disastrous strikes ever witnessed in this country was brought to a close without having excited much more interest throughout the country than a serious railway accident, or a fatal coal-pit explosion.¹⁵

⁹ J. Amato, *Rethinking Home* (California, 2002), 77–97.

¹⁰ *Manchester Guardian*, 10 May 1856.

¹¹ J. Cassell, *Cassell's History of England*, Vol. VI. *From the Death of Sir Robert Peel to the Illness of the Prince of Wales* (London, 1909), 157.

¹² *Cassell's History of England*, 162.

¹³ A.J.P. Taylor, 'Trouble Oop at 'mill', *Times Literary Supplement*, September 1981.

¹⁴ H.I. Dutton and J.E. King, *'Ten per cent and no surrender': The Preston strike, 1853–1854* (Cambridge, 1981).

¹⁵ *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 79:483, 52.

Although this kind of framing is clearly a conscious effort to play down the significance of the event, its composition made it a difficult subject: a long but generally peaceful dispute in a parochial town, involving women and children, led by men acting respectably, which ended in defeat.¹⁶ Yet there is some evidence that it remained a significant date within cotton Lancashire. For example, the calendar of significant historical events given in the *Burnley Express* in October 1882 lists the commencement of the lock-out alongside the first cargo of timber entering Barrow docks in 1867, the ‘taking’ of Peking in 1860, and the Translation of Edward the Confessor.¹⁷

The lock-out enjoyed early popularisation amongst ‘educated’ classes as an exemplar in the field of political economy. It coincided with a resurgence of interest in the subject, driven by a spate of unrest in various trades and an intellectual shift towards the study of labour and capital as a scientific endeavour to better understand wealth generation over other concepts such as happiness and health. Waley would later remark on the prevalence of political economists’ arguments when discussing Preston, suggesting that ‘the rigid economical doctrine condemning strikes without condition or qualification is strenuously maintained’.¹⁸

John Stuart Mill’s *Principles* was published in 1848, and Nassau William Senior, the first Drummond Professor of political economy at Oxford, as well as Whig advisor, architect of the New Poor Law and staunch opponent of trade unionism, published his updated thoughts in his *Four Introductory Lectures* delivered before the University of Oxford in 1852. He also published the updated second, third, and fourth editions of his influential 1836 *An Outline of the Science of Political Economy* across the 1850s.¹⁹ So prominent were these debates, Charles Dickens would write in December 1854 in a letter to Charles Knight that

My satire is against those who see figures and averages, and nothing else—the representatives of the wickedest and most enormous vice of this time—the men who, through long years to come, will do more to damage the real useful truths of political economy than I could do (if I tried) in my whole life.²⁰

Yet such thinking became part of regular discourse amongst the elites. This can be seen in some of the correspondence between Lord Stanley, the Earl of Derby, and

¹⁶ See for example the discussions of the 1878 disputes such as S.O. Rose, ‘Respectable men, disorderly others: the language of gender and the Lancashire weavers’ strike of 1878 in Britain’, *Gender & History* 3 (1993), 382–97, and J.E. King, ‘“We Could Eat the Police!”: Popular Violence in the North Lancashire Cotton Strike of 1878’, *Victorian Studies* 28:3 (1985), 439–71.

¹⁷ *Burnley Express*, 12 October 1882.

¹⁸ J. Waley, ‘On Strikes and Combinations, with Reference to Wages and the Conditions of Labour’, *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* 30:1 (1867), 1–20.

¹⁹ N.W. Senior, *An Outline of the Science of Political Economy* (London, 1836).

²⁰ Letter to Charles Knight, December 30, 1854, *The Letters of Charles Dickens Vol. 1 (of 3), 1833–1856*, digital version, Project Gutenberg edition, 2008, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/25852/25852-h/25852-h.htm>, 350.

Benjamin Disraeli, who devoted lengthy sections of their letters to the strike and its aftermath as it was happening.²¹ Mill-owner Henry Ashworth was also heavily engaged in the debates of political economy. His 1854 *The Preston Strike: A Report into its causes and consequences*, quickly became the accepted and definitive narrative. For example, in 1860, the *Morning Post* advised its readers to read his pamphlet to understand the story.²² It was carefully crafted to reinforce and reiterate Ashworth's own fears over the potential repercussions that the strike could have if the operatives' ideas were allowed to spread. Ashworth took care with how he framed the dispute and sought advice from his friend Richard Cobden, as shown in their correspondence.²³

Ashworth was well acquainted with Preston.²⁴ He had supplied information to London newspapers during the spinners' strike of 1836–1837, and later published a pamphlet on it, likely researched and ghost-written by someone else.²⁵ He gave a paper to the Statistical Section of the British Association in September 1837, which established him as an authority on the matter, and through his close friendship with Cobden, was a fringe member of wider political economist circles as one of the leaders of the Anti-Corn Law League. When the laws were repealed in 1846, Ashworth gained more widespread respect as a thinker, even if he was overshadowed by Cobden.

Ashworth ran his mills as an archetypal 'paternalistic' mill community, providing housing, education and other amenities on the one hand, but exercising close and draconian control on the other. As such, he believed that conditions and wages were an agreement between employer and operatives to be amended in relation to trade conditions and labour supply. Trade unionism was thus a potential impingement on this agreement and restricted an employer's operating power. A violent strike at his family's mill in 1830 further 'embittered' him to the movement.²⁶ Preston was thus an issue that reinforced Ashworth's beliefs in the danger of success for the operatives, which would fundamentally upset the balance of power. Although in other arenas, he had been a proponent of arbitration, there could be no negotiations in Preston.

Ashworth's account of the dispute led to a swift reply from Mortimer Grimshaw, who offered to meet Ashworth at any time, anywhere to debate the strike. He declared that 'You display such a remarkable ignorance as to the real facts in connection with the Preston strike, that the most passive observer of that struggle, on reading YOUR TRASH, cannot fail to detect the many errors and misstatements that you have made.' Grimshaw

²¹ M.G. Wiebe et al (eds) *Benjamin Disraeli Letters: 1852–1856, Volume 6* <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3138/9781442671294.10> [accessed 8 September 2023], 278.

²² *Morning Post*, 11 July 1860.

²³ Lancashire Archives (hereafter LA) DDP/138/87a, Ashworth scrapbook.

²⁴ H. Ashworth, *The Preston Strike, an Enquiry Into Its Causes and Consequences: The Substance of which was Read Before the Statistical Section of the British Association, at Its Meeting, Held in Liverpool, September, 1854* (Manchester, 1854).

²⁵ R. Boyson, *The Ashworth Cotton Enterprise: the rise and fall of a family firm 1818–1880* (London, 1970), 150.

²⁶ Boyson, *Ashworth*, 148.

also claimed to have found ‘forty or fifty errors’ in Ashworth’s pamphlet.²⁷ Regardless, Ashworth’s account became canonical. The French consul in Liverpool, Joseph Hitier, developed his analysis of the strike for a continental audience and sought to reiterate the lasting impact that the morality of the striking operatives had on future disputes. He further utilised Preston as an example of the futility of strike action and used it as a cautionary tale,²⁸ in what *The Manchester Examiner* described as a transplanting of ‘French ideas to English soil.’²⁹ Hitier argued that it was

one of the most dangerous and noteworthy events England has experienced. By the number of participants, the ability of its leaders, and the sympathy it evoked from the working classes, this strike will be remembered in the annals of English history. Moreover, it especially commends itself to the serious consideration of the governments of all countries, given the nature of the workers’ demands and the upheaval they could introduce into their relations with employers.³⁰

When agitation for wage increases across cotton towns resurfaced between 1859 and 1861, coinciding with unrest over the same period amongst the London building trade, the Preston dispute and the town’s apparent ruination served a useful purpose for commentators to refer back to.³¹ The Padiham strike in 1859, and Colne strike in 1861 seemed to both have the potential of being ‘another Preston’, and commentators were quick to warn of the perils of industrial action. Padiham lasted for 29 weeks, witnessed 18 different districts donate to their strike fund, and resulted in an uneasy truce that split the operative unions in Blackburn, Accrington and Padiham. The Colne strike lasted 50 weeks, but was effectively broken by imported operatives, this time from Coventry, and partly organised by Florence Nightingale.³² In what was another bitter dispute, Dickens had visited Colne to survey the situation at the behest of the manufacturers. Like Preston, Colne became another example of how strikes resulted in severe damage to communities, and was immortalised in a lecture, creatively titled ‘The history of a mistake, being a tale of the Colne strike, 1860–1861 ...’ by Manchester educationalist and former Anti-Corn Law League stalwart, Dr John Watts.³³

The added moral and cautionary tone of discussions of the strike became more overt. The merchant turned jurist, economist, and statistician Leone Levi discussed the dispute

²⁷ *Preston Chronicle*, 28 October 1854.

²⁸ My thanks to Prof. Robert Poole for assistance with the translation. J. Hitier, ‘La grève de Preston’, *Revue des Deux Mondes* 12:2 (1857), 367–414. 393.

²⁹ *Preston Chronicle*, 5 December 1857.

³⁰ Hitier, ‘Preston’, 376.

³¹ J.A. Jowitt and A.J. McIvor (eds), *Employers and labour in the English textile industries, 1850–1939* (London, 1988), 28.

³² Nightingale wrote to manufacturers in Blackburn to arrange for agents to be sent to Coventry, at the time in the midst of a large-scale silk weavers strike. See *Glossop-dale Chronicle*, 28 July 1860.

³³ J. Watts, ‘The History of a Mistake, Being a Tale of the Colne Strike, 1860–1’, in Watts, *The Workman’s Bane & Antidote* (Manchester, 1861).

at length in *Annals of British Legislation*, quoting correspondence with Rev John Clay, the chaplain of Preston prison, who also later included it as a key event in his reminiscences published in 1861. Clay noted how ‘many a poor factory girl was drawn from the path of virtue to which in all probability she will never return’. Further emphasizing the apparent moral decay that the strike caused, he quoted one local story that further demonstrated the impact of the lock-out on the community:

Only a few days since, the body of a female child was accidentally discovered in a deep part of the Ribble, known as the “Stone Delph”, the mother of which, it was ascertained, is a young woman residing in the neighbourhood, previous to the strike an honest factory girl, but now living by prostitution. Still, a few such cases, melancholy as they are, do not give us an adequate view of the immoral results of the strike. We see its worst consequences in the spirit of enmity which has been kindled in the breasts of the working classes towards their employers; in the revival of well-nigh extinct jealousies; in the strengthened influence of pernicious prejudices; in the creation of new grudges.³⁴

Other works from the period largely served as anti-trade union pieces.³⁵ Samuel Smiles detailed how operatives returned to work broken, and that the famous rallying cry that turned the lock-out into a “‘Ten per cent” contest’ would never be used again, and as a result ‘every person had become so entirely disgusted with the term’.³⁶ Furthermore he declared that

Preston operatives rapidly gravitated towards absolute destitution, homes were broken up, furniture was sold to the very last stick, and women even disposed of their marriage rings to buy food for their children, then the union collapsed; the workpeople went back to their employment, but without the 10 per cent. All their sacrifices had been in vain, and the only results of their worse than fruitless heroism were broken hearts, ruined homes, and moral and physical desolation.³⁷

Similar arguments were made by others. John Watts declared that it ranked ‘amongst the Yorkshire collieries lock-out and engineering lock-out as an example of the detrimental effects of strikes and lock-outs, a ‘plague giant’ in need of a cure, and ultimately as a reason to be wary of the actions of trade societies and organisations.³⁸ Allegedly, even one of the leaders of the Preston dispute wrote a letter to the *Manchester Courier* decrying strike action in regard to the Colne strike of 1861:

³⁴ L. Levi, *Annals of British Legislation* (London, 1857), 102–4.

³⁵ See for example the discussion in Waley, ‘On Strikes and Combinations’.

³⁶ G. Price, *Combinations and Strikes: Their cost and results* (London, 1854), 22–30.

³⁷ S. Smiles, *Workmen’s earnings, strikes, and savings* (London, 1861), 126.

³⁸ J. Watts, *Trade Societies and Strikes: Their Good & Evil Influences on the Members of Trades’ Unions, and on Society at Large* (Manchester, 1860), 17–18.

I am sorry to learn that the operatives of Lancashire have turned out again. The folly of strikes, and the evils – nothing but evils, resulting from such a reckless course in former times, have taught the operatives no better way of getting rid of their grievances than by aggravating and increasing the causes which produce them.³⁹

There were attempts to revise the negative depiction of the lock-out. That it was seen as one of the ‘principal’ strikes of the 1850s–1860s, especially endeared it to the wider labour movement. The report of the Committee on Trades’ Societies ranked it alongside the Bradford woolcombers’ strike of 1825, the builders’ strike of 1835, the previous Preston strike of 1836–1837 and the Manchester strike of 1841 and engineers’ strike and lock-out of 1853.⁴⁰ When J.C. Fielden’s sketch of the history of the cotton industry was published in the *Cooperative Wholesale Annual* in 1887, he situated the dispute as part of the development of trade unionism in cotton. Linking the lock-out to the lineage of Chartism, he argued that it was a fundamental break from past attempts at organisation in the scope and scale of the dispute.⁴¹ Hogarth-Patterson would also frame the dispute in a similar way, which although usually resulting in ‘disastrous consequences’, served as the ‘origin’ of strikes undertaken by ‘purely labour’ groups ‘directed in no way to political purposes’.⁴² George Howell too sought to situate the strike as part of a wider movement, and defended it as a dispute over ‘nothing less than the right to combine, in the first place – a right which the employers exercised to the fullest extent, yet denied to the operatives’.⁴³

Bar some other less significant mentions, it was really within local histories that the strike remained relevant. However, it was framed as part of wider narratives linked to various ‘disastrous’ trade disputes. It continued to be an infrequent subject in local talks and lectures. One, delivered by a Mr Harrall

alluded to the memorable lockout of 1853–4 ... the operatives being compelled ultimately to resume work on the old terms. With regard to the last, though not the least, threatened lockout of 1876, every one present must, he was sure, be glad that it had been so nicely tided over, for strikes and lockout-outs, as would be seen, were neither beneficial to masters nor men (applause).⁴⁴

These same messages also continued in historical publications. Writing three years after the strike, Hardwick wrote that the strike merely proved what everyone knew,

³⁹ *Manchester Times*, 25 May 1861.

⁴⁰ ‘Report of the Committee of trades’ societies February 23, 1859’, *Transactions of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science*.

⁴¹ J.C. Fielden, ‘A Sketch of the British Cotton Industry’, *Co-operative Wholesale Annual for 1887* (Manchester, 1887), 322–32.

⁴² R.H Patterson, *The New Golden Age and Influence of the Precious Metals Upon the World* (London, 1882).

⁴³ G. Howell, *Labour Legislation, Labour Movements and Labour Leaders* (London, 1902), 108–9.

⁴⁴ *Preston Chronicle*, 2 December 1876.

that 'the strongest party in the end would win', but that 'No one really wins these struggles'.⁴⁵ The writer Henry Wordsworth Clemesha's 1912 *A History of Preston in Amounderness*, declared the strike the 'greatest and the most disastrous of the town's industrial disputes'.⁴⁶ Later historians would blame the dispute for Preston's lack of dominance in the cotton industry and the town's legacy of 'poor labour relations'.⁴⁷

The Reputation of the Leaders

The infamy of the dispute launched its figureheads to international fame. According to an unnamed contemporary, Whittle, Cowell and Grimshaw 'became the heroes of continental novels in consequence, and had their likenesses taken to illustrate the Parisian and other European metropolitan newspapers'.⁴⁸ Yet, within a short time, most of the leaders' reputations had been tarnished both in the eyes of the press that but also among sections of the working classes. *Blackwood's Magazine's* discussion of the strike from 1858 for example blamed the lock-out leaders for prolonging the dispute and termed them 'smooth-tongued demagogues' whilst the strike committee was 'an irresponsible body, composed of men who live by agitation'.⁴⁹

There were allegations of financial misdoings throughout the strike, but it was not until George Cooper made overt claims of widespread embezzlement that more attention was called to the matter.⁵⁰ Although Cooper was unable to support his claims, and they were likely false, the accusation continued to linger. Hardwick, just a few years after the dispute, gave a detailed analysis of the strike and the balance sheets of the employers and three operatives unions and questioned the accounting on all sides.⁵¹ Even from within the trade union movement, rumours of financial misuse continued. At a union meeting regarding a strike settlement in Darwen in 1884, 'a weaver in the course of a speech in which he detailed his experience of former strikes ... referred notably to a strike in 1853, and observed in regard to some Preston delegates who, though prior to the strike were as poor as any in the lowest parts of Darwen, afterwards set up business in large shops and public-houses, where they sold stuff which makes people mad and candidates for the asylum'.⁵² The notion was one that was a favourite of the *Preston Herald*, as a year later they repeated a similar claim: 'In the Great Preston strike of 1853–1854, which lasted nine months, the strikers had more

⁴⁵ C. Hardwick, *History of the Borough of Preston and its Environs: In the County of Lancaster* (Preston, 1857), 424.

⁴⁶ Clemesha, *History of Preston in Amounderness* (Manchester, 1912) 220.

⁴⁷ A. Hodge, *History of Preston* (Woodplumpton, 1981), 21; see also D. Hunt, *A History of Preston* (Lancaster, 2009), 214–20.

⁴⁸ E. Hopwood, *Lancashire Weaver's Story* (Manchester, 1969), 37.

⁴⁹ *Blackwood's*, 54.

⁵⁰ Dutton and King, 'Ten Per Cent', 190.

⁵¹ Hardwick, *Preston*. 421.

⁵² *Preston Herald*, 20 February 1884.

cash in hand at the conclusion than at the beginning of the strike'.⁵³ Regardless of the truth, the idea stuck, and in 1895, the *Cotton Factory Times*, a newspaper aimed at cotton operatives, remarked how

perhaps the best supported lockout that ever occurred was the well known one that occurred in Preston in the latter part of 1853 and the beginning of 1854. Although it lasted nine months, and the operatives had, as usual at that time, no funds worth mentioning to begin with, the spinners of the town had more money when the dispute was closed than they had when it began. The weavers and cardroom hands, however, fairly caught it, and plenty of those who went through it assert that it was their starving condition which really terminated the dispute. But instances where an organisation can finish up a fight with more money than what they began with, and all of it drawn from promiscuous collecting, are so rare that we question if there ever has been another beside the one mentioned.⁵⁴

Clemesha's 1912 history of Preston further embellished this and suggested that 'more than one of the "leaders of the people" at Preston, had – if reports be true – a luxurious, libertine time of it'.⁵⁵

How much these rumours influenced perceptions of the leaders is difficult to measure, but their reputations certainly diminished quickly. During the strike there was an attempt to undermine them in the local press by claiming that some of the leadership, namely Swinglehurst and Gallaher, were not 'themselves factory operatives'.⁵⁶ These accusations could not be levelled at Cowell and Grimshaw as both had established track records. Grimshaw had been involved in various disputes, and Cowell rose to prominence in the 'protracted' 1846 strike known locally as 'Old Hoppit's Tourneawt'.⁵⁷ Neither subsequently managed to escape the long-shadow of the dispute. An editorial in the *Manchester Guardian* in May 1860 commented on the attempts to form a county-wide weavers' union, of which there could not be 'the slightest objection' in the attempts to gain better wages, but offered one caveat concerning potential leaders, 'coupled with this the names of George Cowell, Mortimer Grimshaw ... men who make a living by agitation are naturally enamored of it – as soldiers of war and attorneys of litigation'.⁵⁸

George Cowell became a tea and coffee dealer on Ribbleton Lane,⁵⁹ and likely later ran a provision shop on Adelphi Street. He later moved to Manchester to work as a cloth-looker and 'worked tirelessly in the cause of teetotalism'⁶⁰ before he collapsed

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 11 July 1885.

⁵⁴ *Cotton Factory Times*, 25 November 1892.

⁵⁵ Clemesha, *Preston*, 220.

⁵⁶ *Preston Chronicle*, 5 November 1853.

⁵⁷ *Blackburn Standard*, 6 October 1883.

⁵⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, 10 May 1856.

⁵⁹ Dutton and King, 'Ten per cent', 206.

⁶⁰ *Lancaster Guardian*, 19 June 1880.

and later died on the way home from a temperance meeting.⁶¹ Initially he continued to be involved in public speaking as well as temperance. He was part of the attempts to organize female operatives in the Early Closing Movement alongside Swinglehurst in 1855. Yet, such had his public reputation faded, by 1857 when he questioned parliamentary candidate R.A. Cross over issues such as primogeniture in election hustings, the chairman of the meeting 'made some observations in reference ... to the once prominent position he occupied in the town'.⁶² Cowell had a resurgence in publicity in 1859, when he gave a lecture at the Social Science Conference where he outlined the origins and development of the lock-out, attributing it to a lack of sympathy from the masters and underpaid and underfed operatives, whilst also giving an array of reasons for its failure, such as the war in Russia.⁶³ Indeed in the same year, the *Preston Chronicle* would declare when discussing the agitation over the Reform Bill, that 'the Cowells and the Baxendales are listened to, though they are not as violent as were the Mitchells and Johnsons of the last generations', so it is likely he was still active locally if operating with a lower profile.⁶⁴ He had a close relationship with the nascent Chorley Weavers, where rumours abounded that he was in fact their secretary, which, perhaps as a reflection on his reputation, appeared controversial.⁶⁵ At times he appears to have acted as an unofficial 'deputy' for the society in trade meetings at least.⁶⁶ He was also involved in the attempts to set up a co-operative mill in Chorley around the same time.⁶⁷ Yet Cowell had effectively resisted making public statements regarding 'live' strikes or industrial action. Although his name was used by former lock-out colleagues, and thus still carried some authority amongst the attempts to form a county-wide cotton union, he largely stepped away from the front line of the movement after being poorly received by the weavers in Clitheroe during a dispute in the town.⁶⁸ He was attacked by one of the Clitheroe leaders, Wood, in a public meeting with claims that alongside Grimshaw, Rhodes and Matthew, the group had attempted to insert themselves into every dispute that had happened since Preston. The group response stated that 'all Lancashire knows that George Cowell has never made a speech since that time, requesting aid for any strike or struggle'.⁶⁹

Grimshaw's post-lock-out career is more eventful, and his trajectory to a mouthpiece for hire is perhaps the most intriguing of all the leaders. Dutton and King pinpoint his last known activity to Manchester in 1864 in a letter begging for funds, although he was active a short time after this point. They sympathetically lament the 'poacher turned

⁶¹ *Preston Chronicle*, 19 June 1880.

⁶² *Preston Chronicle*, 28 March 1857.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 25 September 1861.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 19 March 1859.

⁶⁵ *Preston Herald*, 21 March 1861.

⁶⁶ *Preston Chronicle*, 30 March 1861.

⁶⁷ *Preston Herald*, 2 March 1861.

⁶⁸ J.A. Jaffe, *Striking a Bargain: Work and Industrial Relations in England, 1815–1865* (Manchester, 2000), 233.

⁶⁹ *Preston Herald*, 30 March 1861.

(ill-paid) gamekeeper: such was the sad fate of the Thunderer of Lancashire'.⁷⁰ King's subsequent biography of Grimshaw equally presents a figure who 'was an enthusiast, whose judgement was sometimes overpowered by the warmth of his feelings and whose oratory appealed especially to women workers'.⁷¹ In the post-lock-out years, Grimshaw moved between and often tried to insert himself into various strikes and disputes. He quickly came to be regarded as someone who 'took an active part in Conservative politics and also in the prevention of strikes in the cotton trade in Lancashire'.⁷² He often paired with fellow Preston veterans Kinder Smith and John Matthew, and attempted to influence operatives in both the Padiham and Colne strikes, and later sought to shape attitudes towards the American Civil War.

The post-lock-out period started off fairly well for Grimshaw. With Ned Whittle, he continued trade-union-related activities around the Blackburn area. He gave lectures that encouraged the formation of a union with the ability to build reserves to resist employer encroachments on wages and rights. At a meeting at the end of May 1854, the pair were crucial to the founding of the official Blackburn Weavers' Association, of which Whittle became the first Secretary in June.⁷³ Yet, within months, Grimshaw was apparently poverty-stricken, blacklisted from working in cotton, and after a heated dispute with the Manchester School, unable to find venues or chairmen for his lectures.⁷⁴ He maintained a form of patronage from the late Chartist *People's Paper* which reported on his activities and openly defended him. In January 1855, he made a second of several appeals to the public for funds of one half penny per loom on account of his blacklisting in Great Harwood. Defending his actions in Preston and the continued importance of the 'Ten Per cent and No Surrender!' slogan, he declared that he would not be forced from the town 'while I have such an army in Harwood, and such an ally in the church, that are prepared to stand by me'.⁷⁵ Grimshaw clearly took the criticisms of the lock-out personally, and defended the strike on several fronts whilst attempting to counter the negative narratives through writing responses to criticisms across various newspapers. The *People's Paper* passionately defended him and appealed for funds on his behalf.⁷⁶

Grimshaw also paired with J.B. Horsfall, giving lectures around the county, both invited and uninvited, whilst presenting themselves as the executive of the nascent weavers' union. At an appearance in Stalybridge during a dispute in 1856, Horsfall attempted to convince the local operatives to accept a five to seven per cent wage advance, but these proposals were 'met with silence'. Grimshaw failed to appear, and 'no chairman was appointed; no resolution was passed; and no response was made by the meeting'. Horsfall then failed to raise any subscriptions to cover the expenses of the bellman he

⁷⁰ Dutton and King, 'Ten Per Cent'.

⁷¹ King, *Grimshaw*.

⁷² *Wigan Observer*, 19 August 1870.

⁷³ *Preston Chronicle*, 20 May 1854.

⁷⁴ *People's Paper*, 10 February 1855.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 13 January 1855.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 17 February 1855.

had hired to announce the meeting,⁷⁷ with 'several' people reported as laughing and one stating that 'he's been losing at a dog or horse race, and wants something to make it up!'⁷⁸ Attempts at forming a large-scale union several times descended into farce with votes of no confidence or refusals to recognize any kind of authority from various district representatives.⁷⁹

Grimshaw seemingly moved to America between 1857 and 1861.⁸⁰ He claimed to have moved with Horsfall and travelled 6,000 miles across the continent, but declared America a 'farce, a humbug, and a lie' in the way that workers were treated. His time abroad apparently changed his worldview, and he concluded that strikes and lock-outs were 'the great bane – yea the curse of the country' and upon his return to England had, at request, taken part in disputes only to 'bring them to a speedy and amicable settlement'. He also claimed the tarnishing of his reputation had been driven by the Weavers' Executive in Colne, 'the most incompetent imbeciles. The most miserable set of fellows that the world ever saw'.⁸¹ Grimshaw reappeared during two incidents in 1861. In February, he became part of a large strike in Blackburn and Darwen, where during an open air rally on the outskirts of the town, he was accused by one of the strike leaders of Darwen, John Knowles Fish, of being a 'tool' and 'employed' by one of the mill owners to convince the operatives to accept terms that had been agreed between the local employers and a deputation from Blackburn. Grimshaw denied the accusation, but defended the employer, Mr Crossley.⁸² He again took to the press to defend himself, this time in the Tory-aligned *Preston Herald*.⁸³

The weaver John O'Neil describes another incident in 1861 where Grimshaw and Horsfall appeared, apparently unannounced, alongside John Mathews of Rochdale and Thomas Rhodes of Stockport, as well as George Cowell to give a lecture to the weavers of Clitheroe. O'Neil declared that 'we knew them to be a gang of notorious scoundrels' and after an argument upon being discovered in the Brownlow Arms, the visitors revealed that they hoped to end the local dispute through arbitration, but they would not reveal who had sent or paid them. The crowd awaiting their speeches threw stones, pushed and kicked them, telling them 'they sold the Preston strike and must not come here to sell them'. O'Neil hid them in a committee room until they could be sent to Whalley in a cab for their own safety as 'some of them might be killed'.⁸⁴ The group provided a joint account of the incident in the *Preston Chronicle*. They suggested that they were invited to work with a local magistrate, Redmayne, to help with arbitration, and this crossed over into the group also being involved in the Colne strike that had

⁷⁷ *Manchester Courier*, 7 June 1856.

⁷⁸ *Ashton Reporter*, 7 June 1856.

⁷⁹ *Bolton Chronicle*, 16 August 1856.

⁸⁰ King, *Grimshaw*.

⁸¹ *Manchester Guardian*, 23 May 1856.

⁸² *Blackburn Standard*, 27 February 1861.

⁸³ *Preston Herald*, 2 March 1861.

⁸⁴ J. O'Neil, *A Lancashire Weaver's Journal: 1856–1864, 1872–1875* (Chester, 1982), 119.

been underway since 1860. Although Cowell found some success in Colne, there was resistance to the group from the leadership in both towns. Offering little explanation, they effectively portrayed the incident as a misunderstanding.⁸⁵

In 1862 Grimshaw and Mathews attempted to position themselves as spokesmen for operatives over two main issues. The first was the notion of Indian tariffs, and at one point they claimed to represent the Stalybridge weavers in a proposed deputation to the Indian Minister. The local operatives' leaders dismissed them as 'foreigners', and 'paid agitators' who cared only for their wages.⁸⁶ Grimshaw and Mathews also became vocal speakers on the American Civil War dispute. Originally, they argued for the British government to mediate, although Mathews especially was blocked from speaking.⁸⁷ Grimshaw then became a 'mouthpiece' of Confederate agent Henry Hotze, and later attempted to convince the operatives to support the Confederate cause. At one meeting of 5,000 operatives in Blackburn, the local weavers' association passed a vote of no confidence in him, and in support of the Union.⁸⁸ Hotze appears to have bankrolled Grimshaw, Smith and a small band of others through the Liverpool Southern Club.⁸⁹ Grimshaw continued to appear at meetings to seek aid for operatives during the cotton famine, arguing for the Confederacy to be recognised. He also solicited donations from various people, writing on behalf of the Stalybridge Weavers, who claimed that this was done without their knowledge or consent.⁹⁰

By 1864, Grimshaw was regarded as a 'Southern agitator', and with Mathews and Kinder Smith struggled to find chairs for meetings. This 'Southern trinity' went into pubs and ale houses before meetings, buying drinks for younger workers who they then positioned at the front of meetings. At one such meeting in Rochdale, they apparently recruited young 'lads' from the nearby villages of Smallbridge and Wardleworth, plied them with ale and attempted to flood the votes on resolutions. The reports and letters in the *Rochdale Observer* stated that 'fortunately the working classes are becoming too intelligent to be led into strikes against employers for what the *Rochdale Pilot* would call "insignificant objects." Nor will they be led into war with America by these "raiding" emissaries of the Southern Slavery Association'. Questions were asked over who paid them and their expenses, and if they were being employed by local Tories, although this was difficult to ascertain.⁹¹ The trio continued with similar activities, attempting to lead petitions to Lord Palmerston for the removal of all colonial tariffs and the recognition of

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 30 March 1861.

⁸⁶ *Ashton Reporter*, 14 June 1862.

⁸⁷ *Liverpool Daily Post*, 1 July 1862.

⁸⁸ R. Harrison, 'British labour and the confederacy: a note on the southern sympathies of some British working class journals and leaders during the American Civil War', *International Review of Social History* 2:1 (1957), 78–105.

⁸⁹ R.J.M Blackett, 'British Views of the Confederacy', in J.P. Ward (ed), *Britain and the American South: From Colonialism to Rock and Roll* (Mississippi, 2003).

⁹⁰ *Ashton Reporter*, 26 July 1862.

⁹¹ *Rochdale Observer*, 19 November 1864.

the South in 1865. Grimshaw appeared alongside his father 'Radical' Thomas Grimshaw, but the frequency of his appearances decreased, as did the numbers attending, and after the war ended in May, Grimshaw faded from the public eye. He died at his brother's house in Rishton on 22 December 1869 at the age of 44 or 46. Following his death, two people 'presenting themselves' as his brother and sister-in-law, John and Elizabeth, appeared at Chorley police court charged with fraudulently soliciting charitable contributions. The pair had used letters to Grimshaw from influential politicians to present Elizabeth as Mortimer's widow and solicit donations to set her up in business. Both were given three months hard labour.⁹²

Grimshaw's name would briefly re-appear in the local press through appeals to ascertain his birthplace. One of his sons was summoned by the police inspector of Gosport for not registering as an alien, having told people that he had been born in America during his father's exile. But he was unable to prove that he had been born to English parents due to the lack of knowledge of Grimshaw's birthplace.⁹³ Another son, Joseph T. Grimshaw, was born in Buffalo, but had lived several decades in Pawtucket. He was a semi-regular visitor to England, and stayed in Accrington where he had family. Intriguingly, by 1928 an Accrington paper chose to place more emphasis on his grandfather, a 'stout old chartist; Thomas Grimshaw ... he was one of the supporters of Feargus O'Connor at the great Chartist meeting on Whinney Hill in 1842'. Mortimer is simply described as 'an energetic leader during the great Preston strike of 1856 (sic). He was mentioned by Charles Dickens in his account of that distressful period. A splendid orator, he was regarded as the local John Bright. Owing to the upset of the times, he emigrated to the United States ... but later returned to England, and settled in Rishton.'⁹⁴

The career of Ned Whittle offers further insight into the reputation of the Preston leaders, exhibiting some key differences, if ultimately the same fate. Whittle entered the lock-out as a relative unknown outside of his native Blackburn. He had been a weaver, but disliked factory life, and showing aptitude for arithmetic, established a private academy that was highly successful. A month after the strike, he established and became secretary of the Blackburn Weavers, a position he held for four years. He was the key architect of the Blackburn list, which became the basis of the Standard List which governed wage rates in weaving until the 1930s. He lost his position, and his reputation, during the Harwood lock-out in 1858. He was put on public 'trial' in front of a 23-person jury at the Weavers' Institute in Blackburn after his conduct during the dispute, and was later alleged to have settled the strike by wrestling with a mill owner at a picnic in Whitewell, Bowland. Whittle was accused of selling out the strikers and allowing 'himself to be thrown'.⁹⁵ He returned to tuition, from a room at the Swedenborgian schoolroom at Brookhouse Fields, but then became a mill manager, a manufacturer, and mill manager

⁹² *Wigan Observer*, 19 August 1870.

⁹³ *Farnworth Chronicle*, 24 July 1915.

⁹⁴ *Accrington Times and Observer*, 19 May 1928.

⁹⁵ *Blackburn Standard*, 6 October 1883.

again. He appeared in court several times for debt, and for breaking factory regulations, including employing child labour. After the death of his first wife, he remarried, apparently unwisely, and fell on hard times before dying in obscurity. Yet, by 1883, Whittle was recalled as a man who ‘was proof against temptation to dishonesty ... and kept himself from being defiled among such a set of pitchy companions as Norris, Grimshaw and others still worse!’⁹⁶

The leaders, then, all suffered a similar fate, in that although they became known, and to an extent accepted by wider society (mill-owners, the educated classes and so on) they suffered a backlash and were largely rejected by the working-class operatives. The rumours of both financial mismanagement, and accusations that they had ‘sold’ the operatives was an especially recurrent accusation against them. Regardless of the truth, the difference between the contemporary reputation and legacy of the event was stark and reinforces the power of the dominant negative narrative.

Further Afield

Despite the negative popular memory of the strike in the UK, amongst the east coast cotton towns of the United States it served as a source of inspiration to operatives fighting for working rights, applying their experience of the strike and lock-out to the mill environments there. Lancashire had a longstanding cultural connection to the Fall River region of Massachusetts with cotton operatives emigrating there since the 1820s. It was in many ways a culturally Lancastrian settlement, a ‘New Lancashire’, and Coelho suggests that the ‘the name Fall River soon became synonymous with “America” among the spindles of Preston and Oldham’.⁹⁷ Cohen’s study of textile militancy in American cotton industry concludes that nearly ‘all striking spinners in Fall River were immigrants from Lancashire ... unions, like strikes, were introduced into the New England mule-spinning industry from the outside by British immigrant spinners’.⁹⁸

Coelho links an influx of new operatives arriving in the town in the 1860s to the revival of the Fall River Mule Spinners’ Association which had been organized in 1858 by ‘English operatives who had come to the city during the great strike of 1854 in Lancashire’.⁹⁹ In other nearby settlements, Blewitt pinpoints the culture of both trade unionism and collective bargaining as being a distinctly Lancastrian inheritance from the ‘nucleus’ of the ‘agitating community’ from the county.¹⁰⁰ They brought strategies

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ A. Coelho, ‘A row of nationalities: life in a working class community: the Irish, English, and French Canadians of Fall River, Massachusetts, 1850–1890’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Brown University, 1980), 19.

⁹⁸ I. Cohen, ‘American management and British labor: Lancashire immigrant spinners in industrial New England’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 27:4 (1985), 627.

⁹⁹ Coelho, ‘A Row’, 19.

¹⁰⁰ K. Lamontagne, “‘Lancashire in America’: The Culture of English Textile Mill Operatives in Fall River, Massachusetts, 1875–1904”, in D.T. Gleeson (ed.), *English Ethnicity and Culture in North America* (South Carolina, 2017).

and tactics like large, peaceful demonstrations that show a clear lineage. There was a major strike in 1848 led by John Norris, an Englishman who led the strike as ‘workers had done “in the old country”’¹⁰¹, so too had English textile terms been imported such as ‘masters’, ‘hands’ and ‘help’ for operatives, all less common in the United States.¹⁰²

Spinners in Fall River contributed to the Preston strike fund in 1854, whilst during two strikes in 1875, Blewett outlines how ‘the traditions and customs, the history and politics of Lancashire provided the cultural framework’, and more significantly that ‘activist females formulated the strike’s successful strategy based on their collective remembrances of the lessons of the Preston strike in 1854’.¹⁰³ Even Walter Scott, the editor of the *Fall River Herald* responded negatively to a strike in nearby New Bedford, likely as he had ‘witnessed’ Preston.¹⁰⁴ In no clearer sign of the legacy, during the strike at Lawrence Mill of 1866, the operatives cried ‘ten hours and no surrender!’, whilst the strikers at Harmony Mills in Cohoe in 1880 marched to cries of ‘Ten per cent and no Surrender!’¹⁰⁵ ‘Masses’ more Prestonians and Blackburnians would emigrate to the region following the strikes in Lancashire in 1869, and would strike in the new world in 1870.¹⁰⁶ The Fall River strikes of 1879 were driven by male spinners from Preston and Blackburn, who used familiar tactics from the Preston strike, travelling to nearby places to solicit aid. Even the term for those workers employed to break the strike bears a striking similarity – the ‘bobsticks’.¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

Although the Preston strike and lock-out was a substantial national event, both its infamy and the reputations of its working-class leaders quickly diminished. Instead, a dominant narrative driven by notions of political economy helped to shape the dispute as a wholly negative one. The power of this narrative influenced domestic perceptions of the event, and framed trade disputes more widely in a negative way. How true this narrative is, is difficult to determine, but as seen in the case of the Fall River, the influence of the operatives’ action clearly left an indelible mark on future trade union tactics and attitudes. If this is less obvious in Lancashire, the attempts in Padiham and Colne so soon after Preston at least offer the implication that groups of operatives at least saw some merit in what was undertaken.

This article has explored some of the issues around the popular framing of the strike, as well as some of the legacy that this created, and in doing so highlighted both the

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² M.H. Blewett, ‘Strikes in the nineteenth-century cotton textile industry in the northeast United States’, *Encyclopedia of Strikes in American History* (Armonk, NY, 2009), 314–17.

¹⁰³ M.H. Blewett, ‘Traditions and Customs of Lancashire Popular Radicalism in Late Nineteenth-Century Industrial America’, *International Labor and Working-Class History* 42 (1992), 5–19.

¹⁰⁴ M.H. Blewitt, *Constant Turmoil: The politics of industrial life in Nineteenth-Century New England* (Massachusetts, 2002), 243.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 122 and 281.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹⁰⁷ *New York Tribune*, 30 June 1879.

complexities, but also influences of popular and folk memory. There is still much work to be done on the aftermath of the Preston lock-out. This is especially true with regards to the long-term impact on Preston and the communities involved. Likewise, the subsequent industrial struggles that went on in the town warrant more attention as to the development of the town's distinct labour culture. Was the strike a failure, did it damage the local trade union movement? Such questions are hard to answer. But forms of operative representation survived and re-emerged in the years after the dispute. Why the lock-out soon faded from public consciousness is also unclear. Likely its difficult place in the lineage of labour struggles, especially within cotton, meant that it was a painful and difficult event to frame. As has been shown here, the success of Ashworth, a mill-owner, in dominating public understanding of the dispute must also have been a determining factor. Yet as has been discussed here, and across this special issue, successes and failures are never clear-cut.