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Trade Unions and Society

The Struggle for Acceptance, 1850-1880

W. Hamish Fraser



Trade Unions and Society

First published in 1974, *Trade Unions and Society* examines the process by which trade unions sought and achieved recognition in the three decades after 1850. It shows a parallel process: on the one hand, trade unionists struggling to attain the indispensable Victorian virtue, 'respectability', without sacrificing their essentially protective functions; on the other hand, employers recognizing the value of an ordered system of industrial relation in which trade unions could exert discipline and control over their workers. While this was going on, middle-class radicals (often themselves employers) continued their attack on aristocratic domination of political institutions and looked to a 'labour aristocracy' as allies. The book shows the manner in which, thanks to their own efforts and those of their indefatigable publicists, unionists became identified with the respectable elite of the working class. It deals with a crucial period in the trade union development but looks at it not merely from the point of view of the unions, but also that of the employers, politicians, the press, intellectuals, political economists, giving for the first time a rounded picture of trade unionism and industrial relations in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. This book will be of interest to students of economics and history.



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1850–1880

W. Hamish Fraser

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To my parents



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Contents

	<i>page</i>
Introduction	11
1 Trade-union growth, structure and policy	16
2 Trade-union strategy	53
3 Enemies and friends	73
4 The employers	98
5 Trade unions and politics	120
6 Politicians and pressure groups	146
7 Versus the political economists	167
8 Trade unions and the law	185
9 Trade unions and the press	198
10 Trade unions and the working class	208
Biographical notes on trade unionists	226
Notes	232
Select bibliography	266
Index	283



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Introduction

The search for a system that will produce peace in industrial relations is as old as industry itself, but it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that there was any widespread recognition that trade unions were an essential element in any viable system of industrial relations. How this came about in the three decades after 1850 is the theme of this book. It was a gradual process that involved a change of attitude on the part of both trade unionists and of employers, as well as a fundamental alteration in public opinion.

It is hard not to see the third quarter of the nineteenth century as, in so many ways, a lacuna in British history. The very confidence in itself that permeates society gives the period a uniqueness. The middle classes, above all, had reason to feel confident that at last they were coming into their own, though all levels of society were touched by it. It was a confidence built on stability, the kind of stability symbolised by those mid-century monuments to civic pride and prosperity, the great town halls of the industrial cities of the North. Gone was the trepidation of the 1840s. Yet to come was the self-doubt of the 1880s. For three decades one can see 'victorianism' at its high noon.

The confidence was firmly based on economic prosperity. The abandonment of protection, coinciding with Californian gold discoveries of the late 1840s had allowed a great expansion of trade. After a decade of relative stagnation, annual exports quadrupled in value in less than twenty years. All industries expanded to meet the demand. Industrialising states needed the products of British engineering and machinery exports led the export boom with a tenfold increase in value, but coal, iron, textiles and ships all made their contribution to the growth. Prices and profits held, rising to a peak in the boom years of the early 1870s, and only in the last years of the period are the signs of crisis to be found. Improved trade and profits brought the business class a security there had not been in half a century, and with it came a confidence to negotiate with their workers, to make concessions, and to tolerate some erosion of managerial rights.

12 TRADE UNIONS AND SOCIETY

The gains of an expanding economy were not evenly shared, but improvements in the standard of living of the working classes are unquestionable. Average money wages rose by nearly 50 per cent, while real wages increased by just under 40 per cent. To take merely one useful indicator of affluence: per capita consumption of sugar, having remained surprisingly steady for half a century before 1850, suddenly pulled away and trebled over the next thirty years.

There was also a new political confidence. The events of 1848 had not brought revolution: 'the good spirit of our middle classes' (as Lady Palmerston saw) had stood revealed in the ranks of the special constables on the tenth of April. The propertied classes felt confident enough to think in terms of political concessions and parliamentary reform began to be considered once again. The very instability of political groupings in the 1850s and 1860s was indicative of widespread agreement on issues of domestic policy. Even parliamentary reform did not provide that catalyst of political change that the corn laws had done in the 1840s or that Ireland was to do in the 1880s. Even the least perceptive began to identify a working man with the necessary 'virtue, prudence, intelligence, and frugality' which entitled him 'to enter into the privileged pale of the constituent body of the country'. Perhaps he had always existed; he was no different from the 'proud mechanic' of earlier decades; he was no different from those artisans who had sought to make chartism an educational crusade. But, only in the secure years after 1850 was he able to be clearly differentiated from the 'dangerous classes'.

It was in this atmosphere that trade unions made the transition from those rather mysterious conspiracies that middle-class observers had seen in the 1830s, with so much in them that was dangerous to society, to the respectable, legalised – indeed privileged – bodies that annually sent their sober delegates to the meetings of the Trades Union Congress. Trade unions built up their membership and their financial strength and achieved a new level of stability. They spread from local societies into powerful bodies with efficient organisation and professional administration. Employers adjusted to their new strength and industrial relations became less a matter of a struggle for mastery and more a negotiable set of working rules in which both sides made concessions.

The confidence and the concord lasted for a quarter of a century before the doubts and questioning began. By the end of the 1870s

prices were falling sharply and profits were less secure; unemployment in the staple industries was rising; the political demands of the workers had not ended with reform; the first stirrings of a renewed questioning of capitalism began to appear. Concessions were less easy. Employers now sought increased productivity and cost consciousness came to dominate their thinking on industrial relations. Skilled men, faced with the threat of unemployment, had less confidence in the security of their position and showed less faith in the continuing progress of capitalism. Even their powerful unions were rocked by the altered circumstances: Stonemasons' and Ironfounders' Societies both came near to bankruptcy in 1879 and the great Amalgamated Society of Engineers teetered on the brink of crisis. Changed circumstances brought changed attitudes. Traditional goals and traditional structures began to be critically examined and fundamental adjustments made.

In many ways too, therefore, for trade unionism, and for industrial relations also, the third quarter of the nineteenth century is not so much the start of a new direction as an exceptional product of exceptional circumstances. But, in other ways, the period does mark a decisive breakthrough. Never again were the working classes to be treated with the fear and suspicion of the first half of the nineteenth century. The recognition, the status, the role that trade unions won in these three decades was never again lost. There were many more struggles. By the last decades of the century size and organisation of industry altered and changed the nature of capitalism and trade unions altered in response. But, as Clegg, Fox and Thompson have argued, even Taff Vale, which left the unions utterly vulnerable to an employers' onslaught, was not used as an opportunity for crushing unionism. Most employers accepted their right to exist and governments certainly did. The three decades after 1850 were crucial. The issue of trade unionism and its role was debated in these years in all its aspects and the debate was decided in favour of unionism. After 1875, the existence of unionism and the vital role of unions in an organised and voluntary system of industrial relations was never seriously threatened.

The material for this book was collected over many years and during that time I have received guidance and help from more people than it is possible to mention. Special thanks are, however, due to Professor Asa Briggs, who supervised research on trades councils which I undertook at the University of Sussex and some of the results of which is incorporated in the present work. As he

has been to so many students, Professor Briggs was a source of both encouragement and inspiration. Most of my colleagues at the department of economic history at the University of Strathclyde have had their brains picked at some time for information and I should like to thank all of them. Two in particular, Professor S. G. E. Lythe and Dr J. T. Ward gave a great deal of assistance. They read most of the manuscript and helped remove the worst infelicities of style and encouraged reconsiderations of rash judgements. I am very grateful to them. Mr Eric Young, also of the University of Strathclyde, gave me valuable help with the chapter on trade unions and the law and Mr Ian MacDougall, who has done so much towards discovering and preserving Scottish labour records, has been an ever-helpful friend, willingly answering numerous enquiries.

At the many libraries whose collections I used, I received un-failing kindness and courtesy from the librarians and staff and I wish to thank those of the British Museum, the National Library of Scotland, the British Library of Political and Economic Science, the Bishopsgate Institute, the Picton Library, Liverpool, the Mitchell Library, Glasgow, the Library of the TUC, the public libraries of Aberdeen, Birmingham, Bolton, Bradford, Edinburgh, Darlington, Leeds, Manchester, and Newcastle and the libraries of the Universities of Aberdeen, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, London, Manchester, Nottingham, Sheffield, Strathclyde and Sussex. My thanks also to the archivists of both Newcastle and Glasgow city archives.

Officials of a number of trade unions and trades councils took time to guide me through their archives and to answer queries, and thanks are due to the secretaries and staff of the National Union of Furnishing Trade Operatives, the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers, the Edinburgh branch of the National Union of Printing, Bookbinding and Paperworkers, and the Edinburgh Trade Council. Mr Julius Jacobs, a former secretary of the London Trades Council gave me full access to the minutes of the Council which are in his possession and he and Mrs Jacobs were liberal hosts on many occasions.

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The judgements, the errors of fact that remain and all else in the text remains my own responsibility.

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Chapter I

Trade-union Growth, Structure and Policy

Accurate returns of total trade-union membership in Britain are not available before the 1890s and, therefore, for the mid-Victorian period we are dependent on the reasoned guesses of a few interested contemporaries. It was estimated that there were 600,000 unionists in 1859; Frederic Harrison talked of there being 'not short of half a million' in 1865; George Potter suggested 800,000 in 1867 and George Howell thought there were 1,600,000 in 1876.¹ Whatever the exact value of these figures they support the conclusion that between 1850 and 1880 there was a substantial growth in the number of unions and in the number of unionists. Taking a sample of fifteen important unions, in both England and Scotland, Sidney and Beatrice Webb calculated that their membership rose from 24,737 in 1850 to 125,339 in 1880, an increase of more than 500 per cent.²

The growth was not steady, for membership of individual unions could fluctuate quite erratically. Preparations for a major strike usually brought a flow of new members who would disappear just as rapidly if the strike failed. The trade cycle also played its part, for at times of depression and of high unemployment workers were less willing to take the risk of belonging to a union, especially if the union was powerless to prevent wage cuts. In times of boom, with the union in a position to press for advances and the workers feeling secure enough to ignore employers' hostility to unions, membership tended to rise. Broadly, the overall pattern was one of growth from the last years of the 1840s to 1852, when there was a set-back. A revival in 1853 brought steady expansion until the financial crisis of 1857, with a subsequent depression in many of the main industries, slowed down the rate of growth for two or three years. The first half of the 1860s saw sustained growth in

most unions, only for it to be halted once again in 1867, 1868 and 1869. From 1870 to 1875 all unions were expanding at an unprecedented rate amid boom conditions, but the onset of depression in the second half of the decade decimated most of them. Many disappeared entirely and others lost most of the gains in membership they had made since 1870. And within that broad pattern every union was subject to its own peculiar fluctuations.

We are equally dependent on interested observers for estimates of the strength of unionism in particular crafts and between different parts of the country. At the beginning of the 1850s that painstaking observer of London life, Henry Mayhew, estimated that about 10 per cent of the workers in the average London craft were in a trade society.³ In 1867, Alfred Mault, secretary of the Midlands-based General Builders' Association, gave his estimates of unionisation in the building trades to the Royal Commission on Trades Unions: 10·3 per cent of carpenters and joiners, 17 per cent of masons, 18·75 per cent of bricklayers, 30 per cent of plasterers, 9·75 per cent of plumbers, glaziers and painters and 6 per cent of brickmakers.⁴ In 1879, George Howell, concerned to show the strength of unionism, and despite the losses in the years after 1875, claimed a higher percentage: 50 per cent of carpenters and joiners, 66 per cent of masons, 60 per cent of bricklayers, 33 per cent of plasterers and 16 per cent of painters.⁵ Outside the building trades Howell estimated that one in three engineers was in the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, in 1879,⁶ while a decade earlier William Allan had thought it somewhere between two-thirds and three-quarters.⁷ Ironfounders seem to have maintained a high level of unionism. Daniel Guile told the Royal Commission that in strong districts five out of six ironfounders were members of his society⁸ and, in 1879, Howell estimated an overall average of two out of three. Other estimates of union strength given to the Royal Commission were 25 per cent of cabinetmakers, 90 per cent of cotton spinners, 90 per cent of provincial printers and 85 per cent of London bookbinders,⁹ while Howell thought 75 per cent of boilermakers were unionised in 1879.

The main geographical areas of union strength followed the distribution of industry. The North West was the strongest with its cotton factories and engineering works, followed by the industrial Midlands, though Birmingham was a black spot because of the small scale of most of its industry. Despite great weakness in the woollen industry, Yorkshire as a whole was quite strong, as was the North East. The West of Scotland was well organised, and

Edinburgh had one or two strong unions, but taken as a whole, Scotland was generally regarded as weak. Some London trades societies were strong, but the high level of casual labour in the metropolis made the overall picture not very bright. In the mining areas the level of unionisation varied quite drastically throughout the period, with the ups and downs of mining unions. Indeed, in all areas and in each industry there were quite marked fluctuations in membership in response to the ebb and flow of the trade cycle or to the internal problems of unions.

I

In the building trades the largest society was the Operative Stonemasons' Friendly Society, formed amid the Owenite enthusiasm of 1833. Its main areas of strength were Manchester, Birmingham and Bristol, but under the able leadership of its secretary from 1847 to 1872, Richard Harnott,¹⁰ it grew from 4,671 members in 1850 to more than 26,000 in 1876, with 373 branches,¹¹ before the end of the building boom of the seventies began to take its toll and it fell back to under 13,000 in 1880. The society covered England and Wales. In Scotland there was the United Association of Operative Masons, formed in 1852 and with 6,000 members in 1880. The bricklayers were divided between the London and Manchester Orders of the Operative Bricklayers' Society, two quite distinct and mutually hostile bodies. The two Orders had split in 1848 and the expansionist policies of Edwin Coulson, secretary of the London body from 1860 to 1891 created great bitterness. Attempts at an accord between them were usually short-lived. Until the end of the 1870s the Manchester Order was the larger with 7,350 members in 1875. The London Order grew from 200 to 300 at its formation to over 5,500 in 1866. By 1870 this had fallen to 1,441, but a steady recovery in the 1870s took it to 6,749 in 1877 and despite a fall in the depression it had, by the 1880s, surpassed the Manchester Order.¹²

The best-known builders' society of the period was undoubtedly the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners, formed by the amalgamation of twenty local – mainly London – societies in 1860. It began with only 600 members, but from 1862, when the efficient and dedicated Hull joiner, Robert Applegarth, took over as general secretary, it grew steadily: 3,320 in 1865, 10,178 in 1870, 14,917 in 1875, and 17,764 in 1880. With headquarters in London, its more than 300 branches by the end of the seventies covered

England, Wales and Ireland and there was a number of branches in the United States. A similar amalgamation, the Associated Carpenters and Joiners, was formed in Scotland in 1861 and had about 7,000 members in the mid-1870s. Outside the amalgamations was the Manchester-based General Union of Carpenters and Joiners whose history went back to 1827. It was steadily passed in membership by the Amalgamated Society, but it still had more than 10,000 members in 1875. However, in the following years the Amalgamated Society began a war of attrition against the General Union, deliberately setting out to 'poach' whole lodges and by the middle of the following decade the membership of the General Union had fallen to under 2,000.¹³ Besides these large bodies, many small local societies of carpenters and joiners remained in existence, particularly in London. George Potter's union, the Progressive Joiners' Society, for example, had a mere 130 members.¹⁴

Local societies of plasterers came together in a National Association of Operative Plasterers in 1860. Its general secretary, based first in Liverpool and later in Birmingham, was Charles Williams and although he was a man of considerable ability and enthusiasm, the Association grew only slowly and was under 4,000 members at the end of the 1870s. It suffered from frequent splits, such as in 1870 when most of the London branches broke away to form a Metropolitan Association.¹⁵ Other building trade unions remained small and of little significance. The United Operative Plumbers' Association covering Birmingham, the North of England and Scotland grew only slightly to just over 2,000 members after its formation in 1865 and it, too, suffered from lodges breaking away, particularly the Scottish ones. The painters, who had been suffering for decades from an influx of unskilled and casual labour, found it the most difficult to organise on a national basis. About sixty North of England societies were loosely linked in the Manchester Alliance from 1855, but not until 1873 was George Shipton able to organise a mainly London Society, the Amalgamated Society of House Decorators and Painters.¹⁶ A Manchester-based Brickmakers' Society achieved considerable notoriety in the 1860s with its policy of sabotage, boycott and machine smashing against machine-made bricks, but, by the 1870s, the battle had been fought and lost. In London attempts to organise the brickmakers in the 1860s were short-lived.

At the forefront of British industry in the mid-century was the iron industry and its related machine-building and shipbuilding industries and it was here that the strongest unions developed.

Above them all stood the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, formed in September 1850 by an amalgamation of the Manchester-based Journeymen Steam Engine and Machine Makers' Friendly Society ('the Old Mechanics'), the Steam Engine Makers' Society and a number of London unions of millwrights and smiths. Right from the start it was larger than any other union, with 12,000 members by the end of its first year. Its rate of growth was spectacular: 21,000 by 1860, 35,000 by 1870, 44,692 in 1880. It covered fitters, turners, smiths, patternmakers and millwrights in locomotive building, in machine-building – particularly textile machines – in steam-engine making and in marine engineering. Lancashire, Cheshire, Yorkshire, Tyneside and London were its strongest areas but by the end of the 1860s it had spread to all parts of the country and beyond. Its 312 branches in 1868 included 35 in Scotland, 13 in Ireland, 9 in Australasia, 4 in Canada, 11 in the United States, 1 in Malta, 1 in Constantinople and 1 in France.¹⁷ Not all eligible workers joined the A.S.E. and a number of small rival societies persisted, such as the Steam Engine Makers' Society, with just over 4,000 members in 1880; the United Patternmakers' Association with 800 members; the United Machine Workers with 300 members, and, in Scotland, the Associated Blacksmiths with 2,000 members, in 1880. In addition there was a proliferation of tiny specialist engineering societies on a local basis.¹⁸ None of these presented a threat to the domination of the A.S.E., but they were a source of frequent irritation and dispute at certain works.

In the foundries the moulders and ironfounders had been organised since the beginning of the century in the Friendly Society of Iron Moulders, changing its name in 1854 to the Friendly Society of Iron Founders. Its outstanding secretary was Daniel Guile, general secretary from 1863 to 1881, under whom membership grew from around 8,000 in 1860 to over 12,000 at the end of his period of office. In Scotland the Scottish Iron Moulders' Union, which became the Associated Iron Moulders of Scotland, grew fairly steadily to around 4,000 members in 1880. Alongside the moulders in the foundries were smaller groups of iron dressers and coremakers usually organised in their own societies. In the brass foundries of the Midlands the workers were, from 1866, organised in the United Journeymen Brassfounders' Association with 1,900 members in 1880, and in 1872 W. J. Davis created the Amalgamated Brassworkers' Society with 5,000 members in 1880.

The actual makers of the iron, the puddlers and millmen of

Staffordshire, Teesside, Yorkshire, Durham and central Scotland were slow to organise on a permanent basis. The Staffordshire men formed a union in 1863, which became the Associated Ironworkers of Great Britain. A split in 1865 caused the North of England to form their own National Amalgamated Association of Ironworkers under the presidency of John Kane. Kane's body, with around 5,000 members in 1866, became the best known. The Staffordshire millmen continued with their own separate body.¹⁹

The vital fuel of British industry was coal and by 1873 more than half a million workers were employed in the industry. The miners, however, proved notoriously difficult to organise on a permanent national basis. It was not for want of effort, but isolation of miners' villages, differences in work conditions at different collieries and in different coal fields and the hostility of the coal owners proved major barriers to permanency. A National Association under Martin Jude had had a short-lived existence in the 1840s, but by 1850 there were no national links and what organisation there was was on a county or even more localised basis. In 1855, however, under the leadership of Alexander McDonald, a university-educated miners' agent from Lanarkshire, a Scottish Miners' Association was formed, loosely linking what remained of county organisations in Fife, Midlothian, Ayrshire, Renfrewshire, Stirlingshire and West Lothian. Three years later the Yorkshire miners succeeded in forming a permanent association, the South Yorkshire Miners' Association, which after the appointment of John Normansell as secretary in 1864 became one of the best-organised miners' unions. A much weaker West Yorkshire Association appeared in 1863 but for a time its existence was a very precarious one. Some traces of unionism persisted in Northumberland and Durham in the 1850s, but it usually made an appearance only at times of strike. However, in 1862 an organisation, which proved to be permanent, the Northumberland Miners' Mutual Confident Association, was formed to resist the reintroduction of the yearly bond, with Thomas Burt as its secretary from 1865. Five years later, the Durham men followed their neighbours' example with the Durham Miners' Association of which William Crawford became general secretary in the 1870s. In Lancashire, Thomas Halliday was the main force behind the revival of mining unionism and in the early 1860s he was able to form a federation of most of the Lancashire unions.²⁰

Much of this revival of mining unionism in the 1860s was due to the efforts of Alexander McDonald in the 1850s to renew contacts

between miners' unions, mainly for the purpose of pressing for improved conditions in the mines, through parliamentary legislation. The efforts bore fruit in 1863 when the National Association of Coal, Lime and Ironstone Miners was formed, linking unions in all the main mining areas. Unity was not maintained for long, however, and in 1869 a breakaway body was formed by those who favoured a more centralised organisation and one which would create a national organisation for industrial purposes and not confine united action between regions to parliamentary lobbying, as McDonald's body did. The main strength of the Amalgamated Association of Miners, as the new body was called, lay in Lancashire and in Wales, where it was responsible for organising the South Wales miners in a union. It proved a substantial rival to the National Association between 1869 and its demise in 1875. In 1873, at the height of the boom, the Amalgamated Association was claiming 99,145 members compared with the National Association's 123,406.²¹ Despite the collapse of the Amalgamated Association in 1875, due to a number of disastrous strike defeats, the National Association was not able to maintain its existence in the face of the depression. Even most of the county organisations broke up and only in Fife and Northumberland and Durham was a really widespread organisation maintained.

In the textile industry the cotton mills of Lancashire housed the major concentrations of labour: and there union organisation among the cotton workers was effective and extensive. It was, however, largely made up of local societies. Frequent attempts were made to link together these local bodies, but any organisations that did emerge were fairly loose federations. John Doherty's General Union of Spinners had collapsed in the early 1830s. An attempt at a new federation was made in 1842 when the Association of Operative Cotton Spinners, Twiners and Self-Acting Minders of the United Kingdom was formed, which sought to unite both hand-mule spinners and the workers on the new self-acting machines. Rivalry between the two groups put a great strain on the Association and it faded away after 1847, when the Bolton and Oldham spinners' societies withdrew. A new amalgamation was constructed in 1853, again consisting of hand-mule spinners and self-actor minders. It survived the big Preston strike of that year but steadily declined in importance, since the two main areas of Bolton and Oldham were not associated with it. A further federation in 1860 remained weak and unco-ordinated and not until 1869 was a permanent Amalgamated Association of

Operative Cotton Spinners, Self-Acting Minders, Twiners and Rovers of Lancashire and Adjoining Counties formed. By 1880 this body, although weakened by a major strike in 1878, had just under 12,000 members.

In weaving, there were some powerloom weavers' associations in the 1840s and probably some informal federation of a few of them in the early 1850s. From 1854 when the Blackburn Weavers' Association was formed a number of district associations of weavers' societies appeared, clustered around the main centres: Padiham had one in 1856, Darwen in 1857, Accrington, Preston and Haslingden in 1858, Clitheroe in 1860, Bolton in 1865, Nelson in 1866. New district associations continued to be formed throughout the period and by 1880 there were at least thirty of these. It was as a result of a breakaway from the Blackburn Association in 1858, and at the prompting of Thomas Birtwistle, an official of the Accrington Association, that the East Lancashire Power Loom Weavers' Association was formed, which survived both the cotton famine of the 1860s and a nine-weeks' strike of great bitterness in 1878. It was reorganised in 1878 as the North-East Lancashire Weavers' Amalgamation, linking fourteen district associations with almost 16,000 members. In 1884 this was widened into the Northern Counties Amalgamated Association of Weavers. In the preparatory sections of the industry, an attempt in 1857-8 to form a federation of Cardroom Operatives came to nothing and not until 1886 was a permanent Cardroom Amalgamation formed. These federations of weavers and spinners never at any time contained all the cotton unions. Very many local societies remained completely independent or were organised in other smaller federations.²²

The woollen and worsted mills of Yorkshire were in complete contrast to Lancashire, for there was very little organisation among the woollen workers before the 1880s. Influenced by developments in Lancashire, some of the more-skilled workers did organise small unions. In the 1860s, for example, most of the main wool and worsted towns had their local societies of overlookers and, in some, societies of spinners appear from time to time, but the great mass of workers in the industry were untouched by unionism and even when an organisation came into existence during a strike it never succeeded in establishing itself.

Unionism among the hosiery workers of Nottingham and Leicestershire had a long and frequently notorious history, but in the 1850s and 1860s the industry was being transformed by tech-

nical developments and the position of the hand framework knitter working outside the factories was being undermined by the new rotary power and circular power machines. The hand workers were organised in many small local unions, but in 1866 these succeeded in federating in a United Framework Knitters' Society, but it split in 1871 between the hand workers in factories and those working outside. In addition, there was a Rotary Framework Knitters' Society and a Circular Framework Knitters' Union. In the main towns these unions were able to build up a strong organisation, but they failed almost completely in organising the large number of workers in the many villages of the area and this encouraged the movement of the industry from the towns to the villages.²³

Nottingham was also the centre of an expanding lace industry. A Lace Makers' Society was formed in 1850 covering most sections of the industry. A split occurred in 1867 between workers in different processes, but in 1874 they were re-united in the Amalgamated Operative Lace Makers.²⁴

Iron, coal, textiles – the fourth pillar of Britain's industrial dominance was shipbuilding. Until the mid-1860s the Thames remained the most important area, but the development of iron-shipbuilding, combined with bad business methods had by the end of the sixties brought a switch to Tyneside, Merseyside and Clydeside; it also brought a change in the nature of shipbuilding unionism. The wooden shipbuilders, the shipwrights, had been able to develop powerful local unions which, in most areas, fairly effectively controlled entry, rules and remuneration in the trade. With the development of iron-shipbuilding, however, their position was eroded and new workers in iron moved into the industry. The United Society of Boilermakers, formed in 1834, added Ironshipbuilders to its title in 1852 and began to expand steadily in shipbuilding. From under 2,000 members in 1850 it rose to almost 18,000 in 1880. Shipwrights' societies continued and they were successfully united in a national organisation in 1882, but their fate was irrevocable decline: even on the remaining woodwork in shipbuilding they found themselves being squeezed out. In Scotland especially, the Associated Carpenters took over more and more of the finishing jobs.

This period also saw the traditional crafts trying to move from a local to a national basis – tailors, shoemakers, cabinetmakers, printers and bookbinders. All of these had a long history of combination in local societies. An Amalgamated Association of

Operative Tailors was formed in 1866 with headquarters in Manchester, though the London Operative Tailors remained aloof until destroyed by strike and court actions in 1867. There was also a separate Scottish Association formed about the same time. An Amalgamated Cordwainers' Society was formed in 1863, linking some London and provincial societies of boot and shoemakers.²⁵ It consisted mainly of hand-sewing workers, though thanks to the efforts of George Odger, of the London West-End Ladies' Shoemakers' Society, it was not committed to any opposition to machine-made work. However, discrimination against factory workers undoubtedly took place and in 1873 representatives from the factory-based industry of Northamptonshire and Leicestershire broke away to form the National Union of Boot and Shoe Riveters and Finishers,²⁶ which grew to over 6,000 members by 1880. Again, the Scottish shoemakers were separately organised in local societies, with a national society surviving for only a few years in the 1860s. In cabinetmaking, the Alliance Cabinetmakers' Association established in 1865 spread from London, but for long faced opposition from independent local societies.

Trade unionism had been well-established in printing and book-binding since the eighteenth century, but despite numerous attempts to create national organisations there was still divided organisation. Most provincial printers were in the Provincial Typographical Association, which had been formed in 1849 amid the ruins of an earlier National Typographical Association. Its headquarters were in Manchester and by the end of the 1870s had well over 5,000 members in about 80 branches. The London and Scottish printers, however, remained separate. The London Society of Compositors dated from the end of the eighteenth century and the Scottish societies, although they had been affiliated to the National Typographical Association in the forties, formed their own Scottish Typographical Association in 1853.²⁷ Among the bookbinders there was a Bookbinders' Consolidated Union dating from 1840 covering mainly provincial workers but moving into London in 1857 to compete with the London Consolidated Lodge of Journeymen Bookbinders, which had Thomas Dunning as its secretary. In the 1860s the Consolidated Union moved into the other important bookbinding centre, Edinburgh, which had retained its independent Union Society of Journeymen Bookbinders, and forced amalgamation in 1872. Also in 1872 the Consolidated Union opened its doors to machine rulers and by this steady expansionist policy had achieved a membership of just

under 2,000 by the end of the 1870s. There were other tiny but powerful societies, particularly in London, that retained their independence, such as the Vellum Binders' Society, which had been formed in 1823, and the Day-Working Binders, who had broken from the London Consolidated Lodge in 1850.

Some of the most powerful, though numerically small, unions consisted of skilled craftsmen in specialist trades confined to limited areas. For example, with the bulk of its membership around the Birmingham region, the Flint Glass Makers' Society maintained a very effective organisation with about 2,000 members. The best-known such unions were those of the Sheffield light metal trades – file smiths, table-knife grinders, edge-tool grinders, saw makers, saw grinders, saw-handle makers and a host of such highly specialised workers – who were all organised in tiny societies striving to maintain a firm control over their particular craft.

While most of the societies of the period were organisations of skilled workmen, organisation among the unskilled was not unknown. From 1853 there was a Harbour Labourers' Society on Clydeside,²⁹ and short-lived bodies of general labourers existed in Glasgow at the end of the 1850s.³⁰ A builders' labourers' society appeared during the London lock-out of 1859 and the Royal Commission on Trades Union heard of a number of organisations of builders' labourers.³¹ In general, however, organisation among the unskilled proved difficult to achieve and even more difficult to maintain: low earnings, a low level of education, occupational mobility and the casual nature of their work proved massive barriers for the unskilled to overcome and made them particularly vulnerable to economic fluctuations. However, the exceptional economic conditions of the first few years of the 1870s, with a high demand for labour, gave even the unskilled workers a strong bargaining position and in these years a number of unions of the unskilled appeared.

The most important new area of organisation was among the agricultural labourers, notoriously the most poorly-paid of workers. The first abortive efforts in this direction had taken place in the mid-sixties, when farm servants in many of the main farming areas of Scotland had formed protective societies, and when there was some organised activity in Dorset and in Lincolnshire. But the honour of really inspiring 'the revolt of the field' must go to Warwickshire, where in February 1872, under the secretaryship of the Barford Methodist, Joseph Arch, a Warwickshire Agricultural Labourers' Union was formed. Other areas, Lincolnshire,

Huntingdonshire, Kent and Sussex quickly followed and, in April, delegates from twenty-six counties, meeting at Leamington Spa, formed the National Agricultural Labourers' Union with Arch as its chairman. A year later it had almost 72,000 members in 982 branches. A number of unions continued to exist outside the National and some of these were united in 1873 in a Federal Union of Labourers, with about 50,000 members. Internal disputes and the onset of the agricultural depression in the second half of the 1870s began to take their toll of the agricultural unions and by 1881, membership of Arch's union had slumped to 15,000 and the decline continued throughout that decade.³²

Another important new area of organisation at the beginning of the 1870s was the railways. Some societies of engine drivers and firemen appear from time to time from the 1840s; in 1866 there was an Enginemens and Firemens United Society with its own journal. Not until 1871, however, did a permanent organisation appear, largely due to the assistance of M. T. Bass, the brewer. A national union of railwaymen, the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants was formed and, by the following year, there was a Scottish society of the same name. It was intended to cover all grades, but in 1880 both the engine drivers and the signalmen broke away to form their own separate organisations.³³

The year 1871 also brought a significant breakthrough among the dock workers of London's east end. Resisting a 25 per cent cut in wages, they formed the Labour Protection League, which in October 1872 claimed a membership of 30,000, including not only stevedores and dockers, but other workers on the waterside.³⁴ Barge men were in the Amalgamated Lightermen and Watermen's Association and there was some organisation of seamen.

Numerous new organisations of the unskilled, previously unorganised, workers made a brief appearance at the beginning of the 1870s. Dustmen, shop assistants, postal workers, carmen and even policemen developed organisations for a few months in these years. The London gas stokers organised the Amalgamated Gas Stokers' Union during their strike in 1872 which blacked out a large part of London. The builders' labourers formed the General Amalgamated Labourers' Union. At the end of 1872 there was even an attempt to link the new unions of transport workers, when a conference of representatives of the Lightermen's Society, the Carmen's Association, the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants and the Labour Protection League resulted in the formation of the Amalgamated Labour Union. It was intended to

co-ordinate strike activity with a council made up of representatives of the four societies to which all disputes had to be submitted before a strike was embarked upon:³⁵ there is no evidence that it actually succeeded in regularising procedures.

Few of the unions survived the onset of large-scale unemployment brought by the depression in the second half of the seventies. Many had crumbled earlier in the face of bitter employer opposition. But, contrary to what was once believed, unionism among the unskilled workers did not die out entirely. Little pockets of organisation persisted and, in the London docks, from their organisation within the Labour Protection League the stevedores were able to build and maintain what was virtually a closed shop until the end of the 1880s.

There were literally hundreds of small societies with only a few score members usually confined to one particular locality: basket-makers, cocoa fibre mat makers, composition and ornamental frame makers, glass blowers, gilders, gold beaters, organ builders, tobacco pipe makers, portmanteau makers, french polishers, wire workers and wood carvers, to name only a handful. In Staffordshire, Glasgow, London and in the West Country there were a number of potters' societies, covering the specialist tasks of potting. Most coopers were organised in their own local society, as were sail makers and ship riggers, tinplate workers and rope workers. Even small unions of handloom weavers still existed at the end of the 1870s. Some of these unions were really no more than friendly societies, but, at times of dispute, could be brought into action as trade unions. All were subject to the vicissitudes of the trade cycles and to the energy – or lack of it – of their secretaries.

II

A multitude of trade societies produced a multitude of variations in structure and there is no common pattern. The majority of societies remained small, with limited resources coming either from regular 1d or 2d contributions or from occasional levies. The funds would be used either for a brief strike or to provide small sums for widows, orphans or disabled members of the trade. Usually such donations were made on an *ad hoc* basis, with the approval of a trade meeting, which was the normal manner in which any major decisions were taken. With the growth of national trade organisations such primitive democracy was no longer

possible and more formal rules and regulations were necessary, but the variety remained.

The most spectacular of the larger national societies was the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, which the Webbs in their *History* regarded as providing a 'new model' for other craft unions. While it is true that the A.S.E. did point the direction for some future trade-union development, it took a long time before other trades achieved the efficiency of the engineers and, indeed, many did not attempt to emulate its structure. The A.S.E. had the advantage of building on two well-established unions, the Steam Engine Makers' Society and the 'Old Mechanics' and it combined features of both. The Steam Engine Makers' Society had been largely a friendly society, paying sickness allowance among its members, but no out-of-work, i.e. unemployment or strike, benefit. The 'Old Mechanics', on the other hand, paid out-of-work benefit but no sickness allowance. The benefit side of the new society was, therefore, based on an amalgamation of the two bodies and provided a full range of benefits – out-of-work as well as sickness and superannuation. It combined to an extent and with an effectiveness such as had not before existed the advantages of both a trade and a friendly society. For the high weekly due of 1s a member was eligible for up to £19 18s per year unemployment benefit;³⁶ 10s per week for 26 weeks and 5s per week thereafter sickness benefit; up to 9s per week superannuation benefit; a lump sum of £100 on permanent disablement; £12 funeral allowance; and in certain circumstances of high unemployment up to £6 emigration assistance.

The one society to deliberately model itself on the A.S.E. was the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners. There were differences in the level of some benefits, but, to all intents, the pattern was the same. A number of other societies such as the Friendly Society of Ironfounders, the United Society of Boiler-makers and the Flintglass Makers' Society offered a similar substantial range of benefits in return for high dues, but the friendly benefit side in these long pre-dated the formation of the A.S.E.

In many other societies, in contrast, trade and sickness funds were quite distinct. In the Operative Stonemasons' Society, for example, for 5½d a week a member could join the trade section, which entitled him only to funeral benefit, superannuation and support in the event of a strike. It was optional to pay a further 3½d for the sickness fund. The London Order of the Operative Bricklayers' Society had no sickness fund until the 1870s and the