

The President and Fellows of Harvard College

The General Strike by G. A. Phillips

Review by: Standish Meacham

The Business History Review, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Spring, 1977), pp. 104-106

Published by: [The President and Fellows of Harvard College](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3112929>

Accessed: 04/02/2014 14:02

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The President and Fellows of Harvard College is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Business History Review*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

capable of wading through some rather convoluted prose, will be stimulated by a provocative approach and wealth of information, especially the discussion of middle-class sexual mores and family structure. Hobsbawm's coverage is current in that it reflects the trends in historical scholarship in the last decade, and his ability to handle some of the new social history is at times brilliant. Even the nervous specialist will find much that is illuminating, and those who have disdained Marxist history as narrowly "economic determinist" will be acquainted with the wider possibilities of an unorthodox approach.

° ° °

THE GENERAL STRIKE. By G. A. Phillips. London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976. Pp. xi + 388. £7.95.

Reviewed by Standish Meacham
Professor of History
The University of Texas at Austin

G. A. Phillips apologizes at the outset of his authoritative study of the 1926 British General Strike that the work "may not prove easily digestible." He is correct. The fare is both heavy with facts and rich in analysis. The general reader might well be happier with Patrick Renshaw's recent and less demanding account, published in England as *The General Strike* and in this country as *Nine Days that Shook Britain*. But those with more than a passing interest, not only in the events that Phillips describes but in their relationship to wider questions of labor history, will find this book well worth their while.

Using papers hitherto either unavailable or unexamined — most notably cabinet papers and the records of the Trades Union Congress — Phillips has produced as thorough an account of the events of the "nine days," and of those that immediately preceded and followed, as we shall probably ever get. His attention to foreground detail does not prevent him, however, from casting the activities and attitudes he recounts against a contemporary background of murky and ill-perceived notions about the nature and implications of a general strike.

Labor leaders had begun to recognize its potential as a weapon of industrial warfare before World War I, when, as Phillips points out, capitalism had ceased to respect industrial boundaries, and trade unionists saw no reason why they should any longer continue to do so. Events in the summer of 1920, however, led the country to understand that a general strike might be defined as something more than an industrial dispute raised to a higher power. Both the Trades Union Congress and the Labour Party united in a Council of Action to threaten a national shut-down should the Government persist in its intention to intervene in the war between Russia and Poland: the general strike as political action. The Government backed away from that confrontation. In so doing, as Phillips states, it fostered within the labor movement "a false sense of immunity to any indictment for unconstitutional behaviour" (9), a sense that was seriously to mislead labor leaders when they attempted to employ the same weapon, though for different ends, six years later.

Determination to press ahead with strike actions during the early

1920s led the TUC to countenance a radical rhetoric that raised both expectations and fears. The trade union leadership failed to recognize that what they understood as rhetoric, others — a Conservative Government, for example — might rebroadcast to the nation as constitutional threat. In the end, the TUC's General Council might have perceived the situation more clearly had it acknowledged that the general strike of 1926 *was* political, as Phillips points out, a protest against “the inequity and irrationality of specific Conservative policies” (130), among them the Government's refusal to grant a further wage subsidy to the miners. The General Council's unwillingness to come to grips with this central issue led it to proceed without any clear understanding of the nature and meaning of its actions. Handicapped by this uncertainty, the labor leadership was no match for a Government that understood the strike as political and unconstitutional, and did not hesitate to respond to it as such.

By means of full and intelligently selected documentation, Phillips carries his readers with him into the two camps during the period of the strike itself. Labor's uncertainty was reflected in its inability to determine the extent to which the strike was to be a general one. Essential services were to be maintained. Yet how were they to be defined, and who was to define them? Throughout the period of the strike, the Council never resolved its own attitude toward the Government. Was it an interested party? an opponent? or a neutral ringmaster in the fight between the mineowners and the miners? Nor was the relationship between the TUC and the Miners' Federation ever satisfactorily defined. Were they brothers together in an outright war against capital? Or were the miners clients of the Council and bound, as such, to take the best settlement their agent could procure them? The miners never accepted that latter argument; the Council, as the strike proceeded, acted increasingly on the unwarranted assumption that they had.

If tactics were more clearly perceived within the Government's camp, strategy was equally confused. Baldwin and his fellow-“officers” commandeered and commanded as if the country were under seige. That the strike lasted no longer than it did was attributable in large measure to the Government's effective deployment of men and services. Yet Baldwin was little clearer than the General Council as to the Government's proper role. His indecision allowed events to slip beyond his control. Sympathetic to the mineowners, he failed to use that obvious sympathy to extract a bargain from them that might have been acceptable to the strike leaders, if not to the miners. Phillips rightly credits Baldwin's indecisiveness on the one hand to his recognition of the need for widespread change and rationalization in the mining industry and, on the other, to his conservative mistrust of government intervention to effect the necessary reforms. As Phillips points out, succeeding Governments and the Mining Association together instituted most of the required changes in the years after 1926. Yet the fact that those changes were the product of “piecemeal and unplanned adjustments of policy” (263) resulted in their failure to achieve their desired ends.

By concentrating his attention on the General Council and the Cabinet, Phillips provides us with less than we need to know about the central and

far more bitter protagonists in the struggle: the mine owners and the miners. We are told almost nothing of the former group or of the nature and strength of its Association. Of the miners — or, at any rate, their leaders — we do learn something. Yet Phillips fails to address what is perhaps the central question within the complex of actions and motivations he has so intelligently attempted to unravel. Why were the rank and file, alone among all the workers in Britain, prepared to risk all, as they so clearly did, in their prolonged and eventually futile struggle? Had they, indeed, been “proletarianized” to the point where they believed, unlike any other of their fellow-workers, that they had nothing to lose but their chains? The answer lies in a full exploration of the miners’ collective consciousness and of the world economic factors that had brought them, by the mid-1920s, to their sorry state. It is an exploration that Phillips does not choose to tackle.

His unwillingness to undertake this admittedly elusive sort of historical probing may have led him to a conclusion that is partially incomplete. He maintains that the strike merits study “less for what it changed in the labour movement, than for what it revealed of the unchanging” (294). On one level, this is correct. In terms of strategy it is true, as Phillips argues, that the pattern of post-1926 industrial strife continued to be traced within long-established boundaries: “the belief in constitutional modes of government, in the virtues of legality, in a pragmatic and conciliatory approach to potentially disruptive social issues (294–295). Yet the strike must be understood not only in terms of the patterns of strategy but also as part of the stuff of mythology. In that sense, it served to divide further the working class and the middle class, and to make Britain a country of two nations. If the programs of the 1945 Labour Government were conceived as a response to what had happened and not in anticipation of what could be made to happen, the mythology of the General Strike, as much as anything, shaped the nature of that response.

* * *

PREZZI E MERCEDI A MILANO DAL 1701 AL 1860. *By Aldo De Maddalena. Milano, Banca Commerciale Italiana, 1974. Pp. 455 + supplementary graphs (99). 16,000 Lire.*

Reviewed by Frank M. Murtaugh, Jr.
Instructor of Economics
The University of the South

Aldo De Maddalena’s book does not belie its title. It is essentially a Milanese price history published as an addition to the series: *Studi e Ricerche di Storia Economica Italiana nell’Età del Risorgimento*. It is, however, more akin to earlier works in the series, such as R. Romano’s *Prezzi, salari e servizi a Napoli nel secolo XVIII (1734–1806)* and G. Felloni’s *Il mercato monetario in Piemonte nel secolo XVIII*, than to some of the more general works such as G. Luzzatto’s *L’economia italiana dal 1861 al 1914, I: 1861–1894*, or V. Castronovo’s *Economia e società in Piemonte dall’Unità al 1914*. In short, it is a book that will be of primary interest to but two groups of scholars: those concerned with the economic