



Working in Cork: Everyday life in Irish Steel, Sunbeam Wolsey and the Ford Marina Plant, 1917–2001

Hodson, P. (2022). Working in Cork: Everyday life in Irish Steel, Sunbeam Wolsey and the Ford Marina Plant, 1917–2001. *Women's History Review*, 31(1), 164-166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2021.1927536>

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Published in:
Women's History Review

Publication Status:
Published (in print/issue): 02/01/2022

DOI:
[10.1080/09612025.2021.1927536](https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2021.1927536)

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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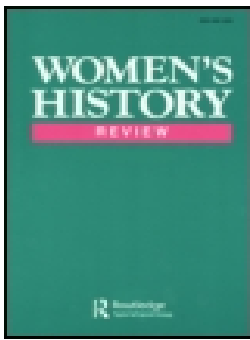
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Working in Cork: Everyday life in Irish Steel, Sunbeam Wolsey and the Ford Marina Plant, 1917–2001

by Liam Cullinane, Cork, Cork University Press, 2020, xvi + 304pp., £35.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-78205-413-9

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To cite this article: Pete Hodson (2021): Working in Cork: Everyday life in Irish Steel, Sunbeam Wolsey and the Ford Marina Plant, 1917–2001, Women's History Review, DOI: [10.1080/09612025.2021.1927536](https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2021.1927536)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2021.1927536>



Published online: 23 May 2021.



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BOOK REVIEW

Working in Cork: Everyday life in Irish Steel, Sunbeam Wolsey and the Ford Marina Plant, 1917–2001, by Liam Cullinane, Cork, Cork University Press, 2020, xvi + 304pp., £35.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-78205-413-9

Dr Liam Cullinane's book analyses the fortunes of three of Cork's now defunct major industrial employers: Irish Steel, Sunbeam Wolsey and the Ford Marina Plant. The three workplaces, Ireland's only steel mill, a predominantly female-employing garment manufacturer, and Ford Motor Company's first purpose-built European assembly plant, are particularly rich case studies. Industrial iconography does not easily fit with traditional Irish imagery, projected by the independent state after 1922, of a rural, Catholic and Gaelic nation. Yet industry, and class-based inequalities, as Cullinane demonstrates, framed the lived experience of Cork's workers throughout much of the twentieth century.

The introduction follows a familiar (but nonetheless valid) contour: Irish working-class history, squeezed between the millstones of unionism and nationalism, has resulted in limited labour research post-Larkin/Connolly. Cullinane's research marks an important contribution to this relatively underdeveloped field. Cullinane's book demonstrates the utility of a shopfloor approach, of Irish labour history interpreted through worker testimony, rather than trades union minute books and national leadership tactics.

Cullinane provides a succinct, yet incisive, business history for each of his three case studies, before examining the social memory of each factory using ex-worker testimony. The rich oral history culture in Cork—fostered by the Cork Folklore Project based at University College Cork—provided Cullinane with both a clear theoretical expertise in the practice of oral history and rich repository of source material. Cullinane's own extensive oral history fieldwork added a further layer of complexity. The study also represents—though Cullinane rarely uses the term itself—a valuable case study of *deindustrialisation* 'beyond the heartlands' (to borrow David Nettleingham's phrase) in an area seldom thought of, or marketed as, 'post-industrial'. The three case studies bear the familiar hallmarks of restructuring, worker resistance, closure and capital flight which culminated, by the late 1980s, in Cork's reputation as one of the country's unemployment blackspots.

Chapters 7 and 8, which interweave the themes of emigration, gender and resistance across Ford, Irish Steel and Sunbeam Wolsey, represent a particularly valuable contribution. The conditions of 'full employment' and periods of acute skilled labour shortage found in Britain eluded Ireland, both north and south, in the post-war period. Curiously, the absence of a strong 'moral economy' and full employment does not seem to have stymied Cork workers' willingness to engage in collective industrial action. Emigration, Ireland's economic safety valve since the famine, and employment precarity continued to shape the lived experience of Cork's industrial workers. Catching the Fishguard boat, Cullinane writes, provided the opportunity to escape 'a constricted horizon of expectations' and an Irish economy bedevilled by stuttering growth. Well-established Irish communities in London, Liverpool and Glasgow exerted a magnetic appeal for young Irish men and women. How these migrant workers slotted into the British industrial labour market, and if economic inequalities were reproduced and sharpened, would make an interesting article if this information was captured during oral history interviews.


Despite the policies of economic protectionism and frugal self-reliance pursued by successive Éire (later Republic of Ireland) governments until the 1960s, the independent state remained, as Cullinane demonstrates, enmeshed in global (especially British and American) capitalism. The gendered nature of industrial capitalism was reproduced in Cork. Familiar tropes of men as ‘breadwinners’ and women ‘homemakers’ emerge in Cullinane’s research, as does the issue of gender pay disparity and the tendency (actively encouraged by employers and trades unions alike) of new mothers to leave full-time employment.

The book would have been enriched by integrating the substantial (and growing) international scholarship on deindustrialisation—the work of Steven High, Tim Strangleman and Jackie Clarke to name but a few. Applying this research would have provided a useful framework through which to read both the economic history and social influence of Cullinane’s three case studies. Similarly, the application of this work may have assisted the author in his (frustratingly brief) discussion of Irish Steel’s takeover, and path to closure, by the Indian-owned Ispat in 1995. The book’s ambitious scope and space pressures involved in converting a thesis into a monograph may have prevented this, but a deeper examination of Cork’s industrial heritage and the ‘half-life’ of deindustrialisation—socially, culturally and politically—would have been useful. What, for example, happened to the factory sites after closure? Have any attempts at workplace memorialisation taken place, by whom, and for what purpose?

The overall result is a highly valuable and accessible re-framing of Cork’s socio-economic history embedded in working-class social memory and the rhythms of industrial life. The Republic of Ireland, clearly, was not insulated from the ravages of deindustrialisation that engulfed western industrial economies from the 1970s. The evident quality of Cullinane’s contribution will hopefully encourage future historians to enliven and expand Irish labour historiography and consider other areas where industry, labour and resistance closely intertwine with the history of place.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2021.1927536>

