

Cultural and Societal Changes Caused by Industrialization

Black, Jeremy and Donald M. MacRaild. *Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

By 1830, industrialisation had made significant and irreversible progress, changing the lives of many people to such an extent that their way of life would have been unrecognizable to their grand-parents' generation. Not only was Britain becoming more urban (even if this was far from universal) and the rural world was becoming relatively less important. In the early stages of industrial and urban growth, prior to the social reforms of the 1840s and beyond, the environment of the urban world was more dangerous than would be the case later. Sewerage systems, housing stock, street lighting, policing-- all these things were inadequate-- or were perceived to be lacking - in the urban world

The increasing population mobility-- especially the labour migration-- that was discussed in Chapter 6 in many ways flowed against perceived social wisdom. The Elizabethan Poor Law had worked expressly to curtail movement because of the social upheaval that was thought to accompany radical changes in local population, especially in relation to the cost of relieving the poverty of the newcomers. In the eighteenth century, and especially in the nineteenth, workers travelled much more in search of work, and did so in far greater numbers, than had been the case previously. Employers resisted certain sorts of migration and often acted through a sense of fear a out losing a stable labour force. We can see many instances of this. Masters and Servants' legislation, which was increasingly resisted by workers from the later eighteenth century onward, was designed expressly to tie labourers to their work with severe contracts. Government also sought to stem the flow of skilled artisans to the American colonies, especially after they gained independence. While population movement rates in the nineteenth century would suggest quite clearly that employers were losing this particular battle to hold on to their human capital, it is important not to underplay the degree to which there was a struggle between masters and men, over the issue of contracts. The legislation was still being used for this purpose by employers in the 1860s and 1870s. Moreover, some groups of workers, for example the miners in the north-east of England were tied even more firmly to long contracts in what was known as the 'bond system'. While they resisted what some saw as a semi-feudal system of labour relations, pit-owners nevertheless used all their powers to hold on to contracted workers. This meant going to magistrates, offering rewards for information of absconded workers, putting up posters, and so on. In the urban world, however, Thomas Carlyle's 'cash nexus'-- a relationship at work based on money alone, and not loyalty, contract or honour-- became increasingly prevalent as the century wore on.

In this way, and in others, pastoral Britain was giving way to the towns and industrial villages that came to typify early-Victorian society. Rural forms of life did not translate easily into the town and both workers and employers discovered this. Although urban dwellers were not quite a majority of the population in 1830, and the decline of the rural world was relative rather than absolute, large towns, such as Birmingham and Bradford, and the great industrial and commercial cities of Glasgow and Manchester, began to assume a dominant role in the nation's prosperity. The urban world also had a psychological impact on the nation. Not only did towns and cities represent a different mode of life from the village and countryside, they also pressed upon the collective imagination of

the people who watched them grow and who lived within them. In a sense, all periods are symbolised by some idea of change, some new aspect of life: in the nineteenth century, the place was undoubtedly occupied by urban and industrial development.

For the labouring classes of any society, at any time, work-- whether in field or factory-- could be tough, remorseless and sometimes dangerous. Working as a village blacksmith, a dock-side porter or a textile operative was similar insofar as the work was undertaken for remuneration in order to live. But there could be considerable differences between one working environment and another, the work of one period and another. There is little doubt that work patterns, overall, changed quite considerable in the nineteenth century, but this must not be over-stressed. Work was not entirely standardised in this period: the Lancashire textile trade alone counted more than 1,200 different job names, according to the census enumerators of 1841, a bewildering array that defied categorisation, except to say all were in some way or another connected with cotton-cloth production. But each trade carried its own customs, practices, experiences and rates of pay.

Moreover, until the 1840s, thousands of traditional handicraft trades had yet to die out, and toil was performed overwhelming by men and women working with their hands. Machinofacture was becoming a part of working life, especially in cutting-edge industries such as textiles, but muscle-power still provided more livings than the archetypal labour processes of factories as found in Lancashire and Yorkshire. The regimentation of people by machines did not achieve a majority position until the twentieth century. Machines were not even to dominate all aspects of the cotton trade until the second half of the nineteenth century. While spinning was mechanised long before weaving, powerloom weaving was not fully integrated into the factory system until after the 1850s. In the earlier

part of the century, weaving remained a handicraft trade and the average cotton-mill employed no more than a couple of hundred workers. The technological gap between spinning and weaving was such that hundreds of thousands of handloom weavers continued to have work long after textile sheds appeared on the slopes of the Pennines. What is more, intricate types of production, for example, embroidery and lace-making, were still being created on handlooms because early-generation weaving machines were too crude for the working of very fine, fragile threads. As mechanisation spread, however, handloom weavers' wages tumbled. In 1800, these men could earn 30s per week; thirty years later, this was down to perhaps 5s or so.