Voices of the Industrial Revolution

Selected Readings from the Liberal Economists and Their Critics

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CHILD LABOR IN FACTORIES AND MINES

The seamy side of the industrial revolution was graphically presented to members of Parliament and the reading public of Great Britain through three comprehensive, and justly famous, official reports. The first, by the Sadler Committee, followed hearings held in 1832 to investigate conditions of child labor in the textile mills; the second, by Lord Ashley's Mines Commission in 1842, dealt with working conditions in the mines with emphasis on child labor in the coal pits; the third, also in 1842, under Edwin Chadwick, concerned itself with "the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population." The reader will note the committees' tendency to ask leading questions of the witnesses, and the reports have been criticized on this ground. Slanted or not, the committee findings shocked the British public into demanding remedial legislation. An Act passed in 1833 limited hours for women and children in textile factories, and one of 1842 prohibited employment in mines of all women and of boys under thirteen.

The testimony given below, from the first two reports, is drawn from Parliamentary Papers, 1831-32, vol. XV and 1842, vols. XV-XVII.

TESTIMONY PRESENTED TO THE SADLER COMMITTEE (1832)

Joshua Drake, called in; and examined

What is your business? — A woollen weaver.
Where do you reside? — At Leeds.
You say that you had a child that went to the flax-mill and she was between 14 and 15; do they take them in as early into the flax-mills as into the woollen mills? — Yes; but it was not my idea to send her to a flax-mill; it was her own wish; owing to some comrades that she had working at Mr. Benyon's.
Was she a healthy girl? — She was very healthy when she went there. Was it the dust that injured her health? — Whether it was the dust, or being sometimes over-worked till she sweated, and then chilling again, I cannot say.
What sort of room was it she worked in? — I was never in it, but when she came out she was covered with dust and flyings of tow.
Did she ever tell you whether the nature of her work was such as to make her very hot? — No; but she said that sometimes they were made to sweat a good deal, and that they starved, and then this dust choked her; but it was not above three or four days before it was very visible that this dust had an effect upon her, and she fell sick.
Did she suffer more from it than her companions? — I do not know whether she did or not, but I think that of the four girls who were her comrades, three of them are dead.
You say that you were in the habit of giving her a vomit once a week? — Yes; it was by the advice of the people that had children working at the flax-mills.
Was it by the advice of any medical man? — No; but it is a practice that is continued now. I have a brother-in-law now that has a child working at it, and they give her a sort of vomit of salts once a week, to relieve her stomach.
You say she was beaten several times, did she ever say what she was beaten for? — For some neglect, and the tow not being properly thick; I think she said, the overseer said she was spreading it too thick, and he knocked her down, and beat her, and I took her away; they sent word that she should be shifted to another overseer if she would go.
Is it not necessary in those mills, as in other places where children are employed, to have some means of keeping them in order? — They must be kept in order so as to mind their work; but I always found that the best-tempered stubbers generally get the best warps done.
When the child is corrected in this way, is it upon the complaint of the stubber? — The stubber has it in his own management either to correct or to screen; the overseer seldom meddles with the children, except where the stubber complains; and then if he be a bad-tempered overseer, he takes them and beats them himself. But as far as ever I knew, the best-tempered stubbers have always the least complaint of their work.
What means would you suggest of putting a stop to this cruel treatment? — If the law could do anything for it, I would have them punished by law as for assault; where the assault leaves a visible mark.
Are you aware whether there is any provision of that sort in the Bill? — No, I do not know anything about it; but I know this, that there was a boy taken and tied upon another man's back, and they flogged him round the place; and he was brought down to Leeds Court-house, and the mayor, after looking at the child, ordered the offender to go out and make it up with the parent of the boy, or otherwise he would be punished.
So that, in short, if they ill-treated a child now, the magistrates would punish them? — They will let him compromise for a few shillings.

But does not that rest with the option of the parent? — The child’s father was obliged to it; but I think he got seven or eight shillings.

Do you not think that those children were generally more cruelly treated at the termination of the day, when they have over-laboured themselves, and are actually fatigued? — Yes. Is it not found, by universal experience, that the most cruel punishments take place when undue hours of labour are imposed upon the children, and, when, therefore, they are no longer able to perform the work? — That I have been a witness to. When Mr. Gott was working long hours, I was then watching upon the premises; I used to go through the mills, and I have seen some slubbers encouraging them to sing hymns in order to keep awake; others would be beating them about, and throwing things at them to keep them awake.

When a child gets 3 s. a week, does that go much toward its subsistence? — No, it will not keep it as it should.

When they got 6 s. or 7 s. when they were piecers, if they reduced the hours of labour, would they not get less? — They would get a halfpenny a day less, but I would rather have less wages and less work.

Do you receive any parish assistance? — No.

Why do you allow your children to go to those places where they are overworked? — Necessity compels a man that has children to let them work.

Mr. Matthew Crabtree, called in; and examined

What age are you? — Twenty-two.

What is your occupation? — A blanket manufacturer.

Have you ever been employed in a factory? — Yes.

At what age did you first go to work in one? — Eight.

How long did you continue in that occupation? — Four years.

Will you state the hours of labour at the period when you first went to the factory, in ordinary times? — From 6 in the morning to 8 at night.

Fourteen hours? — Yes.

With what intervals for refreshment and rest? — An hour at noon.

Then you had no resting time allowed in which to take your breakfast, or what is in Yorkshire called your “drinking”? — No.

When the trade was brisk what were your hours? — From 5 in the morning to 9 in the evening.

Sixteen hours? — Yes.

With what intervals at dinner? — An hour.

How far did you live from the mill? — About two miles.

Was there any time allowed for you to get your breakfast in the mill? — No.

Did you take it before you left home? — Generally.

During those long hours of labour could you be punctual; how did you awake? — I seldom did awake spontaneously; I was most generally awoke or lifted out of bed, sometimes asleep, by my parents.

Were you always in time? — No.

What was the consequence if you had been too late? — I was most commonly beaten.

Severely? — Yes, severely, I thought.

Will you state the effect that those long hours had upon the state of your health and feelings? — I was, when working those long hours, commonly much fatigued at night, when I left my work; so much so that I sometimes should have slept as I walked if I had not stumbled and started awake again; and so sick often that I could not eat, and what I did eat I vomited.

Did the labour spoil your appetite? — It did.

In what situation were you in the mill? — I was a piecener.

Will you state for this Committee whether piecening is a very laborious employment for children or not? — It is a very laborious employment. Piecers are continually running to and fro, and on their feet the whole day.

The duty of the piecener is to take the cardings from one part of the machinery and placed them on another? — Yes. So that the labour is not only continual, but is unabated to the last? — It is unabated to the last.

Do you not think, from your own experience, that the speed of the machinery is so calculated as to demand the utmost exertions of a child, supposing the hours were moderate? — It is as much as they can do when they are not very much fatigued to keep up with their work, and towards the close of the day, when they came to be more fatigued, they cannot keep up with it very well, and the consequence is that they are beaten to spur them on.
Peter Smart, called in; and examined

Where do you reside? — At Dundee.
Have you worked in a mill from your youth? — Yes, since I was 5 years of age.
Had you a father and mother in the country at the time? —
My mother stopped in Perth, about eleven miles from the mill, and my father was in the army.
Were you hired for any length of time when you went? —
Yes, my mother got 15 s. for six years, I having my meat and clothes.

What were your hours of labour, as you recollect, in the mill? — In the summer season we were very scarce of water. But when you had sufficient water, how long did you work? — We began at 4 o’clock in the morning and worked till 10 or 11 at night; as long as we could stand on our feet.
Were you kept on the premises constantly? — Constantly.
Locked up? — Yes, locked up.
Night and day? — Night and day; I never went home while I was at the mill.
Do the children ever attempt to run away? — Very often.
Were they pursued and brought back again? — Yes, the overseer pursued them and brought them back.
Did you ever attempt to run away? — Yes, I ran away twice.
And you were brought back? — Yes; and I was sent up to the master’s loft, and thrashed with a whip for running away.

Do you know whether the children were, in point of fact, compelled to stop during the whole time for which they were engaged? — Yes, they were.
By law? — I cannot say by law; but they were compelled by the master; I never saw any law used there but the law of their own hands...

TESTIMONY GATHERED BY THE ASHLEY MINES COMMISSION
(1842)

Thomas Dunn, Esq. Chief Manager

Believes that morals of the collier’s children are decidedly better than those of the Sheffield artizans, who are generally bad enough in Sheffield though not so bad as in Manchester; thinks education among colliers’ children to be very much neglected; though he thinks they will generally be able to read; they are usually employed at early ages in opening doors, but this prevents any further education on week days after they go into the pits; believes no girls are employed close to Sheffield in coal pits, but at other places is aware that girls are worked naked down to their waists the same as men; has no objection to an Act preventing the employment of children in coal pits before they are 11 years old; it would be no injury to their trade, but might be hard upon the poor parents; the hours which they work are maximum 12, and minimum 10.

Payne, Esq. coal master

That children are employed generally at nine years old in the coal pits and sometimes at eight. In fact, the smaller the vein of coal is in height, the younger and smaller are the children required; the work occupies from six to seven hours per day in the pits; they are not ill-used or worked beyond their strength; a good deal of depravity exists but they are certainly not worse in morals than in other branches of the Sheffield trade, but upon the whole superior; the morals of this district are materially improving; Mr. Bruce, the clergyman, has been zealous and active in endeavoring to ameliorate their moral and religious education...

Ann Eggley, hurrier in Messrs. Thorpe’s colliery. 18 years old:

I’m sure I don’t know how to spell my name. We go at four in the morning, and sometimes at half-past four. We begin to work as soon as we get down. We get out after four, sometimes at five, in the evening. We work the whole time except an hour for dinner, and sometimes we haven’t time to eat. I hurry by myself, and have done so for long. I know the corves are very heavy, they are the biggest corves anywhere about. The work is far too hard for me; the sweat runs off me all over sometimes. I am very tired at night. Sometimes when we get home at night we have not power to wash us, and then we go to bed. Sometimes we fall asleep in the chair. Father said last night it was both a shame and a disgrace for girls to work as we do, but there was naught else for us to do. I began to hurry when I was seven and I have been hurrying ever since. I have been 11 years in the pits. The girls are always tired. I was poorly twice this winter; it was with headache. I hurry for Robert Wiggins; he is not akin to me. ... We don’t always get enough to eat and drink, but we get a good supper. I have known my father go at two in
the morning to work . . . and he didn’t come out till four. I am quite sure that we work constantly 12 hours except on Saturdays. We wear trousers and our shifts in the pit and great big shoes clinkered and nailed. The girls never work naked to the waist in our pit. The men don’t insult us in the pit. The conduct of the girls in the pit is good enough sometimes and sometimes bad enough. I never went to a day-school. I went a little to a Sunday-school, but I soon gave it over. I thought it too bad to be confined both Sundays and week-days. I walk about and get the fresh air on Sundays. I have not learnt to read. I don’t know my letters. I never learnt naught. I never go to church or chapel; there is no church or chapel at Gawber, there is none nearer than a mile. . . . I have never heard that a good man came into the world who was God’s son to save sinners. I never heard of Christ at all. Nobody has ever told me about him, nor have my father and mother ever taught me to pray. I know no prayer; I never pray.

Patience Kershaw, aged 17:

My father has been dead about a year; my mother is living and has ten children, five lads and five lasses; the oldest is about thirty, the youngest is four; three lasses go to mill; all the lads are colliers, two getters and three hurriers; one lives at home and does nothing; mother does nought but look after home. All my sisters have been hurriers, but three went to the mill. Alice went because her legs swelled from hurrying in cold water when she was hot. I never went to day-school; I go to Sunday-school, but I cannot read or write; I go to pit at five o’clock in the morning and come out at five in the evening; I get my breakfast of porridge and milk first; I take my dinner with me, a cake, and eat it as I go; I do not stop or rest any time for the purpose; I get nothing else until I get home, and then have potatoes and meat, not every day meat. I hurry in the clothes I have now got on, trousers and ragged jacket; the bald place upon my head is made by thrusting the corves; my legs have never swelled, but sisters’ did when they went to mill; I hurry the corves a mile and more under ground and back; they weigh 300 cwt.; I hurry 11 a-day; I wear a belt and chain at the workings to get the corves out; the putters that I work for are naked except their caps; they pull off all their clothes; I see them at work when I go up; sometimes they beat me, if I am not quick
enough, with their hands; they strike me upon my back; the
boys take liberties with me, sometimes, they pull me about; I am
the only girl in the pit; there are about 20 boys and 15 men; all
the men are naked; I would rather work in mill than in coal-pit.

Isabel Wilson, 38 years old, coal putter:
When women have children thick (fast) they are compelled
to take them down early. I have been married 19 years and have
had 10 bairns; seven are in life. When on Sir John's work was a
carrier of coals, which caused me to miscarry five times from
the strains, and was gai ill after each. Putting is no so oppressiv;
last child was born on Saturday morning, and I was at work on
the Friday night.
Once met with an accident; a coal brake my cheek-bone,
which kept me idle some weeks.
I have wrought below 30 years, and so has the guid man;
he is getting touched in the breath now.
None of the children read, as the work is no regular. I did
read once, but no able to atten to it now; when I go below lassie
10 years of age keeps house and makes the broth or stir-about.
(Nine sleep in two bedsteads; there did not appear to be
any beds, and the whole of the furniture consisted of two chairs,
three stools, at table, a kail-pot and a few broken basins and
cups. Upon asking if the furniture was all they had, the guid
wife said, furniture was of no use, as it was so troublesome to flit
with.)

THOMAS CARLYLE (1795-1881)
The son of a humble Scottish stonemason, Thomas
Carlyle died in London one of the most famous men of let-
ters in the English speaking world. His life spanned nearly
the whole of the nineteenth century. Born in 1795 in the
midst of the French Revolutionary era, he lived to see the
transformation of the British Isles into the industrial work-
shop of the world and the triumph of liberal democracy. For
all these events he expressed an intense and vocal dislike.
The first of his books to bring him fame, The French Revolu-
tion, a History (1837) is a classic of historical writing, but it
is also a moral Philippic against revolution. It was followed
by lives of Cromwell and Frederick the Great, massive
historical biographies in which he gave full rein to his passion
for military history and hero worship. Past and Present
(1843), written in the midst of the "wretched thirties" and
"hungry forties," was his commentary on the blessings of
industrialism. Although outside the main stream of nineteenth
century thought, no other Victorian writer had the popular
appeal of this stern, Old-Testament prophet.
The following selections are from the original 1843
edition of Past and Present.
PAST AND PRESENT (1843)
Ernst ist das Leben.—Schiller
Book 1
PROEM
CHAPTER 1
MIDAS
The condition of England, on which many pamphlets are
now in the course of publication, and many thoughts unpublish-
ed are going on in every reflective head, is justly regarded as
one of the most ominous, and withal one of the strangest, ever
seen in this world. England is full of wealth, of multifarious pro-
duce, supply for human want in every kind; yet England is
dying of inanition. With unabated bounty the land of England
blooms and grows; waving with yellow harvests; thick-studded
with workshops, industrial implements, with fifteen millions
of workers, understood to be the strongest, the cunningest and
the willingest our Earth ever had; these men are here; the work
they have done; the fruit they have realized is here, abun-
dant, exuberant on every hand of us: and behold, some baleful
fiat as of Enchantment has gone forth, saying, "Touch it not, ye
workers, ye master-workers, ye master-idlers; none of you can
touch it, no man of you shall be the better for it; this is en-