

# Preface in English

## *Use Labour history – The use of Labour history*

The interest in Labour history is growing. To be sure, the universities have not shown much interest for the last few years. But other parts of the country have. Particularly an interest is taken in local history where the individual can see the connection to his or her own life. The Labour movement, too, has recently begun taking initiatives and supporting initiatives, both locally and nationally, to have its own history written – everyday life and working life as they were shaped by local conditions. In addition some major projects like the Labour Museum in Copenhagen and the television series “Nu dages det ...” have seen the light of day over the last few years.

This yearbook for The History of the Labour Movement focuses on how Labour history is passed on. On how Labour history is taught in primary and secondary schools with the special requirements posed by these institutions to the way things should be done. On the way in which Labour history is presented to the public in museums and on television. And not least on the passing on of the history of workers to the workers themselves. Many of the local projects which have been going on have used oral testimony. Indeed, many projects are mainly constituted by what the workers themselves have been able to tell. The professional experts who have been involved, in many cases also as initiators, have used this material in many different ways. In combination with other sources or not. Used the memories to give life and blood to the history, or left the tales as they were as a piece of history writing. With this yearbook we want to make it possible to gain an insight into the many different ways of using history that are going on, and to show the possibilities and limitations of the different ways of passing on history.

This is not the first time the SFAH has been the forum for passing on and discussing experience made with local history and the use of memoirs in Labour history. This was also done at the seminar on workers' memories and Labour history in November 1985. For a good many years the SFAH has had a committee for local history. Even though this yearbook focuses on the passing on of history, the articles more or less directly contain a discussion of the use history writing makes of memoirs, and of the local community as the framework of Labour history. These discussions have mainly been pursued outside of Denmark. Perhaps mainly in Great Britain where for many years the organization, “History Workshop”, has constituted the framework of innumerable local Labour history projects.

In Great Britain local History Workshop groups have collected and published memoirs. Either in the form of autobiographies or in the form of extracts from memoirs illustrating common themes such as school conditions. What is special about the British History Workshop groups is that very often it is the working-class narrators themselves who participate in the entire process, in telling their own memories to a tape-recorder, editing, publishing and passing them on. To some History Workshop people this has been the point of the exercise. The process itself of shaping one's own history was emphasized as important and meaningful in itself almost irrespective of the result. Others have been sceptical and have stressed that the work with memories and local history does not necessarily in itself produce any insight into the process of historical developments and the reasons behind changes in the local community. That would call for the individual experience as expressed in the memories being integrated in a social context. And exactly at this point what is needed is history writing and the knowledge and skill of the professional historian.

This discussion is equally relevant in a Danish context. From time to time mild scepticism vis a vis local history and everyday history has been voiced in SFAH-circles. Aren't we running a



risk that the political history and the overall trends will disappear from Labour history if we focus on what is local and on everyday life? The British discussion points partly to different ways of using memories and local history, partly to some of the problems that are in fact raised by the use of memories and local history. Ideally there is no contradiction between using material to gain an insight into one's own history and, on the other hand, as a source in a research and teaching process with the purpose of giving an insight to other people as well. Nor is there a contradiction between everyday life history and "the overall history". However, the fact that in practice it can be difficult to contain all of it in one and the same project becomes apparent from time to time also in the articles of this yearbook.

In the individual projects many different ways of meeting this challenge have been chosen. This includes ways that occasionally impinge on a different discussion which has been running, at least among historians, in connection with the use of memoirs. How much is just a good yarn, and how much is objective description of reality, and can a good yarn pass on a truthful historical picture even if not fully correct in all details? The question of how far one can go in order to pass on history is a problem which, among others, Poul Vitus Nielsen discusses in his article on the television series "Snart dages det ...".

The many different projects we introduce in the yearbook have geneses that are just as different, by the way. Some were started at the initiative of trade unions. Others were initiated by professional historians, ethnologists and other Labour historians – the initiative came *de bas* and had local origins. Some have had much money available, others have rather had much enthusiasm of their own as a back-up. All this contributes towards giving the different projects differing frameworks, and it is worthwhile to keep this in mind.

We start by introducing some of the most large-scale and ambitious projects. The work of the National Union of Semi-Skilled Workers (SID) to get Labour history included in school text books in a proper manner. As early as in 1971 SID began looking at the way in which work and worker's history were treated in school books. What was found was that if anything at all was said it rarely contributed to an understanding of workers' conditions or the history of the Labour movement. This work has been followed up subsequently by the SID through the project "The History of the Labourer". On the basis of the dictum: If those who write the books cannot do a better job, we must do it ourselves. In his article John Mølgård tells the story of the SID effort to have the history of the labourer written, and to provoke a change in the content of the school books from 1971 and until today.

How, quite concretely, can Labour history be taught in the school system? Sanne and John Hansen give an example of this in their article. Taking as their point of departure the construction of the Little Belt Bridge in 1925-35, they tell the history of the labourer by describing the life of the bridge navy, Gunnar. The basic point in the work of Sanne and John Hansen is to use something concrete as the point of departure something with which the children are familiar, viz. the bridge. And then, by means of "the small history" let the children catch sight of "the large history". As another point of departure they have used a second point of criticism leveled by the SID against history education in the schools: Teaching should not be pursued with the printed book as the only medium, but also through video-tapes, slides etc., and by practical experiments in which – on a small scale – the children try to build a bridge of their own.

Henrik Adrian who has had many years' experience as a teacher in secondary schools, introduces his article by stating that the history of the Labour movement has entered the text books of secondary education in the course of the last 10 years. In some cases the interpretation is debatable, but the fact remains that Labour history has found its way into the history books of secondary history education. The problem, then, is not so much the text books, but the fact that Labour history becomes "text book knowledge", according Henrik Adrian. To the pupils it does not matter whether they are dealing with working conditions in Denmark of the 1930s or the Ancient Incas as long as history does not seem to be of concern to the pupils themselves. Henrik



Adrian gives us a recipe of how the local community of Herlev can be made into an experience, a piece of living knowledge of the local community, the history of the working class in the post-war years and the pupils' own history.

Whereas the school system with its traditions and the confines that exist for teaching can be a somewhat ungainly dancing partner, in the Brickfield Project there was scope enough to let things develop as they would. The Brickfield Project got off the ground when a group of amateur actors wanted to make a local play. They asked the folklorists in Copenhagen whether in their archives they had any folkloristic material from the district which could serve as a background for dramatization. What emerged was both a play, radio, television and video programmes, teaching material, a number of articles and books and perhaps even a museum will be established. The project is based on the collection of tales told by the old brickfield workers combined with the collection of old tools etc. In his article »Det en arbejdsmand kan fortælle kan godt være af værdi« ("What a Labourer Can Tell, May Very Well be Valuable"), Karsten Biering tells us of the experience he enjoyed together with Jørgen Jonasson, the former foreman in a brickworks, when they dug into the history of work in a brickworks. And of how workers and scholars (and North Schleswig people and people from Copenhagen) learned from each other and grew to respect each other.

In "Lille dreng på Rundetårn" (Little Boy in the Round Tower) Finn Vadmand retells the story behind the genesis of the picture play concerning the general strike in Randers in 1922. In a way it is a sad story. It was possible to obtain the necessary funds (from, among others, the Danish TUC educational fund) and to create the picture play about the important event in the history of the Labour movement. However, it was never seen by very many of the workers who were intended to be the audience.

Similarly the local community sets the frame of the next project to be presented. For many years Keld Dalsgård has been writing on local trade union history. In the article Keld Dalsgård reports on the cooperation with the local trade unions, and his considerations on how to write labour history with the local community as the frame of reference into which enter both the paper workers as individuals, the organizations, the local community and national history. His work with local history has enabled him to look at some of the events which often, in the course of history writing, have been taken for granted, without further explanation, for instance the unionization of the workers. Keld Dalsgård lists a number of examples of the way in which material from local history can shed new light on Labour history, thus making it possible for local history to form the basis of a new national history.

Whereas Keld Dalsgård has chosen to use memories as one source among others and write his version of history on this basis, Kirsten Folke Harrits and Ditte Scharnberg in their collection and writing efforts have chosen to let the memories speak for themselves. Their point of departure is that the worker is himself or herself the historian. Through their memories he or she passes on her or his own tale of the past. This view of memories stems from a profound respect of the separate nature of memories.

The work involved in collecting, treating and passing on memories thus becomes a piece of work in cultural history in which the object of the exercise is to put onto paper the history writing of the workers themselves, so that this history can be passed on to new generations of workers. Like Keld Dalsgård, Kirsten Harrits and Ditte Scharnberg have cooperated closely with the local trade unions, but they have used different methods and have had different intentions. Between them the two articles give an insight into the possibilities available for passing on local Labour history to the workers of a local community.

While many of the projects mentioned above are initiatives taken by people outside the well-established institutions, Else Marie Boyhus' article deals with the work that went on in 1985-1988 at the Lolland-Falster County Museum registering, studying and describing the town of



Nakskov's history from 1900-1940. The period during which Nakskov was industrialized. The very fact that the study was undertaken by an established museum made it possible to work both broadly and in depth. In her article Else Marie Boyhus describes both the concrete work with the many different part-projects and gives us a small slice of the history of Nakskov during the period. The special Nakskov variation of Social Democratic local policy in the years between the wars.

In their article on the Women's Museum in Århus, Merete Ipsen and Jette Sandahl discuss the possibilities that museums have in presenting history in other ways than the written word by means of interiors and objects. In addition to working very consciously with ways of making exhibitions, the Women's Museum has also worked in "grass-root research" in which context young unemployed women have explored their own history. For instance by having young unmarried mothers interviewing earlier generations of unmarried mothers. Later on, together the "young" and the "old" worked with the material at the museum and found ways of passing it on. For instance, by playing extracts from tapes, but also by constructing interiors giving the spectator a feeling of how things really were.

In her article Anette Vasstrøm, too, deals with the opportunities that museums have in presenting otherwise well known material in new and different ways. Anette Vasstrøm describes the many considerations that lie behind the structuring of exhibitions at the Labour Museum in Copenhagen, and all the practical work that precedes the exhibition which the public sees. By means of retrospection on developments within museums of cultural history and ethnological scholarly traditions, the activities of the Labour Museum are thrown into relief. What is happening is both a pursuance of existing traditions and a break-away from ordinary Danish museum practice. By means of concrete examples – especially derived from the work with the exhibition "For liv og brød" (For Life and Bread) – Anette Vasstrøm demonstrates the opportunities open to museums to give the guest a feeling of "how things really were", and how museum people have endeavoured to place the experience of everyday life, which the exhibition depicts, in a historical and political context.

Books and exhibitions are ways of presenting history that have often been tried by Labour historians, they are ways that are often available. This is not true of television. The TV-series "Snart dages det ..." is still the only one of its kind. In his article "Fra kulisserne" (From the Wings) Poul Vitus Nielsen points out that this very fact was one of the problems. Much of the discussion to which the series gave rise, and much of the criticism levelled against the series occurred because far too many expectations had to be fulfilled. The series was seen as *the* history, rather than as what it was intended to be, viz. one interpretation among many possible interpretations. In his article Poul Vitus Nielsen touches upon many of the points of criticism and explains the considerations behind the selection of material. The mode chosen was drama documentary, and the article contains many examples to show what can and what cannot be done within this genre. It also explains why it was the point of view of the film maker rather than the historian which came to dominate the series. At the same time Poul Vitus Nielsen both as a film maker and as a historian is quite willing to take responsibility for the result.

The final article in the yearbook is by Anker Gemzøe and contains a number of considerations pertaining to "Pelle Erobreren" (Pelle, The Conqueror) as a film and as a book. He demonstrates that the film is truer to the author's intention than it would seem on the face of it. The fidelity has nothing to do with loyally following the book chapter by chapter – the two media are far too different to permit something like that. It is Anker Gemzøe's point that loyalty lies at a much deeper level – in the overall symbolism and basic view of history contained in the film. This makes the screen version of Pelle Erobreren one of the best novel-to-film adaptations. According to Anker Gemzøe the most serious weakness of the film is the lack of historical dynamism which is such a pronounced feature of the book. The way in which this dimension of the book



could have become a dimension of the film is made clear by comparisons with other great epic films like Bertolucci's "1900".

Like Poul Vitus Nielsen's article it also contains a discussion of what can and what cannot be done within certain genres and with different types of media. Even though historians will hardly be the film makers of the future, this brings us to the crux of succesful history propagation: Form and content are interdependent.

With this yearbook we want to present some of the considerations made and experience gained by more or less professional propagators of history. For further inspiration and as a contribution to the debate on how Labour history can be told.

*The editors*