# Human Documents of the Industrial Revolution in Britain

E. Royston Pike



# HUMAN DOCUMENTS OF THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION IN BRITAIN

# By the same author

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# Editor

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OLD WOKING SURREY

So many books have been written on the Industrial Revolution in Britain that it may be thought that there is hardly room for another. Should an apology be thought necessary, it may be said that the present volume is an attempt to go some way towards filling what must surely appear to be a somewhat surprising gap in the literature. Its aim and purpose is to enable the men and women—and, let it be said, the children and young people—who lived in and through the Industrial Revolution in this country and who had their part, large or small, in its development and helped to give it direction and impetus, to describe their experiences in their own words.

All the documents quoted are *original* documents, prepared and written and set down in print when the Revolution was actually going on. No doubt many of them are one-sided, some of them frankly partisan, most of them limited in their viewpoint. But then they are not what has been filtered through the minds and pens of historians, writing long afterwards in a calmer atmosphere and enjoying the not inconsiderable advantages of knowledge after the event. They are the raw material of history; and what they may perhaps lose in balanced reflection and considered judgment they much more than make up for in first-hand testimony, in the warmth of feeling engendered by personal experience.

There is something more. Throughout, in this compilation, this collection of real-life stories, the emphasis is on the *human* element. In making my selection from out of the enormous amount of significant material that is available, I have disregarded anything and everything that suggests that the men and women who were engaged in the Industrial Revolution may be looked upon as figures in a statistical table or points on a graph. Here is the rich red meat of human experience, in one of the most tremendously important, exciting and exacting periods of modern times, indeed of all time.

In these documents we may read what it was really like to live in that great age of revolutionary change. We may listen to what the people have to say, told in their own words and in their own inimitable way. To be a domestic worker compelled to exchange the free and easy conditions of his cottage employment, combined with some seasonal work in his own fields, for the regulated toil of the factory—a workhouse brat despatched in a cart with other unfortunates down the long road that had its terminus behind the grim walls of the apprentice-house—a child 'trapper' sitting in the dark for lonely and seemingly interminable hours in the gloomy recesses of a coal-pit—a woman dragging tubs of coal attached by a chain drawn round her naked middle—a cotton operative fined for whistling in the factory—a girl in Manchester working from before light to long after dark in a company of precocious young males—a Sheffield grinder coughing up his lungs-a London dressmaker kept at her needle for days and nights together with sometimes no more than a couple of hours in the twenty-four to call her own. . . . All these we may meet, and many another of the hosts of humble workers in that age of boundless opportunities for the fortunate few and of incessant and poorly rewarded labour for the vast majority, in a society almost entirely wanting in everything that makes for social welfare. If the rhetoric may be allowed, most of these pages are marked with human sweat, many are tear-stained, and not a few are bespattered with blood.

While in my selections I have drawn on a large and varied collection of books and pamphlets, by far the most numerous and important class come from what today we should call Blue Books—the minutes of evidence taken before Government or Parliamentary inquiries, committees, commissions of one kind and another, together with the reports and conclusions that were founded upon them. The bulk of these have never been reprinted, and are available only on the shelves of the very largest of our national libraries. Much of what the volumes contain is of interest only to the dedicated student of industrial techniques and administrative detail, but buried in their many hundreds of pages is many a gem of human interest, as the somnolent air of the committee room was disturbed by the sharp exclamations of indignation and disgust, of pain and misery. For a hundred years and more they have rested in the obscurity of the nation's archives—in some

cases I have found the pages uncut—and the reader will be able to judge how well they have deserved their discovery and resurrection.

Not much need be said about the way in which the material has been arranged. To begin with, there is a section, or book or chapter, on The Rise of the Factory System, in which the old industrial order is shown giving birth to the new. This is followed by a collection of documents illustrative of Factory Life and People, in which I have drawn very considerably on the accounts of Dr Kay and Peter Gaskell, two authors who have been often referred to in all the histories of the social and economic life of the time but very inadequately represented in quotation. Then comes a section on Child Labour. This is by far the largest in the book, partly because of the exceedingly important part that children (even infants) and young persons played in building up the industries of modern Britain, but more because they were the first, and for a long time the only, objects of legislative 'interference'. Over a period of more than forty years their condition received the attention of Parliament, and the reports and minutes of evidence of the successive committees of inquiry are among the most valuable social documents of the time. Hardly second in importance, and not even second in human interest, is the section that follows, having for its subject Woman's Place in the new world that was coming to birth in such turmoil and anguish and disorder. Here we are given the most intimate pictures of women's life, in the factory and workshop, in the home, and, in all its disgusting detail, underground in the coal mines. From this it is a natural transition to Sexual Relations, in which that almost virgin subject of social investigation, the sex life of the working people, is examined and revealed. Then, under the heading of The State of the Towns will be found accounts of some of the most important of the centres of population in those parts of the country that were most affected by the series of revolutionary changes. Some of them, many in fact, make disgusting reading; but it is well to be reminded of the conditions of overcrowding, poverty, squalor and stench in which the industrial masses lived out their lives. It is good to be reminded, too, that there were fine flowerings of the human spirit on the urban dunghills.

These are the main sections, but there are numerous subsidiary headings. Each division has an introduction, which has

been kept short since this book is not intended to be a history of the Industrial Revolution but rather something in the nature of a gloss. In a number of cases I have said something about the authors of the documents quoted, in order that the reader may judge their credentials and allow for possible partisanship and bias. If we are considering, say, the conditions of work in a cotton factory, we may well feel inclined to give greater weight to the evidence of one who actually worked in the factory than to one who looked at the factory from outside and may have visited it only as a member of a conducted tour. The headings given to the documents are mine, and editorial additions by way of explanation, etc., in the text are enclosed in square brackets. Full details of the source are appended to each extract.

The period covered by the survey is roughly that from the end of the eighteenth century to well on in the reign of Queen Victoria, when the Industrial Revolution, after having brought about a new social and industrial order, had at length been brought under some measure of public control, its worst excesses were being remedied, and the generation of hardbitten pioneers had given place to men of a much more socially responsible type.

What impression are the two hundred and fifty 'documents' assembled here, likely to make on the reader? Something resembling the impression they have made on my own mind perhaps—that the truth about the Industrial Revolution is nothing like so simple and clear-cut as the histories may have led us to suppose. There are many strange things in these pages, astonishing phrases, surprising descriptions, unexpected asides. Not all the masters were tyrants, and not all the tyrants were masters. And the things which are dealt with are still so very much alive that we must make allowance for the passions and prejudices of class and education, of employment and status. The final thought the documents have left with me is that the only really valid generalization about the Industrial Revolution is that no generalization is possible.

Here, then, is the Industrial Revolution in the raw, as it were—its glory and its grime, its tremendous achievement at the cost of so much human suffering and labour, its shame and its pride, and, let us not forget to acknowledge, its boundless promise of a better and brighter tomorrow.

E. R. P.

# (P.P. = Parliamentary Papers)

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