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'The path I trod':¹
a portrait of the (business) historian as a young idiot²

The most obvious place to start is with my undergraduate 'Modern' (that is, post-Roman) History degree at Oxford in 1969–72. That was where I made my first proper acquaintance with American history, on an optional course in the summer term of 1971 called 'Industrial America and the Growth of Governmental Power', which was a state-and-society survey of the period from Reconstruction through the Progressive Era³.

Why did I choose to specialise in modern American history, once I had completed most of my required courses?⁴ I found modern British—or, as it was then more accurately described, 'English', which probably explains some of my problems with it—history tedious, apart from the Industrial Revolution, and my only foreign language was French, so modern European history did not seem like a good option either. My Latin was good, and I found medieval history fascinating—but, again, no German, so that was a non-starter too. And finally, I knew the course would be well taught by an inspiring tutor, John Walsh, and that was really enough to clinch the argument. 'Industrial America' was where I first read American statutes, court decisions, political rhetoric, and social theory and encountered the work of the 'greatest generation' of American historians (John Hope Franklin, Samuel Hays, John Higham, Richard Hofstadter, Comer Vann Woodward, Robert Wiebe, and others). Two of the essays I wrote on the course turned out to be particularly important for me. One was about the organisational problems of the American labour movement in the Gilded Age and Progressive

¹ With apologies to Terence Vincent Powderly (1849–1924), Grand Master Workman of the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor (1879–93), who used this title for his autobiography, published posthumously (Powderly 1940)—it seems not entirely inappropriate here. I first came across Terence Vincent Powderly on the Industrial America course in 1971, and then again on ILR 702 in 1974.

² The first version of this article was published in 2012 at http://www.dur.ac.uk/h.j.harris/TRTM/TRTM-The_Path_I_Trod.doc.

³ Circa 1865–1916.

⁴ David H. Burton gave a good picture of the state of US history in British higher education when I first experienced it as a student at one of our most conservative institutions (Burton 1973).

Era⁵ and seems to have had an influence on much of the rest of my professional life.⁶ The other was on the consolidation of business power in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, and was my first meeting with the work of Alfred D. Chandler, Jr. But I didn't read much of it at the time, and remained ignorant of most of it for years afterwards. Some reviewers of my first book, *The Right to Manage: Industrial Relations Policies of American Business in the 1940s* (Harris 1982), would fit it into the then-dominant, post-*Visible Hand*, 'Chandlerite' framework for business history, but, in fact, he had little impact upon me, then and since. Most of my understanding of the 'strategy and structure' of the large corporation in the Twentieth Century US would come from other sources, notably the works of Richard Averitt (1968) on structure and Thomas Cochran (1972) on strategy. In terms of my approach to the history of business, probably the most important thing that I read forty years ago was a little book that I would still recommend to anybody, Edward Chase Kirkland's (1956) *Dream and Thought in the Business Community*. Kirkland instructed me never to approach the history of businessmen without paying serious attention to their beliefs and their fears, whether rational or otherwise. This was a lesson that I was happy to learn, because it fitted in with what I thought (business) history should always do anyway—enable the reader to understand the past from the viewpoint of the protagonists. That is not the only thing to ask of an analytical narrative, but it is surely essential.

Britain in the early 1970s was a good time and place to run across the history of 'the labor problem' in late Nineteenth Century America, because we certainly had our very own version of the same phenomenon. My memories of student life are full of power cuts caused by coal miners' and electrical workers' strikes, months without mail from home because of postal strikes (which then affected the nationalised telephone monopoly too, producing weeks of free calls after students discovered the phone engineers' access code, which went unchanged until after the strike was over), and other instances where unionised workers and labour relations impinged on everyday life in a way that seems almost unimaginable nowadays. I was not a very politically aware student, though I did read the papers. I attended one pointless sit-in about nothing very much at all, and went to the occasional

⁵ Circa 1870–1916.

⁶ My memory tells me that the focus of my work was on employers' opposition to unionisation, but, unfortunately, the old essay itself informs me that I have rearranged the past too neatly, and that this was just the last of my four explanatory themes. I also 'remembered' that this was where I had first encountered my future mentor and friend David Brody's (1960) classic *Steelworkers in America: The Nonunion Era*, but it turns out that this is wrong too, and my reading at the time was more limited than I later imagined. Another proof, if any were needed, of the superiority of documentary evidence over unassisted and unverifiable recollection.

demonstration, but, even then, I thought student politics to be little more than a game. We knew that more important things were going on in other places, and we wanted some pale reflection of them in our little Oxford lives too.

The great thing about the strikes of the early 1970s was that, even if you were not very political, you couldn’t ignore them. But what did they mean to me? Not a lot. It’s conventional among career biographies of labour historians of my generation to speak about formative political experiences and commitments—‘How I Discovered the Working Class’, etc.—but I don’t really think I had any, and I didn’t really need to discover the working class because they (or at least a few of them, in a small ex-quarrying village in North Wales that was rapidly losing its Welsh Nonconformist culture of poverty in the 1950s and replacing it with nothing much at all, as it became increasingly well integrated in the 1960s into a modern, secular, and Anglophone culture of consumption) were the people among whom I had grown up.



Illustration 1 The author in very early training to be an American business historian (circa 1954).

My own family background was stuck somewhere between (1) the skilled and respectable working class (most of our friends and neighbours—building tradesmen, garage mechanics, and truck drivers, for example); (2) the lowest rung of the lower-middle class (my father progressed from being a farmworker, slaughterman, and butcher, by way of wartime service with the Royal Engineers that gave him experience in store and office work, and eventually got a poorly paid but salaried job as clerk and bookkeeper in a small firm of livestock auctioneers—when I got my first job in 1975, at the very bottom of the university lecturer pay scale, my starting salary of GBP 3,174 (GBP 20,800 to GBP 32,600 in 2010 values, depending on which conversion method one uses) at age 23 was already more than my father, then 56, had ever earned); and (3) the more secure lower-middle class status of other close

family members who owned their own homes and cars, had TVs and telephones, went on holidays, occasionally even ‘Abroad’, had sometimes received an education beyond high school, and held semi-professional jobs in education and other public services (librarianship, tax collection). Yet other, older family members and friends included small farmers, building contractors, and shopkeepers, who were really just self-employed rather than small businessmen in any real sense, and, from a previous generation, real entrepreneurs—my maternal grandfather and his brothers, for example, who had run a marine salvage business from the 1900s until the 1940s. I spent part of my childhood among the memories of that risky business, when I went to visit my grandparents for the school holidays, and the rest of it living in a small rented house behind the village butcher’s shop of my great uncle John, our landlord. I never knew the world of the urban, industrial working class⁷, and never really wanted to—and I never rejected most of the values of my family and community (apart from their religious beliefs and practices), including their aversion to alcohol (I took the Pledge in a Band of Hope meeting as a child, but started backsliding once I got to college—however, I remained a firm adherent of the religion of ‘Anti-Tobacco’). Working hard, getting a decent job, not hoping for too much, not taking risks, not spending money I didn’t have, saving for the future, caring about respectability before many other things, and aiming to get along with people, but not being too open with them—the village values have been good enough for me; or, at least, if they have not been, if in some respects they have limited my ambition and imagination, it is too late to change now.⁸

⁷ Oxford in the late 1960s and early 1970s still had a significant manufacturing base, but the closest I came to its working class was getting a very good kicking from a bunch of Morris Motors apprentices out for their traditional evening’s entertainment after their Thursday payday: going into the middle of town to get drunk and beat up students. This happened during my first week away from home, and was quite memorable. Apart from that, I had the usual contact with college servants, which always made me feel uncomfortable—my mother extended our inadequate family income by cleaning middle-class ladies’ homes in winter and working in a small hotel in summer, so I had a hard time dealing with the deferential manner of the college ‘scouts’ and waiters paid not very much to look after me, thinking that I came from the servant classes myself, not those born to be served like so many of my peers. Some of the most characterful of the college servants made it much easier and more interesting to deal with them, because they were so insolently insincere, angry, slothful, and very sloppy—as if they had taken hints on appropriate deportment from some of the early works of Evelyn Waugh or Tom Sharpe.

⁸ These values are close to those of the English urban-industrial working class of a previous generation—so memorably evoked in ‘Part I’ of Richard Hoggart’s (1957) *The Uses of Literacy*—and not far from those of some of their American contemporaries described in John Bodnar’s (1980) ‘Immigration, Kinship, and the Rise of Working-Class Realism in Industrial America’. So, I almost took it as a compliment when my

If the personal is political, then my persona was clearly *petit bourgeois*, even if our household income didn't match up to that standard, and I followed a classic life course from village to town, grammar school to university, and eventually into the kind of secure and fairly undemanding, low-risk / low-reward, unexciting-yet-respectable career that suited my character. Why may this admission be semi-relevant here? Because it's clear that, temperamentally, I was never cut out to be a labour historian, particularly one coming of age in the early 1970s, when some of my middle- to upper-class Trotskyite acquaintances at Oxford still dreamed of revolution—a fantasy or nightmare that I never shared—and romanticised the lower classes—something I could not agree with either. Being poor and powerless never struck me as intrinsically admirable, and certainly not enviable—more a matter of bad luck, principally resulting from choosing the wrong parents. I had my own utopian tendencies, but I kept—and keep—them for private reveries, never confusing them with anything practical or attainable.

How did my essentially small-c conservative character (never, yet, resulting in voting Conservative—everybody has his limits) translate into an outlook that I expressed through my work, through the choice of subjects to study and ways to interpret them? Ideologically, I was almost always comfortable with a very centrist and merely reformist



Illustration 2: The author in very early training to become a historian of technology (circa 1954).

old friend and collaborator Nelson Lichtenstein (1987: 309) bracketed me with Bodnar and other scholars I respected—Mel Dubofsky, Dan Nelson, and Bob Zieger—as ‘laborite realists’—though he might not quite have meant it as such. If history is not ‘realist’, true to the past, *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, what’s the point? Interestingly, another old acquaintance, Christopher L. Tomlins (1993), included Lichtenstein himself as someone working alongside me in the pessimist-realist vein in his review of the essay collection we edited together, *Industrial Democracy in America: The Ambiguous Promise* (Lichtenstein and Harris 1993).

politics, moderately social democratic, at best. I believed, probably with more conviction in the 1970s than now, that some form of liberal capitalism was the only worthwhile game in town, and that the important question was therefore whether it would be well or badly managed, either by an interventionist state or by those in control of its most important organisations, the business firms. In early 1970s' Britain, it did not seem that either of our *élites* was especially competent, though neither was actively malevolent in the modern fashion. One of the attractions of the study of US business history came to be a sense that I was reading about people who knew what they wanted and knew how to get it—levels of practical ability and self-confidence in short supply in Britain at the time.⁹

The study of the history of business and increasingly of technology has also been a way of satisfying my fascination for stuff, for discovering how people produced the material ingredients of everyday life that my chosen profession does nothing else to meet (see Illustrations 1 and 2, pp. 93 and respectively 95). Of course, historical study only does so at second hand and almost entirely through reading—but this has always been a very adequate substitute for real experience for an introverted swot like me, who spends most of his time living inside his own thoughts. And it's actually not a bad substitute—for example, it was years after I had started reading about metal-casting technology before I actually saw the inside of a foundry (a small jobbing enterprise in Royersford, Pennsylvania, introduced to me by an old friend, Bill Adam, who was a lifelong Communist as well as a skilled patternmaker and small businessman), but I found that I knew exactly what I was looking at and how it worked. Words didn't fully describe the dust, smell, and heat, but they were pretty good for everything else.

After that biographical excursus, back to the labour problem in Britain in the early 1970s. Among the unsuccessful remedies attempted was our own version of Taft-Hartley¹⁰, in the shape of the Conservative Heath government's Industrial Relations Act of 1971, so questions to do with workers' power, management's resulting problems, and the state's response were certainly on my agenda. I followed 'Industrial America' with a final-year course—a fifth of my entire degree—on 'Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal'. Choosing it was easy—the

⁹ I formed this perception of the American business community at a very particular time, near the end of a period during which, according to Mark S. Mizruchi (2007), a perceptive analyst, it had indeed behaved as an intelligent ruling class.

¹⁰ The Taft-Hartley Act was the major achievement of the 80th Congress (1947–9), the first that the Republican Party had controlled since 1930. It amended the Wagner (National Labor Relations) Act of 1935, the foundation on which the American labour movement had grown in power through the intervening years, and assisted employers in recovering the upper hand.

line of least resistance, or of natural progression, after 'Industrial America', with the added attraction that it would be taught by William Leuchtenburg, who was visiting Oxford at the time. More statutes, more judicial opinions, more social and economic thought, and, of course, a lot more labour history. I lapped it all up, and also recall reading Howard Fast's (1962) novel *Power*, a lightly fictionalised account of the career of John L. Lewis¹¹ which gave me a sense of the trajectory of the new American labour movement of the 1930s and 1940s, from excitement to disappointment and finally containment. Or maybe I am tidying things up here too, and the novel came first, borrowed from Colwyn Bay Public Library when I was still at school, with the interest in American labour history latent thereafter, and just waiting for some intellectual stimulus to spark it into life, which my coursework provided and everyday life under the Heath government encouraged.

The other course I did at university that helped directly with the development of knowledge and skills that would be useful to me in the years that followed (though they all did, in a sense, because they got me used to reading quickly and carefully) was the capstone of my degree programme, an 'Introduction to Political Thought' with another fine tutor, Richard Grassby—then a specialist in early-modern business history (Grassby 1999), now also a realtor in Maryland. 'Pol. Thought' was a compulsory part of a Modern History BA, and many people hated it, but I didn't. The classical authors whose texts I read—Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and, I think, Montesquieu—were not, perhaps, the ones most obviously relevant to somebody who was going to make a career from the study of US industrial relations. But 'Pol. Thought' did teach me to take political ideas seriously and to read texts closely, and, when I finally got around to absorbing American businessmen's ideological statements and exercises in political analysis, as a graduate student and afterwards, I always treated them as if they deserved as much attention as the work of my past masters. If this seems a bit highfalutin, maybe I should rephrase it and simply say that 'Pol. Thought' did for me one of the things that it was supposed to: it taught me to read political rhetoric.

When my first degree was drawing to an end, the obvious question arose: what next? I never really knew what I wanted to do for a living—the only job that I applied for was as a journalism trainee on the *Western Mail*, which was then a part of the Thomson Organization. But even after I had won it I had no idea what the job would amount to, apart from writing, which I thought I was good at. (Wrongly, as a cursory reading of any of my juvenilia will demonstrate—and in any case, the (bad) academic writing of which I thought that I was capable would have offered

¹¹ John L. Lewis was the leader of the United Mine Workers of America who set up the Committee for (later Congress of) Industrial Organizations in 1935, to take advantage of the Wagner Act and the uniquely favourable environment for union building that it created.

no guarantee that I could have made a success of an entirely different style of work.) So, I was easily persuaded to stay and pursue a doctorate instead, which would involve doing a lot more of something I thought that I enjoyed and was good at, in a place that I loved—the architecture of Oxford is very seductive. In comparison, the idea of becoming, perhaps, ‘Our Man in Merthyr Tydfil’, reporting on local folk customs (such as rugby games and mining disasters), having to drink far more than I was comfortable with and, probably, to take up smoking too (occupational requirements of the mid-1970s journalist), while waiting for the call from *The Times* that might never come, was insufficiently real or attractive. Once again, I followed the line of least resistance, sticking with the familiar through not having any strong inclinations to do anything else. I had no idea what graduate study would be like, but I threw together a ‘research proposal’ out of a few ideas left over from a ‘New Deal’ essay, then won a scholarship on the strength of rewritten versions of a couple of ‘Industrial America’ and ‘New Deal’ essays, good references, and an ability to interview well.

Americans who have gone through even the least distinguished graduate programme can have no idea of how unstructured, individualistic, and amateur the ‘training’ of a graduate student in History was almost forty years ago, in what liked—and still likes—to think of itself, with a fair measure of justice, as one of the finest universities in the world. The assumption seems to have been that, as I could write good, short essays when a tutor gave me the title and a reading list, and had managed to scribble lots of even shorter essays in response to tricky and unpredictable questions in thirty hours of final examinations crammed into five days (my coursework through three years counted for nothing in determining my degree class), I was obviously a smart chap and therefore ready to be let loose on a PhD—or, as we termed it, DPhil—without further ado. I could sound plausible enough about my misbegotten ‘research proposal’ in an interview, but I had no theoretical or methodological grounding in the arts and crafts of historiography, had never had to construct a bibliography of my own, had never seen the inside of an archive, never written a footnote, couldn’t type, and had not the haziest notion of what I was really supposed to be doing as a graduate student, or why.

My first ‘research proposal’—an extremely unimaginative plan to explore the connections, whether of influence or interest or mere coincidence, I wasn’t sure, between ‘Britain’, whatever that was, and ‘the New Deal’, whatever that meant—collapsed very quickly when I attempted to pursue its worthless ideas into the university’s libraries.¹² That only took a few weeks, and afterwards there was no

¹² The ideas weren’t completely worthless, and versions of transatlantic comparative history, something that comes naturally to a business historian of the US working in Britain, have continued to interest me—see especially Harris (2007), the very belated product of a research project I began after *The Right to Manage* had been published in

structure of required readings or lectures or seminars or training courses to keep me busy, leave alone provide me with some direction. There were, however, my fellow students at Nuffield College—a small, very competitive, and privileged enclave of eminent social scientists and about fifty graduate students who were, by the standards of the early 1970s, an impressively cosmopolitan bunch, more mixed in age, nationality, gender, sexuality, and, to an extent, race than any I have known since, and probably smarter too. If I learned anything in my two postgraduate years at Oxford, I learned most of it from them. With their guidance, I read some political science, a bit of sociology, and some economics. I came across Harry Braverman, when he was new¹³, and Antonio Gramsci, when he was long dead but experiencing a comeback¹⁴, though I never made it as far as Karl Marx, whom most of my friends still took very seriously. I chatted with colleagues about their industrial relations projects, and envied them the prospect of doing fieldwork, getting data, and knowing what to do with it.¹⁵ As for me, I was completely lost, failing to establish a working relationship with quite friendly and available but not particularly suitable supervisors (it would have helped if I could have pretended to be interested in cricket, the preferred conversational topic of one of the distinguished scholars through whose rooms I passed), drifting and drinking for months. Oxford University's pedagogical theory was basically 'sink or swim', and I sank.

1982, and put to one side after I had become interested in the Philadelphia Metal Manufacturers' Association, only to pick it up again almost 20 years later, having continued to gather material all the while.

- ¹³ Braverman (1974) impressed lots of people, including my supervisor, when it was first published, though its account of the history of industrial labour has not stood up to careful scrutiny.
- ¹⁴ I cannot recall which particular bits of Gramsci I read at the time, probably just parts of the recently translated *Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 1971), but what I took from them was absolutely conventional—the language, if not a very sophisticated understanding, of his hegemony theory.
- ¹⁵ I don't recall learning anything, or even having much to do, with any of Nuffield's distinguished fellowship apart from my college tutor, who always regretted that I wasn't doing proper political-science history, but still tried to take an interest and help out. One of the fellows, the economic historian Max Hartwell, whom I should probably have made more of an effort to talk to, described the college to a bunch of us disgruntled graduate students as a first-class waiting room. It was comfortable, the food and company were good, and it didn't really matter too much what we did or didn't do while we were there—we were more or less guaranteed goodish careers merely on the strength of having attended. Hartwell turns out to have been more or less right. Few of us ended up unemployed, and some of my contemporaries have already picked up knighthoods or even bigger gongs.

However, I did not want to be thrown out, particularly because I was embarking on my first proper adult relationship, which I am sure was my most important reason for wanting to stick around Oxford a while longer. So, I had to do something to justify my presence, or at least to maintain a convincing pretence that I was employing my time usefully, even though I wasn't. I liked the life, the comfort and good food, the company, and my scholarship income from the government and my college, and I still had no idea what other career I might wish to pursue if I dropped out. Nuffield was an ideal place to do nothing much—it was easy to while away the days, and the relatively brief intervals between breakfast, lunch, and dinner in hall were usefully punctuated by coffeetime and teatime in the Common Room. In summer, croquet or punting could fill up some of the remaining free hours; in winter, I even tried squash, which, given my poor eyesight without glasses, and bad coordination, was quite punishing, and indicative of how desperate I must have been for something to do; and in the evening, at all seasons, there was always talking and drinking, and, for much of 1973–4, the nightly entertainment of the 'Watergate' show on TV.

But, in order to hang on, I needed to give the college some better evidence of what else I had been up to, in order to persuade them to renew my scholarship. So, as a survival strategy, in the spring of 1973, I cobbled together a quite interesting paper on 'The American Keynesians', mostly from scraps of knowledge left over from my 'Special Subject' the previous year. My motivation to do this was purely instrumental, but I discovered that I actually still liked reading new and complicated stuff (notably about the theories of 'secular stagnation' and 'mature economy' and their policy implications) and seemed to be quite good at making sense of it. So, having persuaded Nuffield's fellows not to terminate me (I am sure, in fact, that there was little risk, but it was good that I was afraid), with the aid of something that was a bit of a con trick, I decided that I might as well make another, more serious attempt to find a research topic that had legs.

The way I did this was quite simple. I asked people I knew a bit, and respected, if they could suggest any leads to follow. Maldwyn Jones, professor of American History in London, who had been my older brother's tutor at Manchester when he did an MA in American Studies there in 1971–2, said the domestic history of World War II was an open and interesting field, and, as I had read about the New Deal, I would understand it well enough—he sent me off to read Jim F. Heath (1971), which set me on the right path. William Leuchtenburg agreed. Lloyd Ulman, also passing through Oxford as a visiting fellow, told me that the history of wartime labour relations hadn't really been done. So, I might as well do it.

The college library was full of stuff for me to read, and, as it was open stack and rationally organised according to the Library of Congress classification system, it didn't matter that I still had no idea how to construct a bibliography—I could simply wander along the shelves in more or less the right place and pull out

anything that looked interesting. My college tutor, Philip Williams, an enthusiast for the study of the American political system, also helped me dig myself out of my hole by enabling me to switch from the Faculty of Modern History, where I could still find no useful supervision, to Sociology. There, I hitched up with Roderick Martin, a historian by training who was reinventing himself as a political and industrial sociologist, *en route* to a final destination as a professor of management. Rod did not know much about US labour relations either, but he was prepared to read and comment, gently but critically, on whatever rubbish I wrote, which was probably more useful to me than anything else could have been at the time. He also, I think (or it could have been Peter Fairbrother, a Nuffield friend doing an industrial sociology doctorate under Rod's supervision, or Mike Terry, an institutional industrial relations specialist), introduced me to the work of the intellectual star of the 'Oxford School' of industrial relations, Alan Fox, whose masterpiece *Beyond Contract: Work, Power and Trust Relations* had just been published (Fox 1974). Fox provided me with my essential understanding of managerial ideologies, and I found that many of his categories suited US historical realities very well—my later definition of 'unitary corporatism' (Harris 1993) was almost pure Fox.

Of all the things I read at Nuffield in 1973–4, probably the most useful were the topically organised clippings files of wartime US newspaper coverage of labour relations issues—that had been compiled at the time by British political-intelligence operatives, and that had ended up, by some happy accident, in my college library—and the long runs of two American magazines, *Fortune* and *US News and World Report*, both of which provided extensive coverage of the labour beat. After reading my way through them all, I knew my way around the people and the organisations involved in the political economy of wartime and post-war labour. *Fortune*, in particular, also got me hooked on business history—I was seduced by the quality of the rich, heavy paper, the wonderful typography and artwork, and the cleverness of the reporting—and concluded that *Fortune's* intended readership was evidently a group of people worth studying.

My doctoral study through the rest of 1973 and into early 1974 continued to be a messy and inefficient process, but, by the end of it, I did have the outline of a research topic that I could, perhaps, believe in. I had acquired a good level of knowledge and understanding about labour relations in the wartime US, and I was following the 'responsible' union movement down the road toward Taft-Hartley, along the path pointed out to me by Howard Fast and also by a new discovery I made as a guide to the recent American past, again thanks to my fellow students—C. Wright Mills, whose *The New Men of Power* (Mills 1948) became my bible.

And then I ran into a problem: I was exhausting the printed sources in the Oxford libraries, or at least I thought that I was—if I had known how to use them properly, I would not have been so worried, and I could always have taken a 50-

mile train ride to London and used the British Museum and LSE¹⁶ libraries to extend my range. In any case, I knew that, just as my industrial sociologist friends had to do their fieldwork in strange old places called ‘factories’ (which were still quite common in Britain forty years ago, though younger readers will probably not have the foggiest idea what they were like, unless they have seen pictures of them in TV documentaries), at some point I had to use what were to me equally unknown places called ‘archives’, and they were all in the US.

So, I had to leave Oxford—a decision made easier by the collapse of what seemed at the time to have been a long affair, at least a year (a year is a long time when you’re 21 or 22), whose beginning the previous spring had been the major reason why I didn’t want to depart from Oxford in the first place. Now, after almost five years in town, I was finally ready for a change of scene. I applied for a Fulbright Scholarship and got it, but, in those days, it only covered travel and medical insurance, so I liquidated all the savings I had accumulated as a student, about GBP 1,500 (USD 3,500), which would be worth at least GBP 12,000 (USD 15,500) nowadays (or, by a different conversion method, allowing for the growth in average real earnings in nearly forty years, almost twice as much). Those were times of no tuition fees and generous grants for living expenses, and I had also done some well-paid teaching while I was a graduate. I borrowed the rest of what I needed from a couple of very supportive maiden aunts and also from my college, whose only condition was that I should take out a life insurance policy naming them as the beneficiary, to make sure that they would get paid back even if America proved fatal for me—I think they also threw in a grant of several hundred pounds.

Philip Williams, who was instrumental in getting the college to back me, and Rod Martin had both spent time at Cornell, so they thought it would suit an untravelled provincial hick like me who could not imagine living somewhere too far from a hill, lake, river, or woodland and was much too young and naïve to be let loose in a big city. It had a fine research library and an excellent history department—I would work with one of William Leuchtenburg’s old students, Richard Polenberg—and would be a good base from which I could make forays to the mysterious ‘archives’, when I could figure out which ones I needed to visit, and why.

These plans changed before I ever reached Ithaca, because, on the Greyhound bus from Syracuse, I overheard the English accent of an attractive blonde woman in the seat in front of me, and we got talking.¹⁷ It turned out that she had been to

¹⁶ London School of Economics.

¹⁷ Her nickname, I later found out, was ‘Crash’—an ironic but literally true comment on her skills as a light-aircraft pilot. I only flew with her once, on what was supposed to be a short trip to Rochester Airport to pick up a friend arriving by scheduled service. She

university just 20 miles from my home in North Wales, and had even married a man from my old grammar school, before immigrating to Canada. She was now a qualified accountant, single again, and pursuing a doctorate in Organizational Behavior at the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations (Cornell University ILR School nowadays or, simply, ILR). She explained to me that, as the ILR was a state school, the fees were peanuts, even for a foreigner, in comparison to the Ivy League rates charged in History, and you still had access to the same facilities. As I was paying most of my own costs it seemed to me that the argument for ditching History in favour of ILR was unanswerable, a no-brainer, and I did it as quickly as I could after getting off the bus and finding my room in Cascadilla Hall, next to one of Ithaca's famous and beautiful gorges, favourite sites for the many student suicides ('gorging out', in the local vernacular) that seemed to litter the semester. I did get to meet Richard Polenberg at least once, but, though I was able to pay off most of my debt to Nuffield immediately, had a lot more free cash as an ILR student than I otherwise would have, and ended up with much less to repay once I started earning, I found myself back to square one in terms of latching onto a supervisor.

Of all the labour historians on the ILR faculty at the time, I fetched up with Maurice F. Neufeld as my mentor, for no reason that I can recall. Perhaps his faculty colleagues thought that, as his name almost rhymed with Nuffield, he would help me to feel at home; or maybe they just felt that he needed more work. He was probably the least appropriate for the research that I was doing, apart from the fact that his memory of the 1940s was very good. We established some sort of working relationship, but it was not close—symptomatically, I spelled his name wrongly in my book's 'Acknowledgements' (Harris 1982: viii). He was generous with lunches and drinks in the faculty club next door to the ILR, run by students from the excellent hotel school, and helped me with a couple of useful contacts, but was not otherwise very engaged. (And why should he have been? I didn't have much to offer.) I started one course with him, a very conventional-wisdom canter through American labour history that would not have been out of place in Selig

was trying to keep up her flying hours, and was a bit rusty. After a first attempt at landing on the wrong runway, we made it down safely, but, on the way back, her friend, completely unqualified and an utter berk, insisted on having a go. We ended up lost over Upstate New York, as winter's darkness fell, and the needle on the fuel gauge fell with it, unable to tell one Finger Lake from another, but unwilling to radio air traffic control as she didn't want two incidents on her log book in one day. Eventually, we worked out which lake was Cayuga, and found Tompkins County airport again, landing safely on the icy tarmac, but with quite a bump. Though I did not know it at the time, our route took us right over Palmyra, NY, the birthplace not simply of Mormonism in the 1820s, but also—and of much greater interest to me—the large-oven, wood-fired cooking stove a decade later.

Perlman's Wisconsin decades earlier¹⁸, which was probably where it came from, but fairly rapidly concluded that it was not a very good use of a third-year DPhil student's time—and 'the Neuf' certainly did not think that I had risen to the challenge of the opportunities he provided either.

I had very little to do with the other labour historians, any of whom would probably have been much more stimulating—Cletus Daniel, Roger Keeran, Gerd Korman, or James A. Gross, the first volume of whose great work on the National Labor Relations Board had just been published (Gross 1974), or the labour law and collective bargaining scholars—notably George W. Brooks and Alice Cook, or the sociologists and organisational behaviourists—particularly William F. Whyte. I was in the same building as all of these excellent people, but they might just as well have been on Mars for all the contact I had with them; which was of course my fault, not theirs. Instead, I did pretty much the same as I had at Oxford—I read tonnes, only with an almost infinitely better library to play around in, thought about it a lot, but didn't spend enough time talking to anybody about it, which has always been one of my weaknesses.

My most important regular contact was with Rich Strassberg, archivist in the Labor and Management Documentation Center on the ground floor of the ILR Library, where I spent much of my time, ploughing through the 'Vertical Files'¹⁹ and 'Company Files' full of 'grey literature'²⁰ from the 1940s produced by labour unions, business corporations, and pressure groups with an interest in the labour problem. The rest of the time I was upstairs, scouring the shelves for hardback publications on labour management and employment relations, and going through serial publications (business and management magazines) that were relevant. The highpoint of the day was coffeetime, when I wandered across to meet the other graduate students and ate enough cheap doughnuts to keep me going until dinner. Occasionally I had to visit the great Olin Library at the centre of the campus, but generally the ILR had what I wanted. My focus was on what businessmen thought and feared, as evidenced by what they said, wrote, and did. My book's bibliography is full of some of the results of all this effort (Harris 1982: 205–79)—

¹⁸ Research that has not been published or that has been published in a non-commercial form.

¹⁹ Collections of resource materials—such as pamphlets and newspaper clippings, for example—stored upright for ready reference.

²⁰ Maurice F. Neufeld did his bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees at the University of Wisconsin in Madison in the early 1930s, where John R. Commons and Selig Perlman were still developing the 'Wisconsin School' of labour history that remained dominant into the 1960s. By the 1970s, it had been displaced by the 'New Labor History' of David Brody, Melvyn Dubofsky, Herbert Gutman, David Montgomery, and others, but Neufeld's teaching made no noticeable concessions to modern ideas.

hundreds of happy hours spent doing what I do best—the rest sits in my card index of references and several boxes packed with notes, which are only not yellowing because they were typed on yellow-pad paper to begin with, so it's impossible to tell.

Midway through my first semester, I finally took off for 'the archives'. By this time, much of my research focused on the automobile industry—so, a trip to Detroit was unavoidable. It was affordable, because I had persuaded the British Department of Education and Science that it was essential for my work, and it was also an attractive prospect because it meant temporary deliverance from Cascadilla Hall. I had never had to share a bedroom, since my older brother left for college, and, through five years at Oxford, one of the enduring pleasures had been a room of my own (the last one, at Nuffield, quite palatial)—it gave me a lifetime taste for large, light, fairly empty spaces to live and work in. But, in Ithaca, I found myself thrown into my own private Animal House with an American student supposedly pursuing a professional master's degree, but doing so in a very self-destructive way. He was morbidly obese in a way which was then still quite rare, especially among members of the educated white middle class, and of pretty revolting personal habits—a sad character who seemed to spend most of his life in bed, watching TV, smoking, and guzzling huge bottles of bourbon and cardboard tubes of Pringle's chips that he picked up on weekend trips home to watch the Buffalo Bills. The resulting disgusting sounds and smells punctuated our short life together. Sometimes he got out of bed long enough to cook horrible, greasy hamburgers in an electric frying pan, stinking out the room (whose windows did not open, and which was already intolerably hot because the ancient central heating seemed to have been turned up to boiling point as soon as the season began to turn deliciously cool outside). It was an awful living and working environment, and the sound of his nocturnal fantasies as he humped his bedclothes—unrequited sexual longing blending with dreams of making touchdowns for the Bills into a very noisy mashup—was the last straw.²¹

²¹ I have found a 'Hello Mother, Hello Father' letter that I wrote home at the time, describing conditions in our shared 'pigsty' and only leaving out a few of the juicier details—'He's just beyond redemption. Dirty socks and keks [underpants] strewn around the floor . . . constant smoking, and ashtrays never emptied . . . cooking fatty food in the room, and leaving dirty, smelly plates, chicken bones, etc., around . . . an aversion to draught and fresh air, which means I lead a guerrilla campaign to drive away some of the sour odours . . . the TV till 12-30 or 1 a.m. . . . the guzzling of beer and crunching of crisps . . . the snoring, snorting, grunting, and sleep-talking which follow. Altogether, it's too much. He's not a bad guy, he's just an absolute slob.' He has gone on to a successful career in the hospitality trade, and according to Trip Advisor his hotel is not the worst in his city.

Looking back, it's clear that he must have been deeply troubled at the time, but, immature and self-absorbed prig that I was, I had no sympathy for him as I chewed my muesli, fruit, and yoghurt or ate my wholemeal bread, cheese, and spinach salads in the windowless rear half of the room, where I lived. The Bills didn't play enough games to suit me—each one brought a few days' respite and solitary possession of our shared space—so, I had to go somewhere, and the prospect of spending a few weeks in Detroit in early winter seemed positively delightful in comparison to staying in my graduate dorm a moment longer. So, my roommate was, I suppose, an inadvertent benefactor, a facilitator of my development as a researcher—the lack of anywhere comfortable to live meant that I spent all the hours I could away from Cascadilla, working very hard and socialising a lot, but by mid-semester I had had enough and wanted out.

Detroit was a revelation for me—the first large city in which I had ever spent any considerable amount of time. I found cheap accommodation (USD 14 a week) with a couple of guys in a rundown duplex a few minutes' walk away from the Wayne State campus, just across the Edsel Ford Freeway, and south of the old Burroughs Adding Machine factory. Once upon a time, it had been a nice middle-class home, with beautiful woodwork and maple floors, and an old hot-air furnace down in the basement to keep us warm with its heavy breath, but, by the mid-1970s, it was a very low-rent place, with holes in the ceiling—miraculously, the 4th Street residential enclave still survives, neither wrecked, cleared, nor redeveloped. My new roomies were doing master's degrees in archive management and working at the Reuther Library part-time to pay their way. I found them by writing to the Library before I left Ithaca and asking for my letter to be fixed to a student noticeboard, requesting a place on somebody's couch—they went one better, and gave me a bed in a room of my own. Their friendliness and normality made me forget Cascadilla Hall and my old roommate, and we had a great time. We shared the cooking and the shopping, and I was very impressed by the security at the checkouts in our local store—a big fat guard with a loaded shotgun across his knees, sitting behind a bullet-proof plexiglass screen on a balcony above. They also introduced me to local bars, particularly the Circa, and student parties. Detroit seemed to be a real party town. One of those parties, just south of campus, I remember particularly well, because a heavily armed local police SWAT²² team stormed the house looking for a drug dealer on the run—they were actually surprisingly polite, came in through the front door, went out the back, made no trouble or mess, broke no heads, and did not seem to notice or mind the distinctive 1970s smell of the student fug while they were passing through.

In other words, Detroit was rough and dangerous to an extent with which I was completely unfamiliar, but (or perhaps 'so') I loved it. The city was going through

²² Special Weapons and Tactics.

hard times in the winter of 1974, shortly after the first great oil crisis—I think this was when the great Chrysler plant on the East Side ('Dodge Main') closed its doors, or maybe I'm a few years too early and it was just a period of exceptionally heavy layoffs. Unemployment and poverty were everywhere, and crime too. The local TV news seemed to start with a fresh list of murders every night, some of them very gruesome—bodies only discovered down drains when the sewers backed up, etc. (I returned in the summer of 1975, just in time for one of the most celebrated Detroit murders in quite a while, the disappearance of Jimmy Hoffa²³, whose enormous banana-bunch hand I had shaken, very tentatively, and whose perma-tan complexion I had marvelled at—orange skin in mid-winter was rare in the 1970s, especially on middle-aged ex-convicts, not that I had ever encountered any before—when I met him after a lecture he gave at Cornell earlier that year.) The city still bore the scars of the 1967 race riots. I borrowed a bicycle to get around, and, when I rode across to Windsor in Canada or out to Dearborn to visit the Ford River Rouge plant and work at the company archives, I went through neighbourhoods that had been burned out, trashed, vacated, and never even cleaned up properly—the broken glass in otherwise empty streets was a real hazard, but I never picked up a puncture, still less a bullet. I am usually cautious and even quite fearful in American cities that are new to me, particularly after my cousin was gunned down by a couple of adolescent bag-snatchers in front of his partner and their son while they were visiting Baltimore on holiday from Somerset in 1981, but, in Detroit seven years earlier, it wasn't that I was fearless—it's that I was completely without imagination, and nothing was going to happen to stop me enjoying myself.

I found Detroit aesthetically exciting, too. I had entered the US from Canada, and took the Greyhound to Ithaca from the top end of Lake Champlain, around the north-west edge of the Adirondacks. So, I had never seen industrial America before my bus ride across the bleak Ohio Turnpike and through Cleveland and Toledo, where there were still plenty of belching smokestacks.²⁴ After that fine

²³ Jimmy Hoffa was leader of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, one of the strongest and most corrupt US unions, with close links to organised crime. He had been imprisoned in 1967, and released by Richard Nixon after just four years of a 13-year sentence. When I met him, early in 1975, he was attempting to rehabilitate his reputation and regain power in the union—the probable cause of his murder in Detroit that July.

²⁴ I always was an architecture buff, and it's clear that I was a naturally born sucker for what John R. Stilgoe (1982) termed the 'industrial zone aesthetic'. As Detroit was my first proper experience of urban-industrial America, it imprinted itself upon me, and, afterwards, I added to it with knowledge of other such zones—the trackside wreckage along the railroad corridor from New York to Philadelphia, the devastated area of Philadelphia between Germantown and Center City, etc., or, from much briefer

introduction, I was ready for Detroit, which struck me as magnificent—the Art Deco buildings, the Art Institute with its Diego Rivera murals, the huge modernist auto and other factories by the great Albert Kahn and his imitators, the immense and brutal concrete freeways, not to mention the wonderful pollution-dyed sunsets seen across miles of dereliction and squalor, the decaying low-rise housing not blocking the huge sky view. And, in among the spreading ruins, there was still plenty of wealth—the Indian Village enclave, where I met an old GM executive who had worked with the company’s chief labour relations strategist and ideologue in the 1930s and 1940s, or Grosse Pointe, or early (failing) attempts at inner-city regeneration through building fancy modern apartment complexes to attract creative types back to the downtown, where I found myself drinking with some very odd people. I saw other parts of Detroit too, the suburbs to which the white working and lower-middle classes had flown, and which, when I returned in the early 1980s, were already being deserted in their turn.

And, by day, there was plenty of work—in the Reuther Library, in the Burton Historical Collection at the wonderful Public Library (since, sadly decayed), out at Ford’s in Dearborn, and even on one of the upper floors of the old GM Building, where the friendly Industrial Relations staff gave me some contemporary printed stuff to read, after telling me, with a smile, that there was a goldmine of material for me in their archives next door, and they were never going to let me or anybody else see any of it, not even a single page.

Altogether, my few weeks in Detroit stand out in my memory as an almost perfectly happy time, and also the most creative period in all of the years that I was working on what became *The Right to Manage*. When I left Oxford, in August of 1974, I still didn’t really know what I was doing or where I was going with it. September and early October in Cornell had begun to set me on the right track, with plenty of reading and some useful conversations with my fellow students—it is always helpful to have to try to find an answer to the friendly questions ‘What are you doing here? What is your work about?’ Late October and November in Detroit really helped me make my mind up. When I returned to Ithaca, just in time for Thanksgiving, I finally knew what I wanted to do. Everything seemed to fit into place, including the things that (I later discovered) I did not understand at the time, and most of what I didn’t know by December 1974 would turn out to fit in too. After that, it was all plain sailing—a lot more to read, but I knew what sort of thing I needed to read, and why; a lot more thinking; and, of course, all of the writing and rewriting. But, in essence, by early December of 1974, shortly after my 23rd birthday, I had the germ of a book in my head, and all I needed to do was let it grow, feed and water it, prune it, shape it, and in due course harvest the fruits.

acquaintance, central Pittsburgh and South Chicago—so that I developed a sense of the physical environment in which the history I read about had taken place.

There were, of course, plenty of hurdles to overcome, a couple of them immediate. The first was to sort out my relationship with the Cornell University authorities. In my absence, they had discovered my roommate’s gross violations of the safety code, which was supposed to be very strictly enforced in Cascadilla Hall, an old firetrap before its reconstruction in the early 1980s. Refrigerators, toasters, and electric frying pans in rooms were absolutely illegal, especially if powered from long and dangerous extension leads snaking out into the corridor or plugged into sockets they weren’t designed for. When I got back to Ithaca, I found that my roommate had disappeared, but that, in the eyes of Cornell, I was jointly responsible for his sins, and, as he had fled, I was supposed to carry the whole can by myself. So they wanted to get rid of me too, which would not have impressed the Immigration and Naturalization Service or the Fulbright Scholarship people at all, and would have put a nasty crimp in my plans for a doctorate. Fortunately, I managed to write and talk my way out of difficulty, making Cornell’s Judicial Administrator laugh at my account of the few weeks I had spent in my roommate’s company, and take pity on me for my university-imposed ordeal. Instead of getting expelled, I did not even have to pay a fine, and I was moved to a small room of my own, with a beautiful view down across Ithaca to Cayuga Lake and the hills beyond.

The second hurdle was that, having absented myself from many of the classes in ILR 702, I still didn’t want a failing grade on the course, in case I decided to change my degree registration from Oxford to Cornell—a plan I had been considering for weeks, though with decreasing enthusiasm, as I came to understand that an American PhD would probably take longer than the jail time (allowing for good-behaviour remission) in a ‘life sentence’ for an ordinary murder at home. So, I had to throw something together to—I will not say satisfy Maurice, but—at least persuade that wise old bird not to plough me. The result was a long and incoherent paper, quickly bashed out, and not deserving anything better than the very generous B- it obtained. But it had at least one redeeming feature—the title, *The Right to Manage*, which I had probably cribbed from Eric L. Wigham’s (1973) work on the (British) Engineering Employers’ Federation, *The Power to Manage*. I remembered it five years later when John Jolliffe—Bodley’s Librarian, a fellow of my old college, and its Dean of Degrees—told me at a Nuffield party when I finally collected my doctorate that the title I had chosen for my thesis (*Getting Everybody Back on the Same Team: An Interpretation of the Industrial Relations Policies of American Business in the 1940s*) would never do for a book. A book needed something short and snappy to go on the spine, four words at most, but three words would be better. Economy with words was never my strong point, but I had a four-word title available for recycling, and two of them were very small—so, *The Right to Manage* it was. And the rest is (business) history

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