

Book Review: Shredding Paper: The Rise and Fall of Maine's Mighty Paper Industry by Michael G. Hillard

In Shredding Paper: The Rise and Fall of Maine's Mighty Paper Industry, Michael G. Hillard offers a new history of paper manufacturing in the US, focusing on the changing fortunes of Maine's paper industry. Positioning the story of the paper mills as a microcosm of rapidly transforming markets and values across the US and international economic landscape, this page-turning, scholarly analysis elevates paper manufacturing to its rightful place within US labour history, writes [Jeff Roquen](#).

***Shredding Paper: The Rise and Fall of Maine's Mighty Paper Industry.* Michael G. Hillard. Cornell University Press. 2021.**

Find this book (affiliate link): [amazon](#)

Since the end of the Second World War, American historians and historiography have illuminated the myriad causes and consequences of the rise of large-scale production from the Gilded Age (1870-1900) through to the stagflation of the 1970s. Portraits of US tycoons and their respective industries – including Andrew Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick (steel), J.P. Morgan (finance), Cornelius Vanderbilt and Jay Gould (railroads), John D. Rockefeller (oil) and Henry Ford (automobiles) – range from hagiographic to hypercritical. Was the age of monopoly a triumph of American ingenuity and expanded prosperity, or did the US shed its ideals to ultimately create mass misery through highly exploitative working conditions for the sheer benefit of a new class of plutocrats?

Despite the voluminous literature examining the inner workings of American capitalism, paper manufacturing, which vaulted to being the tenth largest industry in the US in the 1930s, has received comparatively scant attention. In [Shredding Paper: The Rise and Fall of Maine's Mighty Paper Industry](#), Michael G. Hillard, a Professor of Economics at the University of Southern Maine, has not only furnished a linear chronicle of neglected labour history. He has also brilliantly demonstrated how the plight of the paper mills of Maine served as a microcosm of rapidly changing markets and values across both the American and international economic landscape.





Image Credit: [Pixabay](#)

Over the course of the initial two chapters, Hillard charts the nascent yet meteoric growth of paper manufacturing in Maine and explores both the enticements and the detrimental effects of the mills. As a result of innovations in the creation of wood pulp – including the sulfite method devised by Benjamin Tilghman – the production of paper exponentially increased to meet surging demand for paper goods (19-20). Three decades after Samuel Dennis Warren (1817-88) founded his eponymous mill in the mid-1850s, it subsequently employed approximately 1000 workers at its zenith – a perfect case study for Hillard.

Beyond offering the lure of above-average wages, the paternalistic-minded Warren constructed a fiefdom with 'high-quality housing [...] churches and gyms [...] and] electricity' (24). Rather than a distant figure divorced from the daily operations of the mill, Warren took the initiative to develop relationships with his workers, and his personal brand of corporate welfare extended to approving employee loans for homes and educational costs (77). While partly motivated by altruism, his concessions also served to prevent any and all attempts to unionise.

Despite earned income and the pride associated with being productive at one's craft, worker loyalty remained precarious due to the daily regimen of 'heat, humidity, noise, danger from chemicals, steam, heavy machinery, shift work and long hours, and rough treatment by co-workers and supervisors' for eleven to thirteen hours a day, six days a week. In the summer, temperatures in the mill could climb to 130 degrees (68-70). While the paternalistic policies of the company allowed injured employees to maintain employment in less taxing jobs and reduced prices at the company store, they failed to offset the humiliation of working for tyrannical foremen and being denied promotion due to a management culture riven by nepotism and favoritism (50, 81-82).

In Chapter Three, Hillard masterfully presents the socio-economic decline of the S.D. Warren mill and its sale to Scott Paper in 1967. The largess exhibited by the Warren management and bestowed upon the faithful workers of the mill from the impoverished 1930s through the booming 1950s yielded decades of largely harmonious relations between labour and ownership. By the 1960s, however, the hiring of professional managers, who possessed minimal knowledge of the demanding work regimen and often insufficient empathy for the overworked craftspeople, alienated the rank-and-file to a significant degree.

Rather than increasing wages, expanding benefits or continuing to prodigiously invest in research and development, shareholders began absorbing a greater share of profits. Moreover, longstanding resentments over abuses of power, including the aforementioned nepotism and favoritism as well as rampant discrimination against and harassment of women, came to the fore and sparked a fierce drive to organise against the fossilised leadership (98-109).

Despite heavy resistance, the workers emerged victorious and redressed many of their grievances. Through the pages of Chapter Four, 'The Madawaska Rebellion', Hillard details the struggle of the Fraser Paper Mill workers to vanquish draconian managerial policies and end the nativist-centred mistreatment of Franco-American employees due to their Catholic identity with unionisation and disruptive strikes in 1971. These accomplished chapters illustrate the complex socio-economic dynamics of an emergent neoliberal era.

Hillard rounds out his monograph by dedicating the penultimate and final chapters to conveying the good-faith attempts by management and labour to navigate an industry transmogrified by mergers and domestic competition by pursuing 'Jointness'. This aimed to overcome rival employer-employee interests with collaboration, compromise and concessions – a tack only partially effective in a tumultuous era defined by technological ingenuity and corresponding job losses (181-85).

In all, *Shredding Paper* succeeds in elevating the production of book, magazine, typing, tissue and other paper products to its rightful place at the forefront of US industry from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day. It offers a page-turning, scholarly analysis of a commodity at the centre of supply, demand and the ever-shifting quest to balance prosperity and dignified work.

- *This review first appeared at [LSE Review of Books](#).*

Please read our [comments policy](#) before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <https://bit.ly/3t1VBBX>

About the reviewer

Jeff Roquen

Jeff Roquen is an independent scholar based in the United States.