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Review of Fabrice Bensimon, *Artisans Abroad:  
British Migrant Workers in Industrialising Europe, 1815–1870*

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FABRICE BENSIMON, *Artisans Abroad: British Migrant Workers in Industrialising Europe, 1815–1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 304 pp. ISBN 978 0 198 83584 4. £83.00 (hardback; also available as open access e-book)

The subject of this masterful study by Fabrice Bensimon is the ‘small-scale, but high value’ (p. 44) flow of itinerant British workers to Continental Europe in the post-Napoleonic period. As *Artisans Abroad* authoritatively proves, Western European industrialization was profoundly shaped by—and indeed possible only because of—the movement of British labour, expertise, and technology across the Channel.

The book is very much situated within labour history and builds upon developments in the field.<sup>1</sup> However, it is also much more than this, incorporating methodologies from social and cultural history as well as migration studies (pp. 8–10). Bensimon aims to move away from the traditional accounts of industrial magnates and capital and instead uncover the experiences of ‘the workers themselves’ (p. 2). Yet, as he frequently reminds us, the sources from which to tell these stories are scarce, and finding the authentic voices of migrant workers, particularly of women, is even more difficult. However, by creatively deploying a broad swathe of sources (including newspaper articles, management records, diplomatic correspondence, and parliamentary inquiries), Bensimon manages to extract an astounding amount of information about these workers, deftly weaving together statistical analyses and biographical case studies<sup>2</sup> and thereby reaching these emigrants both ‘from below and from above’ (pp. 8–9).

The first chapter contextualizes the migration of British workers to the Continent, highlighting governmental fears of a new form of ‘industrial espionage’ which materialized early in the eighteenth century

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<sup>1</sup> e.g. Marcel van der Linden, *Transnational Labour History: Explorations* (Abingdon, 2003); and Marcel van der Linden, ‘The Promise and Challenges of Global Labor History’, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 82 (2012), 57–76.

<sup>2</sup> The latter method follows the approach suggested by Malcolm Chase in an article published in French in 2010, then edited and published in English by Bensimon in 2021: Malcolm Chase, ‘Labour History’s Biographical Turn’, *History Workshop Journal*, 92 (2021), 194–207.

and prompted the prohibition of artisans' migration and the export of machinery (p. 19). Such anxieties only began to peter out from the mid 1820s as Ricardian theories of free trade gained traction over protectionism in economic discourse. Bensimon argues here that the second quarter of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of new attitudes to emigration in Britain, which manifested themselves in colonial settlement schemes and an increasing willingness on the part of politicians and manufacturers to view Continental markets as 'sphere[s] of opportunity' (p. 20). This is clearly evinced by the machine-made lace industry, the growth of which, though originally stymied by export bans, took off in the 1830s and resulted in a 'lively and dynamic' culture of exchange between Nottingham and Calais in the following decades (p. 38).

The remainder of the chapter is dominated by statistics, tackling the thorny issue of calculating the number of British emigrants to France in this period. Though it is 'impossible to give an exact figure', Bensimon extrapolates from patchy French census data and various select committee inquiries and settles on the 'very approximate estimate' of 15–20,000 emigrants over the period in question (pp. 39–42). Another section wades into historiographical debates over the role of wages during the industrial period and asks whether pay was an incentive to emigration. The sheer number of sectors under consideration, plus gendered wage differences, the seasonality of much industrial work, and regional disparities (all of which must be seen against a near-constant backdrop of economic flux), makes this a difficult question to answer definitively. Bensimon aptly demonstrates how these factors interacted in specific sectors such as railway construction, ironworks, and linen production, in which Britons frequently earned more than their French counterparts. Conclusions drawn for emigrants as a group are clouded by the sheer breadth of the investigation, but Bensimon argues persuasively that Continental wages differed more along the axes of skill level and/or gender than of nationality.

The second chapter delves into the specificities of three key industries in which British workers were active. Analysis of the textile industry is subdivided into studies of cotton production, flax working, and wool combing, all of which, as Bensimon proves, were 'transformed by British input' in many Continental regions (p. 62). In terms of iron production, we are shown how the technologically

superior *'forge à l'anglaise'* and the expertise of skilled Welsh iron puddlers was of critical importance in France from the 1820s to the 1850s (pp. 75–6). The British-led construction of the Paris–Rouen–Le Havre railway lines in the 1840s is well known, but Bensimon's account is remarkable—and indeed moving—in its concern for the thousands of itinerant British (and Irish) navvies whose lives, unlike those of their bosses, 'have not [been written] and hardly could' (p. 88). Despite the dearth of first-person accounts, Bensimon draws on a range of sources to illustrate the 'horrifying toll' that navvies' work exacted upon them. He convincingly reasons that the 'overexploited' navvies, despite being unskilled, nevertheless embodied the British industrializing mission on the Continent (pp. 90–2).

The next chapter considers the 'hidden' emigration of working-class women and children. Female migrants' agency, productivity, and skill in a variety of sectors—including, significantly, within the home—are emphasized, despite the contemporary (and unfortunately long-lasting) perception of women's work as unskilled or unimportant. Women's expertise was particularly prized in the linen and jute spinning industries, and many young, single spinners from Dundee relocated—often on their own initiative—to Continental workshops. One industry that employed both women and children was hand- and machine-made lace: they were frequently hired as lace runners, performing back-breaking labour in appalling conditions. British women also commonly faced open hostility from local labourers. Female lace workers, furthermore, received similarly low wages in France and Britain. Bensimon concludes that women 'earned at most a third' of men's wages in that industry despite notable—though scattered—instances of 'female unionism' (pp. 133–4). Concrete statistics on migrant child labour are even harder to come by, though Bensimon's comparative analysis of debates about the phenomenon on both sides of the Channel reveals both its ubiquity and inhumanity. The chapter's central conclusion is that British women and children played a significant role in Continental industrialization, although, to an even greater extent than male workers, 'their names remain . . . shrouded in obscurity, not unlike the dark rooms in which they worked' (p. 137).

Chapter four turns to cultural issues, exploring the role of language barriers, religious differences, leisure activities, and stereotypes within

British labour emigration. The problem of what one Scottish manufacturer called ‘the want of the Language’ can hardly be overstated; indeed, Bensimon convincingly demonstrates that it was often more difficult to emigrate to the Continent than to far-flung colonial territories for this reason (pp. 143–5). Bearing out his commitment to history from below, he shows that while bosses frequently hired interpreters, British labourers had no such luxuries. Furthermore, ‘linguistic competence’ varied widely among migrants – often along class lines – though we are shown how many navvies on international building sites developed a ‘composite language’ to understand one another (pp. 144–8). The consideration of the interplay between ideas of ‘national character and diets’, which factored into discussions about both labour productivity and living standards, is particularly effective (p. 163). Bensimon establishes that the typecasting of British workers – particularly navvies – as beef-eating drunkards was unfounded, with the latter characterization emerging out of broader upper- and middle-class discourse about the working classes. Contemporary perception of the *rosbifs* as stronger or more productive than local workers, he argues, had more to do with Britain’s higher level of industrialization.

Chapter five assesses the level of political engagement among economic migrants abroad. Contributing to the well-established field of cross-Channel political exchange in the nineteenth century (much of which has been authored by Bensimon himself),<sup>3</sup> the chapter asks

<sup>3</sup> e.g. Fabrice Bensimon, ‘Continental Exiles, Chartists and Socialists in London (1834–1848)’, *History of European Ideas*, 47/2 (2021), 271–84; Fabrice Bensimon, ‘The IWMA and its Precursors in London, c.1830–1860’, in Fabrice Bensimon, Quentin Deluermoz, and Jeanne Moisand (eds.), *Arise Ye Wretched of the Earth: The First International in a Global Perspective* (Leiden, 2018), 21–38; Sylvie Aprile, ‘“Translations” politiques et culturelles: Les proscrits français et l’Angleterre’, *Genèses*, 38 (2000), 33–55; Thomas C. Jones and Robert Tombs, ‘The French Left in Exile: *Quarante-huitards* and *Communards* in London, 1848–80’, in Martyn Cornick and Debra Kelly (eds.), *A History of the French in London: Liberty, Equality, Opportunity* (London, 2013), 165–91; Sabine Freitag (ed.), *Exiles from European Revolutions: Refugees in Mid-Victorian England* (Oxford, 2003); Catherine Brice (ed.), *Exile and the Circulation of Political Practices* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2020); Constance Bantman and Ana Cláudia Suriani da Silva (eds.), *The Foreign Political Press in Nineteenth-Century London: Politics from a Distance* (London, 2018); Christine Lattek, *Revolutionary Refugees: German Socialism in Britain, 1840–1860* (London, 2006).

whether economic migrants played any role in the transmission of radical ideologies to the Continent. We are shown how Calais became a 'hotbed of Chartism' due to its population of Nottingham lacemakers (p. 194), and that migrants were responsible for establishing the only branches of Feargus O'Connor's Land Plan that existed in Europe. Insightfully, Bensimon concludes from such examples that most (Chartist) migrants viewed settlement in Europe as temporary, though the claim that they 'dream[ed] of a life where they could enjoy both economic and political freedom, without having to emigrate for work' may be somewhat overstated (p. 196). Highlighting the concurrent rise of militant trade unionism in Britain, Bensimon seeks to map out similar agitation among Britons on the Continent. In France—where trade unions were banned until 1864—he persuasively demonstrates that migrant workers did successfully import traditional methods of British labour organization, though they 'seldom tried to modify the local political structures' (p. 205). Whether or not these radical Britons influenced their French counterparts is more difficult to prove, though local authorities were clearly concerned: in 1825 the *sous-préfet* of Aisne agonized over British lace workers who were 'trying to draw our own [French] workers into making claims they had never even thought of' (p. 181). The final section, 'Insurgents?', seeks to 'quantify the involvement' of British workers in revolutionary upheavals on the Continent (pp. 200–4). The conclusion that they played an infinitesimal role is definitive (but unsurprising); the inclusion of data relating to the Paris Commune, however, surely extends beyond the scope of this study.

The sixth chapter evaluates British migrants' integration into European societies. It thereby provides a much-needed prehistory of the later clashes between French and foreign workers in the 1880s and 1890s, outlining key inflection points during 'the golden age of British labour immigration' from 1815 to 1848 (p. 216). Earlier incidents had various causes, ranging from residual antipathies from the Napoleonic era to colonial tensions; hostility may also have stemmed from locals' unemployment, as at Fourchambault in 1837. Tensions peaked in 1848, as exemplified by attacks on Scottish and Irish flax workers near Rouen and an apparently xenophobic riot against the Calais lacemakers. Despite the paucity of rioters' accounts, Bensimon painstakingly reconstructs contemporary attitudes and reveals that

such uprisings were generally not Anglophobic. Instead, as he argues, they were largely caused by the economic crisis of 1847–8 and should be read as specific interventions made using an evolving language of ‘collective action’, as theorized by John Walter and Charles Tilly.<sup>4</sup> Bensimon thus demonstrates that ‘nothing corroborates the hypothesis of a profound and structural Anglophobia’ directed against emigrants in the decades under consideration (p. 237). Such incidents should not overshadow the fact that the majority of British emigrants lived and worked peacefully on the Continent, whether ‘integrated’ (like the lace machine manufacturer John Leavers, who settled for life in Grand-Couronne), or not (like the countless labourers who remained within the English-speaking communities that sprang up around British factories).

The conclusion traces the afterlives of individuals discussed in the book and the phenomenon of migrants as agents of industrialization more broadly. Following the market collapse of 1848, many migrant Calais lacemakers emigrated to colonial possessions like Australia under the auspices of various government commissions. Others followed different trajectories to—in Elizabeth Gaskell’s words—‘the dominions of the Czar and the Sultan’ that industrialized later in the century (quoted on p. 245). Bensimon reflects upon the typology of the small-scale mobilities represented by these nineteenth-century migrants, emphasizing the relevance of unplanned, short-distance ‘step migration’, as posited by Ernst Georg Ravenstein (pp. 44 and 241–4), and compellingly extending Eric Hobsbawm’s model of the ‘tramping artisan’<sup>5</sup> to encompass labour migration across the Channel (pp. 45 and 253). ‘Local’ migrations on the Continent are also helpfully contrasted with later ‘global’ migration patterns within the empire (p. 253).

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<sup>4</sup> John Walter, *Crowds and Popular Politics in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 2010); Charles Tilly, ‘How Protest Modernized in France, 1845–1855’, in William O. Aydelotte, Robert William Fogel, and Allan G. Bogue (eds.), *The Dimensions of Quantitative Research in History* (Princeton, 1972), 192–255; and Charles Tilly, ‘Les origines du répertoire d’action collective contemporaine en France et en Grande-Bretagne’, *Vingtième Siècle*, 4 (1984), 89–108.

<sup>5</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, ‘The Tramping Artisan’, *Economic History Review: New Series*, 3/3 (1951), 299–320.

Bensimon adroitly advances the contemporary relevance of the ‘artisans abroad’, fulfilling the book’s objective of setting out the origins of ‘present-day connections and disconnections’ between Britain and Europe (p. 3). The book reminds us – in our increasingly anti-migrant, post-Brexit era – that Britain was once ‘a country of emigration rather than immigration’ (p. 2) and that ‘there was never a time when national economies operated in closed circuits’ (p. 254). One wonders, however, whether the book’s persistent commitment – announced in its title – to exploring industrial emigration from Britain to Europe is fully sustained; indeed, the shorthand ‘Europe’ is repeatedly substituted for ‘France’ (or, more rarely, ‘Belgium’). Though France was the preferred destination for ‘most workers’ in this period (p. 1), more data relating to the other countries referred to in the introduction would have been welcome, source material permitting. Overall, though, this is an innovative, lively, and excitingly wide-ranging study of an under-appreciated strand of labour migration, and one which pushes back against traditional narratives of economic and national antagonism.

ATLANTA RAE NEUDORF is a PhD candidate in the history of political thought at Queen Mary, University of London. Her research explores the political ideas of the radical republican Félix Pyat (1810–89) after the defeat of the 1848–9 revolutions, with a particular focus on his intellectual trajectory during the French Second Empire (1852–70). More broadly, her work addresses the intersection of republicanism with nascent trade unionism, revolutionary traditions, and political violence in the nineteenth century.