General editor's introduction

It was in the 1970s that leisure became a major subject of investigation for social historians. One of the most important books to emerge from that interest was Hugh Cunningham's *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution c. 1780–c. 1880* (Croom Helm, 1980). Returning to the subject thirty years on, he set out to remedy what he now sees as deficiencies in the study of leisure as it was written in the 1970s and 1980s. He singles out in particular the neglect of women's experience of work and leisure, the over-concentration on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the failure to address time-use generally rather than spare time in particular. He also seeks to address the now highly topical subject of work–life balance and the changes in the use and valuation of time over the past three centuries.

Beginning with changes in the perception of time in the eighteenth century – and taking in such diverse but related topics as oil lamps, sleep patterns, almanacs, clocks and watches, and the Christian calendar – he goes on to consider leisure and class, leisure and gender, leisure preference, and leisure and its critics. Under these broad headings and ever alert to changes in the relationship of work and leisure, he examines the conflict between rational and irrational recreation, the commercialisation of leisure and the emergence of the leisure industries, the attempts of central and local authorities to regulate leisure, the changing shape of the week, the redefinition and extension of childhood and the development of the concept of retirement.

Cunningham ends this elegantly written, cogently argued and consistently illuminating study with a soberly realistic conclusion. On the basis of three centuries of experience, he finds that the amount of people's time taken up by work – and therefore the amount of time available for leisure – has depended

upon the strength or otherwise of the workers. When their organisation has been strong, working hours have been reduced. Where it is weak, as at present, the employers in a competitive capitalist system have always been reluctant to concede short working time.

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