

The Morning Chronicle's

LABOUR AND THE POOR

VOLUME V

THE MANUFACTURING DISTRICTS

ANGUS B. REACH

Edited By

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Stockport

From “Lancashire: its History, Legends, and Manufactures”

George Newenham Wright

Published 1843

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“Purify the air of Manchester by quenching its furnaces, and you simply stop the dinners of its inhabitants. The grim machine must either go on, or hundreds of thousands must starve.”

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Preface

This work attempts to be a faithful reproduction of the “Labour and the Poor” letters as printed in *The Morning Chronicle*. Only obvious typographical errors and omissions have been corrected. Variations in the spelling and hyphenation of words have largely been retained. We hope any such inconsistencies prove to be of some historical interest to the reader.

As much as possible we have tried to recreate the original layout and styling of the text and all factual tables have been reproduced as closely to the originals as possible with only minimal alterations made where necessary to improve readability.

Not all letters were titled. Where missing we have added titles to the Table of Contents to assist navigation and explanation of content. The letters themselves are as per the originals.

A handful of illustrations have been added to each volume. These did not appear in the original text but hopefully provide added interest.

R. W.
K. B.



Introduction

In 1849 a leading London-based newspaper, *The Morning Chronicle*, undertook an investigation into the working and living conditions of the poor throughout England and Wales in the hope that their findings might lead to much needed change.

The reputed catalyst for their “Labour and the Poor” series was an article written by Henry Mayhew recording a journey into Bermondsey, one of the most deprived districts of London, which was printed in September 1849. Following this it was proposed that an in-depth investigation be carried out and “Special Correspondents”, the investigators, were selected and distributed around the country. The first article or “Letter” appeared on the 18th of October 1849 and the series would run for almost 2 years and 222 letters.

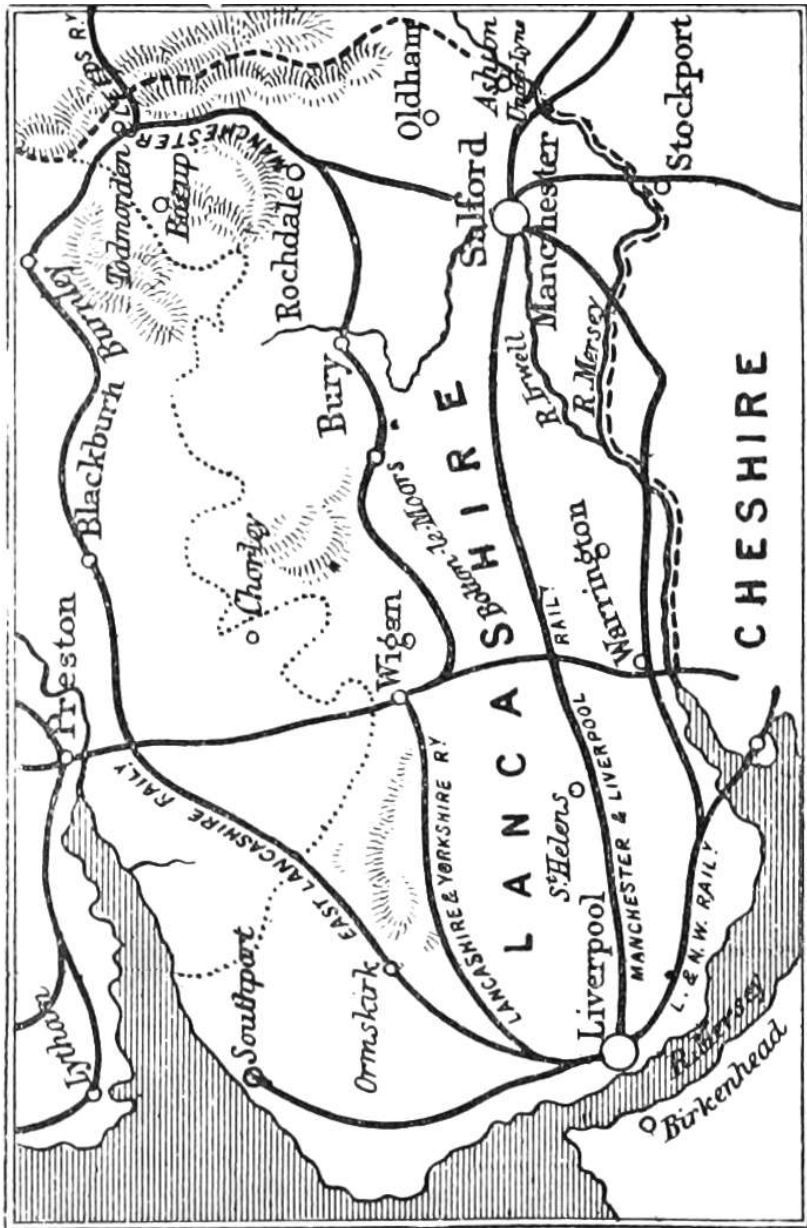
The well-known and respected writers and journalists recruited for the task included Henry Mayhew who was assigned to the Metropolitan districts, Angus Bethune Reach to the Manufacturing districts, Alexander Mackay and Shirley Brooks to the Rural districts and Charles Mackay to investigate the cities of Birmingham and Liverpool. The author of the letters from Wales is as yet unknown.

The “Labour and the Poor” letters were extremely popular at the time, being widely read throughout the nation and even abroad. The revelations in them caused quite a stir amongst the middle and upper classes of Victorian society. *Letters to the Editor* poured in with donations for specific cases of distress that appeared in the letters and also for the general alleviation of the suffering of the poor. A special fund was set up by *The Morning Chronicle* to collect and distribute these donations.

These *Letters to the Editor* have been included in this series, predominantly in the Metropolitan district volumes whose letters elicited the majority of responses. They provide a unique window into the thoughts and sentiments of the Victorian readership as they react to the incredible accounts of misery and desperation being unveiled.

The Morning Chronicle's extraordinary and unsurpassed "Labour and the Poor" investigation provides an unparalleled insight into the people of the period, their living and working conditions, their feelings, their language, their sufferings and their struggles for survival amidst the poverty and destitution of 19th century Britain. An investigation of such magnitude had never before been attempted and the undertaking was truly of epic proportions. Its impact at the time was profound. Its historical importance today is without question.





Map of The Lancashire Cotton District

LABOUR AND THE POOR.



THE MANUFACTURING DISTRICTS.

[FROM OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT.]

MANCHESTER.

LETTER I.

The Morning Chronicle has proposed to itself a great task; no less than the institution of a complete and impartial system of inquiry into the actual condition and future prospects of the labouring poor of England—the dwellers in scattered country cottages, and in lanes and alleys of the towns—the workers in our fields, our factories, our docks, our mines. In pursuance of that branch of this inquiry which has been intrusted to me, I am domiciled for the present in the great capital of the greatest department of our textile industry—amongst those “tall chimneys” which have become proverbial as the signs and symbols of that new and mighty fact—that new and mighty power—that unprecedented social and industrial development, which we call the MANUFACTURING INTEREST.

It will be for me to explore the foundation upon which that development rests; to trace its effect, in all the phases of that effect, upon the workman and the workwoman. Leaving, in a great degree, out of view those questions of commercial polity and politico-economic science which bear indirectly rather than directly and at once upon the operative, I shall confine myself to the immediate influences which encompass his life, and mould and warp his character and his social position. I shall paint the man such as the occupation which he follows, the system in which he has been brought up, the district and the social condition of the community of which he forms an item, have made him. I shall accompany the labourer to the loom, to the mine, to the forge. I shall describe his toil and the circumstances under which it is performed. I shall also visit the workman in his home. I shall describe the economy of the lodging-room, the cellar, the cottage. I shall investigate the bearing of the system of gregarious toil

upon family ties and sexual relationships. I shall narrate to what extent the factories tend to cheer, and to what extent they tend to sadden, the hearth of the artizan who toils amongst them. I shall follow his children to the school and to the mill. I shall inquire how far an undue precocity is nurtured by their early toil and their early wages; I shall observe how far that precocity tends to very early marriages, and consequently to a very early disruption of family bonds—a very early cooling of family affections. I shall inquire diligently and impartially into the vital statistics of the manufacturing system. I shall examine into the effect of factory labour upon the health and life of the factory labourer. I shall investigate the sanitary conditions under which he works at the mill—the sanitary conditions under which he lives at home. I shall likewise diligently inquire into his religious and theological opinions. I shall analyse, first, his educational, then his moral and intellectual standing. I shall examine into what forms his ordinary reading; I shall hear the lectures which please and instruct him; I shall witness the amusements which he favours; I shall accompany him, as with his family he goes to breathe the fresh air of the fields, or to take part in the rational and elevating diversion of the concert-room.

Nor shall I forget most particularly and most diligently to inquire into what have been the consequences of, and what are the opinions of, the factory operatives—men and women—as regards recent factory legislation. To obtain full and accurate information upon this head is, indeed, one of the most important objects of my mission. It has appeared to the wisdom of Parliament that an industrial system, unprecedented and anomalous in its features, should be dealt with by laws which even their warmest advocates admitted to be anomalous, if not unprecedented. The Ten Hours Bill has now been in operation for more than a year and a half—a period amply sufficient to test its practical popularity. That the toil of women and children, away from their households and their homes, ought to be jealously watched by a guardian Legislature, is what few even of the most rigid free-traders in labour are disposed to deny. Premature toil in youth brings premature age on manhood. The child who is overtasked when the vital energies are still feeble and the bones still pliant, will never grow up daring of spirit or stout of frame. The woman who perfectly understands all which belongs to the tending of mules and spindles, but knows nothing of domestic duties, is ignorant of the very rudiments of the art of cooking a dinner, and has yet to learn how to make a

shilling go farthest in the market, will seldom make the fire-side more pleasant than the public-house, or foster and encourage those home habits and home tastes which form one of the very best social characteristics of men of Anglo-Saxon blood. The Legislature has, therefore, providently ordained that the child shall have its due season of recreation and instruction; that the mother shall be so circumstanced as to prevent the possibility of the woman sinking hopelessly into the mill-labourer—into the position of one whose home is rather among looms and spindles than within her threshold and beside her hearth. So far the great question of free trade in labour seems of comparatively easy solution; the difficulty still looms ahead. If the Legislature takes care of the child and the woman, may not the man take care of himself? Leading-strings are useful, but leading-strings too long worn become as fetters. It happens to be the nature of the factory system that, more or less, all its processes must go on simultaneously. The engine, the loom, the mule, and the hands of men, women, and children, must all labour together. Consequently, the ten hours maximum of toil for “women and young children” becomes virtually the maximum of toil for all. The labour of the adult—the industry of the free Englishman—is thus attacked. Abstractedly, his liberty is taken from him; for to say to a man that he shall not work when he wishes to work, is to enslave him as much as to compel him to labour when he wishes to rest. This is the strict political economy and abstract reasoning of the question. But many other elements may be taken into view in its solution. Has political economy no exceptional cases? Is sentiment to be utterly ignored, and a coldly correct system of reasoning—which would deal with men and women as Euclid deals with perfect squares and isosceles triangles—to hold on an eternal and unbroken course? Such questions can only be answered by a strict investigation of the exceptional circumstances and conditions to which they apply.

Such, then, being the state of matters, it becomes of the utmost importance that the sentiments of the factory population upon the Ten Hours Bill, now that they can speak from experience, should be known. This point I shall expressly inquire into. I shall endeavour to ascertain whether any, and if any, what moral, social, and physical advantages have resulted from the diminution in the hours of toil. I shall inquire how the workman and the workwoman spend their additional time of leisure—whether evening schools are better attended—whether reading-rooms have more occupants, and libraries more subscribers. I shall also investigate fully the circumstances of the pending

attempt to elude the Ten Hours Bill, by means of what is called the "shift" or the "relay" system. I shall inquire whether that system has not been originated by the ingenuity of the small proportion of the workmen, and the larger proportion of the masters, who opposed the Ten Hours Bill; and I shall take pains to ascertain whether the present efforts of the minority of the factory population be not rendering nugatory the recent triumphs of the majority.

Such, in brief recapitulation, are the points to which my researches in the cotton districts will be directed. I undertake the task with a determination to be impartial; but animated with the strongest desire to see the labourer elevated in the social scale. I believe the abyss between our highest and our lowest classes to be unnaturally wide. I believe that the shaft of the social column places an undue distance between the Corinthian capital and the basement which bears up all. I fear that the spirit which animates society has in it too much of cold formality, of class selfishness, and of a systemic want of sympathy with struggling labour. Doubtless political economy sprung not before it was wanted into the world. It cleared men's minds of stifling masses of ignorance and prejudice. It pointed out to us the highway to national wealth, and, by consequence, to social prosperity. It taught us to see many things; but none more clearly than that to which we were longest and most unwittingly blind—our own interests. But although political economy brought those great blessings in its train, still, like all earthly things, it was not a gift of unmingled good. Misunderstood or perverted, it spread abroad a hard, dry, bargaining spirit—a spirit well adapted for carrying on to the utmost advantage the operations of production and of exchange—but a spirit hostile to the growth and development of that genial and hearty appreciation of class by class, which ought to form, if not the clamps by which society is bound together, at least the mortar which gives the fabric additional adhesiveness and additional smoothness. It was the consciousness of this mutual, and mutually deadening, want of genial warmth and of chivalrous sympathy operating on a few quick and generous, yet essentially unpractical, and in some cases impracticable, minds, which a few years ago produced that political and literary school which, running from one extreme to another, proposed to overturn the fabric of society, in order to remould it upon something like the feudal system, imbued with something like the patriarchal spirit. Far be it from me to uphold the slightest phase of the least monstrous of these chimeras. But still, is there not something in the tone of the philosophy of which

I speak worthy of the ear of the most economical of statesmen? Do we not lack a brotherly and a mutually cherishing spirit? Might not the "cold charity of man to man" be somewhat warmed and quickened? The extremes of our society are awful and threatening. We are the richest and the poorest nation upon earth. Cheek by jowl stand palaces odorous with perfume and cellars deadly with typhus. Capital and labour look upon each other with suspicious eyes. The owner of the former characterizes the holder of the latter as one of the "dangerous classes"—only, perhaps, to be characterized in turn as one of the tyrannous classes. Let us rest assured, that if one definition be correct, the other is not utterly destitute of truth. If society were properly constituted, need there be any class "dangerous" to the classes above it? It is not the poor—in the ordinary acceptation of the term—who are "dangerous." It is not even the simply destitute who are "dangerous." It is those who are destitute, without, as they conceive, any fault of their own, yet find no sympathy expressed for them—those who are destitute, yet perceive no apparent marks of pressure on classes the interests of which they have been long told are bound up with theirs, and who do not see the signs of that pressure and that embarrassment, simply because of the cold barrier which subsists between the two orders—because of the lack of communication, of frankness, of cordiality, of personal intercourse, which separates the man who deals in capital, from the man who deals in labour.

Without, then, attempting to alter or to remodel the fabric of society, we might advantageously do much to better the spirit of society, and to gather in nearer to a common centre the outposts of society. This must be effected by raising the position—that is to say, raising the standard of the comforts and the education, of the labouring man. How such a change is to be effected will, judging from all indications, soon become the question of questions. Social reforms are getting to be the most pressing of all politics. Land was at first the power which swept everything before it. It was the first form of capital. Then capital, popularly so called, enjoyed its triumphs, swayed the national mind, and altered the national polity. Is not that other species of capital—unaccumulated capital—that is to say, labour—also to possess its time of favour and advancement? The question may indicate imperfect knowledge, and lead to error; but it will be asked, and it must be answered. Among races of men whom we flatter our vanity by designating savages, there does not exist the continued privation and the animal ignorance which place their degrading stamp upon

masses of our own labouring population. While this continues to be so, are we safe? Wonderful has been our recent escape from the fever of convulsion which fixed upon almost all Europe, and most highly does that escape speak for the manly endurance, the sturdy good sense, the admirable good feeling of the working poor of England. But the very fact that we have experienced so signal a deliverance ought surely to induce us to seal up those sources whence danger may arise. If we are thankful to the people, who, feeling dire poverty and beholding boundless wealth, never sought, like their continental neighbours, to get up a convulsion and a scramble, ought we to persevere in that cold system of exclusion and neglect which makes poverty doubly bitter, seeing that it is manifestly spurned and outcast? Because no labourer here called out, "A bas les riches," are we to persevere in calling, "A bas les pauvres"? It may be answered that the one cry is as little heard as the other; and I believe that a sounder and a healthier and a more catholic spirit than England has seen for many years is stirring, and will shortly walk abroad.

Most Englishmen are, either from actual observation or reiterated description, familiar with the general appearance of what are called the manufacturing districts. The traveller by railway is made aware of his approach to the great northern seats of industry by the dull leaden-coloured sky, tainted by thousands of ever smoking chimneys, which broods over the distance. The stations along the line are more closely planted, showing that the country is more and more thickly peopled. Then, small manufacturing villages begin to appear, each consisting of two or three irregular streets clustered round the mill, as in former times cottages were clustered round the castle. Roads substantially paved with stone, so as to support the weight of heavy waggons, wind among the fields. Canals, with freights of barges, intersect the country; and the rivers, if they be not locked and dammed back, and embellished with towing paths upon the banks, run turbid and thick—charged with the foulness of the hundred mills they have aided in their course. Presently the tall chimneys begin to figure conspicuously in the landscape; the country loses its fresh rurality of appearance; grass looks brown and dry, and foliage stunted and smutty. The roads, and even the footpaths across the fields, are black with coal dust. Factories and mills raise their dingy masses everywhere around. Ponderous waggons, heavily laden with bales or casks, go clashing along. You shoot by town after town—the outlying satellites of the great cotton metropolis. They have all similar features—they are all

little Manchesters. Huge, shapeless, unsightly mills, with their countless rows of windows, their towering shafts, their jets of waste steam continually puffing in panting gushes from the brown, grimy wall. Between these vast establishments, a network of mean but regular streets, unpicturesque and unadorned—just the sort of private houses you would expect in the vicinity of such public edifices; and around all this, and here and there scattered amongst all this, great irregular, muddy spaces of waste ground, studded with black pools and swarming with dirty children. Some dozen or so miles so characterized, the distance of course more or less according to the point at which you enter the Queen of the cotton cities—and then, amid smoke and noise, and the hum of never-ceasing toil, you are borne over the roofs to the terminus platform. You stand in Manchester.

There is a smoky brown sky overhead—smoky brown streets all around—long piles of warehouses, many of them with pillared and stately fronts—great grimy mills, the leviathans of ugly architecture, with their smoke-pouring shafts. There are streets of all kinds—some with glittering shops and vast hotels, others grim and little frequented—formed of rows and stacks of warehouses; many mean and distressingly monotonous vistas of uniform brick houses. There are principal thoroughfares, busy and swarming as London central avenues—crowded at once with the evidences of wealth and commerce—gay carriages and phaetons—clumsy low built omnibuses, conveying loads which a horse must shudder to contemplate—carts, and waggons of every construction, high piled with bales and boxes. There are crowds of busy pedestrians of every class which business creates—clerks, and travellers, and agents—bustling from counting-house to counting-house, and bank to bank. There are swarms of mechanics and artizans in their distinguishing fustian—of factory operatives, in general undersized, sallow-looking men—and of factory-girls, somewhat stunted and pale, but smart and active looking, with dingy dresses and dark shawls, speckled with flakes of cotton-wool wreathed round their heads.

This city—this great capital of the weavers and spinners of the earth, the Manchester of the power-loom, the Manchester of the League, *our* Manchester—is but a thing of yesterday. Yet the nucleus of the town is as ancient as the walls of our most ancient cathedral cities. From the time to which the memory of man goeth not to the contrary, a hamlet stood where Manchester now stands. It was a borough since the first year of the fourteenth century. When Henry

VIII. was upon the throne Manchester was spoken of as the "best builded, quickest, and most populous town of Lancashire." For indeed the shadow of coming events fell curiously early on the banks of the Irwell. In the reign of Elizabeth, Manchester had already acquired a fame for its "coatings"—in all probability a species of woollen stuff. Cotton from the Levant was wrought into fabrics here before the Protectorate. In 1650 the trade of Manchester comprehended "woollen fringes, fustians, sackcloths, mingled stuffs and tapes, whereby not only the better sort of workmen are employed, but also the very children by their own labour can maintain themselves." The town was then a meanly-built straggling place, with a principal street, the greater part of it composed of quaint projecting gables, sloping down to the banks of the Irwell. Divers hamlets lay around it, on the shores of the main stream and the two tributaries, the Irk and the Medlock, which here join it; among these were the villages of Salford, Pendleton, and Hulme. The manufacturers of those days pursued their calling in rude and patriarchal guise. Each family, with its apprentices, wrought on its own account. The master of the household was the master of the factory, and when he was not labouring among his dependants, he was guiding, through the hills of Lancashire and Yorkshire, a string of pack-horses, laden with his fabrics, which he hawked as he went along. Sir Richard Arkwright was the man who laid the foundation of *our* Manchester. Since the introduction of roller-spinning the city sprung up as though by magic. A man, only a very few years dead, recollected the people crowding to admire the first tall chimney built in Manchester, and had seen the Liverpool coach set forth at six in the morning, in good hope of its reaching its destination not very long after six o'clock at night. Considerably within two-thirds of a century the scattered villages of Manchester, Salford, Hulme, Pendleton, Chorlton, and two or three others, became the vast cotton metropolis which has lately succeeded in swaying the industrial and commercial polity of England.

Perhaps no species of labour has been more enthusiastically lauded, and none more spitefully attacked, than that which the cotton-factory system originated. That system has been spoken of as the glory and the shame of England. It has been described as the sinews and as the canker of our land. To hear one party, we might imagine that, in their view, the whole end, and aim, and object of life was the production of cheap calico. To listen to another set

of partizans, one might believe all millowners to be Molochs—all mills temples for the immolation of children. Mr. Southey described the factory system as “a wen, a fungous excrescence on the body politic;” and a devout Protectionist journal prayed for the day when the plough would turn up the grass growing over Manchester. Let it be our care to study whether there may not be a middle and a wiser course of opinion between the extremes of either sect of rhapsodists. It would have been admitted, even by Sir James Graham, when he contrasted the “dewy call of incense breathing morn” with the “dismal clank of the factory bell,” that it is still possible that a man, with a family to feed, might prefer the smoke of Manchester, with twelve shillings a week, to the bright dawn and the green fields of Wiltshire with six. No one questions the manifold evils, the manifold abominations, of the life of great cities. Happy, no doubt, should we be to see every man enjoying himself beneath his own vine and his own fig-tree. Happy, no doubt, should we be, were it possible, to clear for ever the blue sky from smoky pollution, and enfranchise the swart artizan from toil which racks his limbs from before sunrise until after sundown. But what can we do? A stubborn ring-fence of facts girdles us. Here are vast masses of people absolutely dependent upon the labour which bristles with so many forbidding points. Purify the air of Manchester by quenching its furnaces, and you simply stop the dinners of its inhabitants. The grim machine must either go on, or hundreds of thousands must starve. There, in a word, is the stern inevitable answer to all who in this matter would allow sentiment to get the better of common sense. But are the pure sentimentalists right even in their view of the matter as it stands? Is the factory operative a less happy man than the rural labourer who toils with the sweet breath of heaven and the glories of God’s creation about him? Perhaps the inquiry now opening in your columns may convey an instructive answer to the question. There is a curious practical difference between the word “country” literally applied, and the word “country” signifying landscape. Are we not sometimes too apt to take it in its latter sense? When we look at the sunlit panorama of hill and vale and glade and stream, we are not always apt to remember that, in these scattered cottages, so picturesquely situated, there grovels poverty more keen and grinding, and suffering as hopeless and as intense, as in ever a cellar or garret of Manchester or Bolton. If the operatives about me here be stunted, is there not a sort of equipoise in the grim gauntness

you too often see in the country? In truth, the repulsiveness of the factory system is upon the surface; the advantages lie beneath. Manufacturing towns are so essentially, so abominably, ugly, smoky, and dirty, that it really is no wonder people turn from them with something like horror. It never seems to have struck the capitalist of the north that appearances are of the least account. On the contrary, he seems to build his mills in the express hope that each succeeding huge brick box will rival its predecessors in intensity of ugliness. So with chimneys. No earnest, or persevering, or systematic attempt ever seems to have been made towards the consumption of the smoke and the purifying of the air. It is my real belief that nine-tenths of the superficial unpopularity of the manufacturing system would be got rid of, were the manufacturers to set heartily to work to purify and beautify their towns. The small per centage of profit sacrificed for this object would be well laid out. It would rescue its spenders from the imputations of narrow-minded and sordid insensibility to all which is beautiful and refined, which we so often hear them contemptuously charged with. Not, perhaps, that those who are best acquainted with the institutions of Manchester would most willingly credit such accusations; but I repeat that the eye demands its homage, and that ranges of mills with their pillared porticos, their stately façades, and their minaret or column-like chimneys, would, in the estimation of the world, divest the manufacturing system of much of the odium, by freeing it from much of the ugliness, attached to it.

The moral ugliness and the moral beauties of that system, I shall examine in their proper places. Where great bodies of people, the vast proportion of them labouring poor, are crammed together, crime must abound. So it was since human nature was human nature. The temptation to crime and the facility of its commission increase together. But the same causes which make the few dishonest, tend to make the many intelligent; clever and daring thieves belong to communities of clever and daring men. The warped branch has yet something in it of the grain of the goodly tree. In a coloured table of crime which lies before me—one of those ingenious modes of painting statistics which the present statistical age has invented—the metropolis is the most darkly-shaded district. Next to it comes the iron country; then the cotton region; and treading close upon their heels—closer, perhaps, than most people imagine—we have, as the next deepest in criminality, the rural districts. If we represent the amount of manufacturing crime during the year 1847 by the figure

18, we shall find the proportion of agricultural offences to stand as high as 14—a proportion which will be of startling magnitude to the many who naturally connect rustic beauties with rural innocence, and take but little account of the fact, that the agricultural labourer endures more habitual and more pinching hunger and cold, amid his fair fields and woods, than the factory operative amid the dust and smoke of his alley and his mill.

But such comparisons, more especially if made with invidious import, are worse than idle. England is a manufacturing and agricultural community, and will continue so.

Whether or no there be anything essentially unnatural in the manufacturing system—whether or no its very existence be a plague spot on the land—involves a controversy which only very idle men would willingly pursue. The thing itself, is a great fact—*un fait accompli*—an “established innovation.” Whether a philosopher, if he could plan out the track for an infant nation to pursue, would devise so that the happiness of a great part of that nation should be rigidly dependent upon the extent of the table of its manufactured exports, we have not now to inquire into. Whether we had any business to set ourselves up as the spinners and weavers for half, and more than half, of the civilized, and a fair slice of the savage, world, is now a question beside the mark; the deed, for good or evil, has been done. The prosperity, and of course the happiness, of the north of England depend upon the continually increasing number of yards of cotton or woollen purchased by Europe, Asia, Africa, and America. If we do not spin and weave for the greater part of the world, our furnace fires must grow cold, our looms stand, and our operatives starve. Let us be thankful that Political Economy has opened our eyes to the necessities of our position. Let us be thankful that we have succeeded in taking measures which have created and will create markets, and have cheapened and will cheapen food. Now it is for Social Economy to play its part—to investigate diligently into the condition, the comforts, the mode of work and of life, of our factory population, and to devise and to urge every possible means for the amelioration of their lot, in their mills and in their homes—for the elevation physically and morally, of that most toilful, most enduring, most intelligent race of our population—that race amongst which the general vigour and enterprise of England seem to be especially condensed—that race which shows by so many tokens that in its veins runs the ruddiest Anglo-Saxon blood, and which, even in

its rude *patois*, spoken by the forge and the loom, keeps still alive the antique phraseology of William Wicliffe and Geoffrey Chaucer.

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