

Strangleman, Tim (2019) *Voices of Guinness: An Oral History of the Park Royal Brewery*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.

Review by Steven High

'At a time of growing class polarization, Voices of Guinness demands our attention. Tim Strangleman invites us into the working lives and shopfloor memories of former industrial workers, confirming his place as a leading light in the study of work and its loss. This is oral history at its very best!' - Steven High, endorsement for *Voices of Guinness*

I was happy to provide an endorsement of *Voices of Guinness*, when invited to by the publisher, as I've been an admirer of Tim Strangleman's scholarship ever since I read his 2004 book, *Work Identity at the End of the Line? Privatization and Culture Change in the UK Rail Industry*. That first book was an unusually sensitive examination of workplace culture, management and the social cost of privatization, as revealed by his interviews with railway workers. It was a brilliant book, beautifully grounded in the working lives of his narrators, but I was also impressed by the fact that Strangleman worked for a time for London Transport and knew this work culture first-hand. Some of the best scholarship, in my opinion, comes from researchers with one foot in the life-worlds that they are studying. Tim Strangleman's many articles on work sociology and deindustrialization have been required reading for my students ever since. *Voices of Guinness* will now be on that list.

Throughout his university career, Strangleman's major preoccupation has been workplace culture and the changes brought about by neo-liberalism. He is interested in what is lost but also in the persistence of occupational and industrial identities. Nobody does workplace culture better. And *Voices of Guinness* is a case in point, offering us a sustained look at a single workplace over its entire 70-year lifespan. Strangleman takes the iconic Guinness brand and invites readers into the lives of those who brewed it at the company's massive Royal Park (London) facility.

Published as part of Oxford's prestigious Oral History Series, *Voices of Guinness* is, geographically speaking, a tightly focused study, but the temporal reach allows us to consider change over the *longue-durée*. As Strangleman writes, he is 'fascinated by the idea of the sedimentation of value in the past, in what is often hard, sometimes dangerous, often boring work.' We hear about the brewery's construction in the 1930s, the first brew (which loomed large in local lore), the early paternalism of management and its postwar compromise with unions during the 'long boom' – a period Jefferson Cowie calls the 'great exception' in the US context. We then hear about the years of insecurity and the slash & burn tactics of a new generation of managers, which culminated in Royal Park's 2005 closure. The last two chapters record the process of 'disembedding, how a workplace culture is disrupted and uprooted.' Strangleman rightly sees in Park Royal a microcosm for the history of work in the 20th century.

The book's journey originates in 2004 when Strangleman got permission to conduct interviews with workers *on site* in the months before Royal Park closed. Most companies are allergic to researchers at the best of times, but particularly so around plant closures. There is no public relations upside to the story. I would therefore love to hear what Strangleman said to the company that convinced them that this was a good idea.

Strangleman also convinced them to let him bring photographer David McCairley to 'capture visually the spirit of the people.' Interestingly, McCairley found it next to impossible to capture the 'spirit' of the worker as the plant was nearly deserted in those final months and those still at work were mainly machine operators. The photos included are therefore more static than the work photography we are used to seeing of an earlier era. This, too, is part of the story that the book tells.

Not surprisingly, given the timing, the interviews capture the heightened anxiety and uncertainty of the moment of rupture. There is an 'overwhelming sense of fatalism and acceptance about the closure,' but very little anger. Where was the fighting spirit? I wanted to know more. In my own interviews for *One Job Town* with displaced industrial workers in Northern Ontario, my home region, conducted in the moment of plant closure, there was raw anger and a pervasive sense of betrayal. Why the different political reactions? What explains the 'passive acceptance' of job loss at Royal Park?

Perhaps it is the oral historian in me, but I also wanted to hear a bit more about the interview context itself and how these conversations unfolded. I suspect that a more explicit methodological discussion was sacrificed by the publisher in order to ensure the book reached a wide public audience. The book is engagingly written, with short crisp chapters.

Another choice that Tim Strangleman makes is to singularly focus on workers and their bosses. We therefore hear nothing about workers' lives outside of the plant or about their families. His core interest is workplace culture and everything else falls decidedly outside the frame. I understand the choice but wonder about the ways that these two halves of workers' lives influenced each other. The exclusive focus on male workers is less understandable. There were certainly women working inside the plant, if only in the plant's offices. I also expected to hear more about the lived experience of trade unionism, but workers facing job loss were probably disinclined to talk union. This was certainly the case in my own study. Instead, Strangleman speaks of a tacit moral economy – a set of local norms and customs – that once prevailed on the shop floor forged in the face-to-face relationships between management and workers.

At various points in the book, Tim Strangleman asks the reader 'what of the charge of nostalgia?' You might say that 'smokestack nostalgia' has haunted deindustrialization studies since Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott coined the term in *Beyond the Ruins* in 2003. Here, Strangleman returns to it repeatedly. On page 80, for example, he writes: 'Are the workers interviewed here, and myself in recording them, complicit in a 'retrospective idealization' of the past, the 'heyday' of industrial work? Were we jointly engaging in bouts of 'smokestack nostalgia,' a romanticized, rose-tinted remembering and recording?' Then, on page 127, he asks 'So is this simple nostalgia? Are these interviews an uncritical reflection on times past, a celebration of 'back in the day', of warmly remembered youth?' He says no, as would I. He notes that interviews were highly reflexive spaces where workers meditated on change in the past and the present. Indeed, 'They were mulling over profound questions about the nature of work and the quality of it.' I wonder, though, why we feel we have to justify listening to workers' voices?

These points of criticism are only small quibbles next to what is achieved, as the book is all that I said it is in my opening endorsement. *Voices of Guinness* represents a major contribution to working-class studies and to the study of deindustrialization. Its release comes just in time for the Working Class Studies Association conference in the UK, which will be held at Tim Strangleman's university. I expect Guinness will be served.

Reviewer Bio

Steven High is a professor of history at Concordia University's Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling. He is the author of many books and articles on deindustrialization including *Industrial Sunset* (2003), *Corporate Wasteland* (2007), *The Deindustrialized World* (2017, with Lachlan MacKinnon and Andrew Perchard), and *One Job Town* (2018).