Appendix A: 5 passages from “Harriet Robinson’s Account of Lowell Mills”

Expert Group A

“ I had been to school constantly until I was about ten years of age, when my mother, feeling obliged to have help in her work besides what I could give, and also needing the money which I could earn, allowed me, at my urgent request (for I wanted to earn *money* like the other little girls), to go to work in the mill. I worked first in the spinning room as a ‘doffer.’ The doffers were the very youngest girls, whose work was to doff, or take off, the full bobbins, and replace them with the empty ones.

“I can see myself now, racing down the alley, between the spinning-frames, carrying in front of me a bobbin-box bigger than I was. These mites had to be very swift in their movements, so as not to keep the spinning-frames stopped long, and they worked only about fifteen minutes in every hour. The rest of the time was their own, and when the overseer was kind they were allowed to read, knit, or even to go outside the mill-yard to play.

“When not doffing, we were often allowed to go home, for a time, and thus we were able to help our mothers in the housework. We were paid two dollars a week; and how proud I was when my turn came to stand up on the bobbin-box, and write my name in the paymaster’s book, and how indignant I was when he asked me if I could ‘write.’ ‘Of course I can,’ said I, and he smiled as he looked down on me.”

Expert Group B

“ The working-hours of all the girls extended from five o’clock in the morning until seven in the evening, with one-half hour for breakfast and for dinner. Even the doffers were forced to be on duty nearly fourteen hours a day, and this was the greatest hardship in the lives of these children. For it was not until 1842 that the hours of labor for children under twelve years of age were limited to ten per day; but the ‘ten-hour-law’ itself was not passed until long after some of these little doffers were old enough to appear before the legislative committee on the subject, plead, by their presence, for a reduction of the hours of labor.

“Most of us children lived at home, and we were well fed, drinking both tea and coffee, and eating substantial meals (besides luncheons) three times a day. We had very happy hours with the older girls, many of whom treated us like babies, or talked in a motherly way, and so had a good influence over us. And in the long winter evenings, when we could not run home between the doffings, we gathered in groups and told each other stories, and sung the old-time songs our mothers had sung, such as ‘Barbara Allen,’ ‘Lord Lovell,’ ‘Captain Kid,’ ‘Hull’s Victory,’ and sometimes a hymn.”

Expert Group C

"The yard which led to the shed was always green, and here many half-holiday duties were performed. We children were expected to scour all the knives and forks used by the forty men-boarders, and by brothers often bought themselves off by giving me some trifle, and I was left alone to do the whole. and what a pile of knives and forks it was! But it was no task, for I did not have the open yard to work in, with the sky over me, and the green grass to stand on, as I scrubbed away at my 'stent'? I don't know why I did not think such long tasks a burden, nor of my work in the mill as drudgery. Perhaps it was because I expected to do my part towards helping my mother to get our living, and had never heard her complain of the hardships in her life.

"On other afternoons I went to walk with a playmate, who, like myself, was full of romantic dreams, along the banks of the Merrimack River, where the Indians had still their tents, or on Sundays, to see the 'new converts' baptized. These baptizings in the river were very common, as the tanks in the churches were not considered *apostolic* by the early Baptists of Lowell."

Expert Group D

"I was a 'little doffer' until I became old enough to earn more money; then I tended a spinning-frame for a little while; and after that I learned, on the Merrimack corporation, to be a drawing-in girl, which was considered one of the most desirable employments, as about only a dozen girls were needed in each mill. We drew in, one by one, the threads of the warp, through the harness and the reed, and so made the beams ready for the weaver's loom. I still have the two hooks I used so long, companions of many a dreaming hour, and preserve them as the ' badge of all my tribe' of drawing-in girls.

"It may be well to add that, although so many changes have been made in mill-work, during the last fifty years, by the introduction of machinery, this part of it still continues to be done by hand, and the drawing-in girl-I saw her last winter, as in my time – still sits on her high stool, and with her little hook patiently draws in the thousands of threads, one by one."

Expert Group E

"One of the first strikes of cotton-factory operatives that ever took place in this country was that in Lowell, in October, 1836. When it was announced that the wages were to be cut down, great indignation was felt, and it was decided to strike, *en masse*. This was done. The mills were shut down, and the girls went in processions from their several corporations to the 'grove' on Chapel Hill, and listened to 'incendiary' speeches from early labor reformers.

"One of the girls stood on a pump, and gave vent to the feelings of her companions in a neat speech, declaring that it was their duty to resist all attempts at cutting down the wages. This

was the first time a woman had spoken in public in Lowell, and the event caused surprise and consternation among her audience.

"Cutting down the wages was not their only grievance, nor the only cause of this strike. Hitherto the corporations had paid twenty-five cents a week towards the board of each operative, and now it was their purpose to have the girls pay the sum; and this, in addition to the cut in the wages, would make a difference of at least one dollar a week. It was estimated that as many as twelve or fifteen hundred girls turned out, and walked in processions through the streets. They had neither flags nor music, but sang songs, a favorite (but rather inappropriate) one being a parody on 'I won't be a nun."

"My own recollection of this first strike (or 'turn out' as it was called) is very vivid. I worked in a lower room, where I heard the proposed strike fully…discussed; I had been an ardent listener to what was said against this attempt at 'oppression' on the part of the corporation, and naturally I took sides with the strikers. When the day came on which the girls were to turn out, those in the upper rooms started first, and so many of them left that our mill was at once shut down. Then, when the girls in my room stood irresolute, uncertain what to do, asking each other, 'Would you?' or "Shall we turn out?' and not one of them having the courage to lead off, I, who began to think they would not go out, after all the talk, became impatient, and started on ahead, saying, with childish bravado, 'I don't care what you do, I am going to turn out, whether anyone else does or not;' and I marched out, and was followed by the others