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The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend: Romantic-period responses to the plight of child labour

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INTRODUCTION

"Yes, let the scorn that haunts his course
Turn on me like a trodden snake,
And hiss and sting me with remorse,
If I the fatherless forsake."
– James Montgomery

Over the course of time, few social issues have garnered as much attention and sympathy from the public as the exploitation of children, a phenomenon which appears to have been largely eradicated in the developed countries of the world, but that was firmly entrenched in Western culture at least until the last century. In particular, in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain, it was commonplace to witness children as young as seven or eight years old tirelessly toiling in the numerous factories and mines scattered across the nation or engaged in urban occupations such as chimney sweeping and street vending. In fact, in the country where industrialization arguably made the most profound impact in Europe, it was often the children from less affluent families who had to pay the highest price; malnourished, poorly clothed, and frequently neglected by parents who lacked the proper means to provide sufficient care, these young individuals were compelled to engage in labour from an extremely early age in order to contribute to the family's economic needs. On the other hand, the industrial system made the presence of working children ever more necessary. They were not only employed as substitutes for adult labourers in times of shortage, but rather sought after for their distinct physical characteristics, which allowed them to perform tasks deemed unsuitable for older people. For instance, in textile mills, young boys and girls were entrusted with the duty of piecing together broken threads with their small fingers. Similarly, as miners and chimney sweeps their services were particularly requested due to their ability to access exceedingly narrow spaces. Most of these unfortunate children spent their days confined in unsanitary, suffocating and perilous environments, where they continuously faced the risk of contracting diseases, developing deformities and enduring potentially fatal accidents.

The phenomenon of child labour, alongside the broader topic of the living conditions of children during the Industrial Revolution, has become a subject of investigation for many contemporary intellectuals and modern researchers. Among the most significant recent contributions is undoubtedly the scholarly inquiry by historian Jane Humphries, which culminated in her 2010 book titled *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution*. Across nearly 400 pages, Humphries provides an exhaustive and detailed depiction of working-class childhood during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, examining a variety of contexts such as those of family life, education, apprenticeship and employment. Her research, based on the analysis of over 600 autobiographies of the period, reveals specific and groundbreaking information regarding household economy, relationships within the family, the reasons for starting work and the different possible career paths for children. Noteworthy in this context is also Clark Nardinelli, economist and author of numerous essays concerning the all-encompassing effects of industrialization. Particularly interesting and relevant to this study is his innovative approach in analysing the causes behind the decline of child labour, which he attributes not merely to the implementation of regulatory legislation, but rather to a complex interplay of economic, technological, social and also legislative factors. Finally, less recent but of immense value is the work of British scholar Royston Pike who, in 1996, assembled into a single publication an enormous array of first-hand testimonies "prepared, written and set down in print when the Revolution was actually going on"[1]. Pike's methods stand in stark contrast to those of the two previously mentioned researchers, as he openly admitted in the introduction to his volume that he was reluctant to furnish readers with statistics and numerical data. Instead, he aimed to give voice to the protagonists of an era, the labourers, whose human dimension and individual narratives are often overlooked in conventional scholarly investigations. His *Hard Times: Human Documents of the Industrial Revolution* offers a unique insight into the existence of hundreds of men, women, and children whose accounts, while occasionally lacking impartiality and objectivity, are profoundly significant as authentic reflections of these individuals' lived experiences.

As for the historical records shedding light on the darkest sides of the recently industrialized society, we find the works of conscientious individuals who meticulously

[1] Pike, E.R. (1996) '*Hard Times': Human Documents of the Industrial Revolution*. New York: Praeger, p. 7.

documented the contemporary situation for the purpose of denouncing it. In this regard, nineteenth-century journalist Henry Mayhew and physician James Philip Kay made a fundamental contribution through their writings on the living and working conditions of the impoverished classes of the time. In particular, Mayhew's monumental publication, entitled *London Labour and the London Poor*, serves as a primary source for a substantial portion of the existing information concerning the misery, criminality and injustices endured by the masses throughout the industrial period. Both writers emphasize the dire circumstances of destitute children, described as pale and frail, their physical well-being undermined by the necessity of carrying out degrading tasks. Equally important are the biographies of men belonging to the world of politics and business who decided to invest their wealth and energy in philanthropic activities. Sir Robert Peel, Robert Owen and Jonas Hanway are just a few names among these pioneers of social reform who established themselves as champions in the long campaign for the abolition of child labour.

One final yet no less significant category of documents offering commentary on childhood during the Industrial Revolution comprises the works authored by many contemporary poets and prose writers. The Romantic period was characterized by a heightened sensitivity to social injustice, with its protagonists often engaging with the prevalent issue of child exploitation in their literary works. Celebrated personalities such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake and Shelley made children prominent characters in their poetry, each with their own personal and unique interpretations. In Wordsworth, for example, the poet's strong rejection of a system seen as corrupting the inherent goodness of humanity is manifested through an exaltation of nature's beauty and a profound nostalgia for the carefree years of youth. The child, as in modern educational approaches, is not regarded as a miniature adult with adult responsibilities, but perceived as a distinct being with specific needs and characteristics that should not be suppressed but rather nurtured and protected. In other works, such as William Blake's, the empathy for the plight of impoverished children is conveyed through the effort to give voice to their sufferings, in the hope that their plea may instil compassion in the readers. Among Blake's most renowned compositions, one certainly remembers *The Chimney Sweeper*, wherein a young climbing boy recounts his distressing story of solitude and abuse. Divided into two sections, the poem narrates a typical scenario for

the time, portraying innocent children being left orphans, abandoned and sold to merciless master sweepers by whom they are forced to endure unimaginable hardship.

The grim conditions of child chimney sweeps and the progression towards the prohibition of their exploitation have received limited attention in modern research, perhaps due to the smaller number of young employees in this field compared to the manufacturing and mining sectors. Some notable exceptions to this trend include George L. Philips's extensive work in *England's Climbing Boys: A History of the Long Struggle to Abolish Child Labour in Chimney Sweeping* published in 1949 and, more recently, Niels Van Manen's 2010 dissertation on the climbing boys' campaigns led in Britain between 1770 and 1840. The general disposition of intellectuals was different during the industrialization era, as many were deeply moved by the cruelty of such a barbaric practice and bravely took a standing in support of this marginalized category, as they did with children working in factories and mines. In this context, it is imperative to acknowledge the figure of James Montgomery, Scottish poet and committed philanthropist who undertook the challenge of arranging an immense collection of documents against the employment of young chimney sweeps. The volume, which appeared in 1824 under the title *The Chimney Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing Boy's Album,* contains a vast range of tracts, accounts, parliamentary reports and literary contributions, all aimed at raising public awareness about the harsh reality of chimney sweeping and obtaining relevant legislative reform.

In light of these considerations, the purpose of this thesis is to illustrate how the injustice of child labour in all forms and fields had enormous impact on the consciousness of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century intellectuals and enlightened members of the elites, as they did not remain indifferent to the cruel realities experienced by great part of British children, but instead advocated their rights through their philanthropic endeavours and literary contributions. In the first chapter, a general overview will be provided of the circumstances surrounding the British Industrial Revolution, with specific emphasis placed on the economic and social consequences of modernization and the laissez-faire policies implemented by the Government. Special attention will be devoted to the extensive process of urbanization that occurred concurrently with the massive migration of workers from rural areas towards urban centres, where employment opportunities were more abundant. This mostly resulted in

overcrowding, inadequate housing for labourers and poor living conditions within city slums. The situation was not much better in the workplace. In fact, the endorsement of unrestrained economic activity by British Parliament significantly hindered the process of labour regulation, facilitating among other things the unprecedented exploitation of children in a variety of sectors. The second section of the research will be focused on the historical status of children within society and the phenomenon of child labour. A range of primary and secondary materials will be examined to unveil some of the key factors contributing to the early employment of boys and girls in the industrialized society, including parental absence, familial poverty and social norms. Moreover, a comprehensive analysis will be conducted of multiple testimonies from children employed in factories, mines and chimney sweeping, with the aim of gaining insight into the countless adversities and dangers they faced. To this purpose, crucial were the reports published by various Parliamentary Committees, established with the specific goal of investigating working conditions within designated fields and identifying potential areas for improvement.

In the third chapter, a comprehensive review will be provided of the long struggle for the abolition of child labour, a battle that was resolutely championed by many prominent personalities of the time. Firstly, a concise digression will be made to examine the propositions of those economists that endorsed child labour as an essential asset for the nation's economic development. Such analysis will facilitate our comprehension of the deep-seated nature of this phenomenon within eighteenth- and nineteenth-century culture, and will enable us to better appreciate the efforts of those who firmly opposed the principles of a society that valued economic interest above anything else. After that, the various stages of child labour regulation will be retraced, together with the notable initiatives undertaken by key figures during each phase. Reference will be made to the endeavours of industrialists Sir Robert Peel and Robert Owen, politicians John Cam Hobhouse, Michael Thomas Sadler, Anthony Ashley-Cooper, and merchant and philanthropist Jonas Hanway. Finally, a concluding segment will be devoted to highlighting the contribution of the Romantic poets who ardently expressed their solidarity with unprivileged children. Through the scrutiny of selected poems, the perspectives of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and Blake will be brought to light, with specific emphasis placed on the humanitarian significance of their work.

Lastly, the fourth and final chapter of this study will be dedicated to an in-depth analysis of James Montgomery's *The Chimney Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing Boy's Album,* deemed particularly deserving of consideration for its emblematic representation of the socially engaged attitude displayed by most contemporary intellectuals. A work of profound social criticism, the collection saw the collaboration of numerous poets, prose writers and philanthropists closely associated with Montgomery, while also capturing the interest of distinguished figures such as Joanna Baillie, Walter Scott and Charles Lamb. In order to better grasp the essence of *The Chimney Sweeper's Friend*, the initial section of the chapter will provide a few essential details concerning the editor's life, starting from his upbringing as son of two Moravian missionaries to his socially committed poetry and his active involvement with charitable organizations in Sheffield. Next, some information about the origins of the collection will be presented, with particular focus on the persona of Samuel Roberts, an enlightened entrepreneur who, alongside Montgomery, led a vigorous campaign for the abolition of climbing boys in Britain. Finally, a series of texts appearing in the volume will be taken into account in order to identify the primary strategies used to evoke empathy among the readers and solicit public support for the cause. These include a variety of documents collected by the Sheffield Society for abolishing the use of Climbing Boys, including an appeal to the King of England, an essay on the working conditions of child chimney sweeps, several reports detailing instances of cruelty, abuse and abduction, and a medical account outlining the serious health risks that came with the profession of chimney sweeping.

Furthermore, a few poems will be analysed in which the profound sufferings experienced by child sweeps are portrayed with vivid clarity. The first four poems to be investigated were written by Montgomery himself and collectively form the series *The Climbing Boy's Soliloquies*. Sequentially titled *A Word With Myself*, *The Complaint*, *The Dream* and *Easter-Monday at Sheffield*, they delve into crucial themes regarding chimney sweepers' life and occupation, encompassing topics such as violence, the yearning to escape from a degrading existence, misery, solitude, but also the solace provided through charitable activities. The fifth and sixth compositions were authored by Quaker poets Bernard Barton and Jeremiah Holmes Wiffen, and serve as conduits for the core humanitarian values held by the Quaker community of the time, with its active involvement in the effort to ameliorate the conditions of the working class. The last

poem under examination is *The Chimney Sweeper* by William Blake, a piece penned more than three decades earlier but astutely incorporated by Mongomery into the collection for its remarkable visionary power and its potential to evoke profound emotional resonance in the reader. In each of these compositions, we shall observe a skilful treatment of the central themes, brilliantly addressed so as to appeal to the audience's sense of humanity and with the hopeful aspiration of making a meaningful contribution to the arduous fight against what was indeed a genuine dehumanization of children. While it is quite challenging to determine the tangible impact of Montgomery's collection on the actual eradication of child labour, the profound humanitarian value of it, as of all socially committed literary works, cannot be overlooked and serves as evidence of the existence, in a world that appeared cruel and indifferent to those in need, of remarkable individuals distinguished by their compassionate hearts and rectitude.

1. THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION IN BRITAIN

With the term Industrial Revolution, we refer to the long and complex process of transformation which invested both Europe and the United States between the mid-eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries. Over this period, a whole array of groundbreaking innovations was implemented that irreversibly altered the economic and social structure of the countries involved, fostering the transition from a domestic system based on hand production methods to a factory system in which machines made modern large-scale production possible. It should not come as a surprise that the changes attributable to this incredible revolution began in Great Britain. In fact, it is important to consider that the British economy was already relatively rich by contemporary standards before the years in which historians situate the beginning of the Industrial Revolution[2]. As early as the 1760s, French historian Pierre-Jean Grosley commented on the wealth of pre-industrial London affirming that "people might be thought very rich in comparison of the Parisians" and that "the inhabitants of [the capital] eat and drink well, and are handsomely cloathed"[3]. Although it would be far-fetched to state that all eighteenth-century Londoners experienced a comfortable life, research confirms that the level of prosperity in Britain at that time was generally higher than in continental European countries[4].

A number of factors contributed to Great Britain's pioneering role in the Industrial Revolution. For instance, in the eighteenth century, significant advances in agriculture led to an unprecedented rise in land productivity, consequently promoting a rapid growth of the population. Thanks to innovations like the crop rotation and the introduction of new cultivations imported from America and Asia[5], food supplies expanded notably and the living conditions of millions of English families improved. At the same time, the swift increase in inhabitants created an excess of available labour for the emerging factories. Another favourable circumstance on which Britain could rely on

[2] Floud, R. and McCloskey, D.N. (1994) *The Economic History of Britain since 1700, Vol. 1: 1800-1860*. 2nd Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 44.
[3] Evans, E.J. (2001) *The Forging of the Modern State: Early Industrial Britain, 1783-1870*. 3d Edition. London: Routledge, p. 7.
[4] Ibidem.
[5] Ensminger, M.E. and Ensminger, A.H. (1994) *Foods & Nutrition Encyclopaedia, Two Volume Set*. Boca Raton: CRC-Press, p. 1104.

was the possibility of accessing a wide variety of raw materials, both shipped from the colonies and already present on the national territory. Those include cotton, coal, iron, copper, limestone and tin, all of which could be quickly displaced thanks to the dense network of canals and new roads constructed all around the country beginning in the 1750s[6]. In this regard, of fundamental importance is the intervention of the turnpike trusts, private organizations which financed road improvements by levying tolls, and whose work was demonstrated to have significantly contributed to reduce transport costs and to improve the quality of travel[7]. These changes in the transportation system had a considerable impact on economic development in Britain, in that they supported the expansion of both domestic and international trade.

It should also not be forgotten that Great Britain could count on a large supply of capital originated from an already prosperous trade and cottage industry, and which could be reinvested in the new factories and industrial machinery. Surely, the British Government facilitated the industrialization process by passing laws that fostered a favourable business environment, but most of the high-risk investments that allowed Britain to become the first industrialized country in the eighteenth century were made by private citizens, determined entrepreneurs who were ready to seize an opportunity to enhance their success when it presented itself. As economist David Landes stated in his 1969 essay, the British were "a people fascinated by wealth and commerce, collectively and individually"[8]. The exemplary British entrepreneur was competent, firm and perseverant; he knew how to identify people's needs and he was able to cooperate with others in order to effectively achieve his goals[9]. Moreover, he had to build for himself a reputation as a gentleman: the actions of many British industrialists, such as cotton master Richard Arkwright or linen manufactures John Marshall, were notoriously driven by their obsession to establish themselves as worthy members of the landed gentry[10]. In fact, at that time the possession of a landed estate was still perceived as the most tangible symbol of social prestige. Whatever their personal motives may have been, it is

[6] Montagna, J. (1981) 'The Industrial Revolution', *Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute*, 2, p. 5
[7] Bogart, D. (2004) 'Turnpike trusts and the transportation revolution in 18th century England', *Explorations in Economic History*, 42(4), p. 479.
[8] Landes, D.S. (1969) *The Unbound Prometheus*. 2nd Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 66.
[9] Mokyr, J. (2012) 'Entrepreneurship and the Industrial Revolution in Britain' in Landes, D.S., Mokyr, J. and Baumol, W. (eds) *The Invention of Enterprise: Entrepreneurship from Ancient Mesopotamia to Modern Times*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 186.
[10] Ibidem.

undeniable that these individuals represented a major driving force behind the Industrial Revolution, as their commitment was fundamental for the establishment of the new factories and the invention and introduction of innovative technologies.

Finally, it is worth mentioning some of the main innovations and technological advances that took place within this modernization process. Enormous progress was made in a number of industries thanks to James Watt's improvements of the steam engine in the 1760s. While the first attempts to employ steam for practical purposes date back to the seventeenth century, Watt's machine is considered the first to effectively address water wastage by incorporating a separate condenser[11]. Moreover, it used a considerably smaller amount of fuel in comparison to its predecessors, making the engine's operation more affordable and feasible even in areas where coal was scarce. The development of a new efficient steam engine meant a quantum leap for industrialization because steam power was not environment-dependent and therefore eliminated geographical constraints[12]. By 1800, over 2.500 steam engines were scattered around Britain, most of them in mines, cotton mills and manufacturing factories where new ways of organizing labour were now required[13].

The installation of new machines as the steam engine also created a huge demand for coal. If in 1750, Britain's annual coal production stood at 5.2 million tons, by 1850 this figure had risen to 62.5 million tons per year, surpassing the 1750s output by more than tenfold[14]. In coal mining, significant improvements were represented by ameliorated tunnel ventilation and illumination, improved underground and surface transportation through the use of steam powered machinery, and the employment of explosives like gunpowder to break apart coal seams[15]. Although the mining process had definitely been made more practical, it is important to emphasise that the conditions in which miners worked were still extremely perilous. They were forced to descend deeper and deeper into the ground to find new coal and to squeeze through tunnels that were narrow and humid. They were vulnerable to respiratory disease, like the black lung

[11] Encyclopaedia Britannica (2023) *Watt steam engine*. Available at: https://www.britannica.com/technology/Watt-steam-engine (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[12] Ibidem.
[13] Word History Encyclopedia (2023) *Watt steam engine*. Available at: https://www.worldhistory.org/Watt_Steam_Engine/#google_vignette (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[14] Letters and the Lamp (2023) *The Industrial Revolution, coal mining and the Felling Colliery disaster*. Available at: https://wp.lancs.ac.uk/lettersandthelamp/sections/the-industrial-revolution-coal-mining-and-the-felling-colliery-disaster/ (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[15] Montagna, J. (1981) 'The Industrial Revolution', p. 4.

disease, and they were always in danger of dying trapped in the tunnels. In fact, it was not uncommon that passages propped up with wood would collapse, or that gases present in coal mines would cause an explosion if they came into contact with the flame of a candle[16]. All these factors collectively made coal mining a tremendously hazardous occupation.

In the iron industry, the introduction of Watt's steam engine brought considerable benefits as it enabled the implementation of machine-driven air blasts into the blast furnace, ultimately facilitating a mass production process[17]. Also, Henry Cort's newly developed puddling method made it possible to obtain iron of higher quality by using coke instead of charcoal to burn away impurities in the material[18]. In a similar way, several were the inventions that revolutionised the British textile industry. Innovations like James Hargreaves' spinning jenny, Richard Arkwright's water frame and Edmund Cartwright's power loom contributed to significantly speed up the spinning and weaving processes, allowing the country to become competitive on the international textile market[19].

When considering the impact of these changes on the British population, they brought about a whole series of social implications. First of all, the workplace gradually shifted from the small artisan's workshop and the peasant's cottage to the factory; this meant that labourers were not dispersed in their homes anymore and could no longer plan their time autonomously, but were instead gathered into large industrial establishments where their work was organized collectively. Here, long hours were enforced by factory owners with the goal of maximizing profits, to the point that in the nineteenth century it was not unusual for adults as well as children to work between fourteen and sixteen hours a day, six days a week. The concentration of labour also led workers and their families to settle in the rapidly expanding towns that were spreading in proximity of the factories, promoting a substantial increase in urban population.

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[16] Letters and the Lamp (2023) *The Industrial Revolution, coal mining and the Felling Colliery disaster*.
[17] JSW Steel. *How Iron and Steel Fuelled the Industrial Revolution*. Available at: https://www.jsw.in/steel/how-iron-and-steel-fuelled-industrial-revolution (Accessed: 22 March 2024).
[18] The National Iron & Steel Heritage Museum (2018) *Henry Cort*. Available at : https://steelmuseum.org/i-s-hall-of-fame/cort_henry.cfm#:~:text=Henry%20Cort%20discovered%20the%20puddling,produced%20on%20a%20large%20scale (Accessed: 22 March 2024).
[19] Historic-UK.com. *The Cotton Industry*. Available at: https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofBritain/Cotton-Industry/ (Accessed: 23 March 2024).

Cities and towns, which had traditionally been centres for administration and commerce, swiftly evolved into busy places for manufacturing and industry. For instance, data shows that London grew from a population of half a million in the 1680s to more than two million citizens in 1850[20]. Similarly, other cities like Nottingham, Manchester and Liverpool progressed from being small market towns in the seventeenth century and transformed into big settlements with more than 300,000 inhabitants[21] in the mid-nineteenth century.

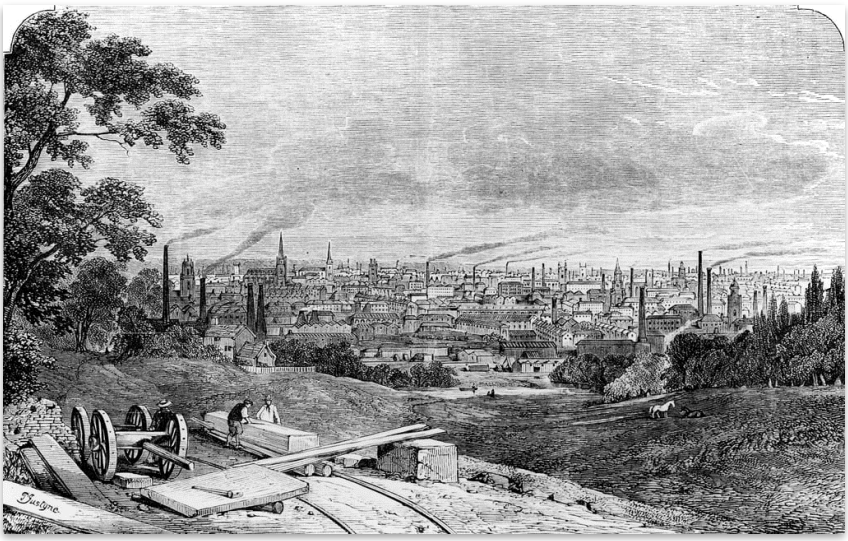

Figure 1. Manchester 1840s - engraving by illustrator Percy William Justyne.

1.1. Living and working conditions

1.1.1. Urban squalor and overcrowding

In the crucial years between 1780 and 1840, Britain transitioned from being what Napoleon had derogatorily labelled as "a nation of shopkeepers"[22] into "the workshop of the world"[23]. Massive industrial development, the great availability of raw materials

[20] ArchivesHistory. *People in Place: Early Modern London*. Available at: https://archives.history.ac.uk/people-in-place/pip.html#:~:text=Early%20modern%20London,-Between%20the%20early&text=Its%20population%20grew%20from%20around,cent%20of%20the%20nation's%20wealth. (Accessed: 23 March 2024).

[21] Alvarez-Palau, E.J. *et al*. (2023) *Transport and urban growth in the First Industrial Revolution*, Dissertation, Yale Department of Economics, p. 5.

[22] SirGordonBennett.com (2023) *A Nation of Shopkeepers* Available at: https://www.sirgordonbennett.com/gordons-bugle/nation-of-shopkeepers/ (Accessed: 23 March 2024).

[23] Encyclopedia.com (2023) *Workshop of the World*. Available at: https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/workshop-world (Accessed: 23 March 2024).

and the presence of an effective financial system granted the country a prominent role in international trade, enabling it to long withstand the competition posed by other emerging industrial nations[24]. For producers and entrepreneurs, the period between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries was extremely profitable. Richard Arkwright managed to create an enormous empire of factories which spread through Derbyshire, Staffordshire and Lancashire up into Scotland, allegedly leaving behind at his death a fortune of more than £500,000, which today is more than £200 million[25]. Ironmaster Richard Cashway became the sixth wealthiest man in Britain[26] after his enterprise Cyfarthfa Ironworks achieved international success, while Josiah Wedgwood amassed more than £600,000 pounds by submitting the first luxury brand of pottery[27]. Many are the fascinating stories that speak of ambition and success. Nevertheless, there is another much less favourable reality that one should take into account when considering the effects of the Industrial Revolution. If resourceful businessmen could benefit greatly from this newly established state of things, the labouring classes had to endure extremely challenging living and working conditions.

Firstly, unprecedented social problems were caused by the convergence of urbanization and the huge population expansion that came with industrialization. As mentioned before, urban settlements experienced a dramatic growth in the first half of the nineteenth century. Thanks to the many technological innovations, producers could now establish their factories near towns and cities where transportation facilities were readily accessible, thereby attracting thousands of peasants leaving the countryside in search for better opportunities and higher income. Moreover, during the eighteenth century the British population expanded at a faster pace than ever before, reaching 27,4 million in 1850[28], compared to about 6 million in 1700[29]. Among the main factors which supported this growth one could mention the increase in the availability of food, improvements in people's diets and the virtual eradication of dreaded diseases, all of

[24] BBC Archives (2018) *Laissez-faire and the Victorians*. Available at : https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian_britain/education_health/laissez_faire_01.shtml (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[25] Belper Derbyshire (2018) *Richard Arkwright Biography*. Available at: https://belper-research.com/people/arkwright/arkwright.html (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[26] The Guardian (1999) *Who wants to be a millionaire?* Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/sep/29/features11.g2 (Accessed: 25 March 2024).
[27] The Hustle (2019) *The 18th-century potter who became the world's first tycoon*. Available at: https://thehustle.co/josiahwedgwood/ (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[28] Mitchell, B.R. (1980) *European Historical Statistics*, 1750-1975. 2nd Edition. New York: Facts on File.
[29] Floud, R. and McCloskey, D.N. (1981) *The Economic History of Britain since 1700,* p. 20.

which contributed to a decline in mortality rates[30]. Furthermore, the higher wages offered by industrial employment facilitated early marriages and subsequently earlier childbearing. For all these reasons, urban centres located in industrialized areas became home to a huge mass of people, mostly shopkeepers and members of the labouring classes[31], whose inhumane living conditions initially remained mostly overlooked in a world that was now moving at ever-increasing speed.

The works of those few virtuous men who at the time had the courage to denounce the situation are an invaluable source to try and comprehend the key problems that characterized the appalling life experiences of the British proletariat. For instance, Scottish writer James Montgomery, whose admirable work will be extensively explored in later chapters of this thesis, campaigned strenuously against the widespread child exploitation at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Of particular interest in this regard is also the pamphlet *The moral and physical conditions of the working classes employed in the cotton manufacture in Manchester*, published by Doctor James Philip Kay in 1832. Kay was a medical officer in Manchester, whose assiduous contact with patients coming from the most insanitary and loathsome quarters in town prompted him to make a record of their sufferings[32]. The areas inhabited by labourers are described as extremely unclean, overcrowded, and as lacking proper regulation. Kay writes:

> The state of the streets powerfully affects the health of their inhabitants... Want of cleanliness, of forethought, and economy, are found in almost invariable alliance with dissipation, reckless habits and disease. The population gradually becomes physically less efficient as the producers of wealth... Were such manners to prevail, the horrors of pauperism would accumulate[33].

The streets of Manchester felt "almost pestilential"[34], the air made unbearable by the smoke and exhalations coming from the nearby factories. People here lived an unhappy life, emaciated and demoralized by prolonged exhausting labour, and alienated from a monotonous routine that offered no intellectual stimuli nor moments of leisure[35]. For the labourers Kay encountered, not even the home represented a safe place, as apartments

[30] Montagna, J. (1981) 'The Industrial Revolution', p. 6.
[31] Kay, J.P. (1832) *The moral and physical conditions of the working classes employed in the cotton manufacture in Manchester.* Manchester: Harrison and Crosfield, p. 6.
[32] Pike, E.R. (1996) *Hard Times:* p. 43.
[33] Kay, J.P. (1832) *The moral and physical conditions of the working classes,* pp. 14-15.
[34] Ibidem, p. 10.
[35] Ibidem, p. 8.

were frequently crowded with twenty or thirty lodgers and there was no chance of privacy or distinction of age and sex[36]. Houses were badly furnished, dirty and sometimes damp, their state promoting the spread of diseases such as diarrhoea, cholera or even typhus[37].

Children of the manufacturing population suffered greatly due to these gruesome conditions. In his work, Kay portrays them as looking pale and sallow and as often being neglected by parents who had neither the time nor the means to take care of them[38]. He even reports that according to the bills of mortality of the town more than half of them died before reaching six years of age[39]. Children started working extremely early in their life, on average at 8 years old[40], to support their families in making ends meet. In fact, although the wages offered by industrial work in the cities were generally higher than incomes derived from agricultural work, they were often not sufficient to help families step across the poverty threshold, leaving parents little choice but that of having their little children employed. In her 2010 book *Children of the Labouring Poor* researcher Eileen Wallace provides us with a detailed chronicle of how early nineteenth-century children contributed to their kinship's livelihood during challenging times, and in doing so she emphasises the main characteristics these small individuals somehow had in common, however varied they life circumstances might have been. Children from impoverished families were usually offered only a rudimentary education, they lived in sub-standard housing with limited access to clean water, they were ill-fed, frequently poorly clothed and they started performing some kind of full-time or part-time work at a very early age[41]. In the early years of the Industrial Revolution, the exploitation of children in factories, mines, mills and other industries was so extensive that some critics went so far as affirming that "the prosperity of the English manufactures was based

[36] Ibidem, p. 20.
[37] Ibidem, p. 15.
[38] Ibidem, p. 42.
[39] Ibidem, p. 43.
[40] World History Encyclopedia (2023) *Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution*. Available at : https://www.worldhistory.org/article/2216/child-labour-in-the-british-industrial-revolution/ (Accessed: 22 March 2024).
[41] Wallace, E. (2010) *Children of the Labouring Poor: The Working Lives of Children in Nineteenth-Century Hertfordshire*. Hatfield: Hertfordshire Publications, p. 13.

upon [children's] helpless misery"[42] and that "the employment of children on a vast scale became the most important social feature of English life"[43].

1.1.2. The impact of laissez-faire political economy

The reasons for Britain's thriving as a leading industrial power in the nineteenth century are multiple and complex, but there was a strong belief among economists of the time that the country's economic prosperity was largely due to the application of a "laissez-faire" policy. The expression "laissez-faire", meaning "allow to do", has its origins in the speculations of the Physiocrats, a group of eighteenth-century French scholars who advocated minimal government intervention in economic issues, asserting that government policies should not interfere with the functioning of natural economic laws. In Britain, the popularity of this phrase is broadly associated with Adam Smith's theory of the "invisible hand", which the Scottish economist put forward in his *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, first published in 1776. Smith believed that the tariffs imposed by the government on imported goods did not serve the stated purpose of protecting national manufacturing against foreign competition, but instead hindered the expansion of global trade and impeded the improvement of living standards in all countries[44]. According to him, the authorities should have ensured a system based on free trade, in which prices were regulated exclusively by the demand for products. In an open market, a spontaneous order is created,[45] whereby economic transactions are supervised by a sort of "invisible hand": all individuals must be free to act in their own self-interest because in seeking to maximize their own profits, they are guided by an invisible hand to unintentionally contribute to the collective good of society[46]. If unregulated by the government, businesses would produce goods that are in high demand and would implement more sophisticated technological processes to develop their manufactures in response to demand for their products[47]. At the same time, free competition would guarantee the availability of high-quality goods at the most affordable prices, so as to satisfy customers' needs.

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[42] Hammond, L. and Hammond, B. (1932) *'The Town Labourer, 1760-1832'*. London: Longmans, Green & Co, p. 143.
[43] Ibidem, p. 157.
[44] Evans, E.J. (2001) *The Forging of the Modern State,* p. 47.
[45] Aydinonat, N.E. (1999) "Invisible Hand Explanations: The Case of Menger's Explanation of the 'Origin of Money'", *Ankara University, Faculty of Political Sciences,* Discussion Papers, 21, p. 4.
[46] Smith, A. (1776), *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, IV(ii). 5th Edition. London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., p. 456.
[47] Evans, E.J. (2001) *The Forging of the Modern State,* p. 49.

The idea of an "invisible hand" had a tremendous impact on the economic and social life of the age; yet, before exploring the consequences of such a philosophy on the lives of British labourers, it is vital to consider that Smith's theories have often been equivocated and interpreted according to the interests of those in power. In the first place, it must be remembered that in *The Wealth of Nations* the author was mainly referring to import restrictions, which led to monopolies and caused a non-optimal allocation of a society's economic resources. Furthermore, Smith was by no-means a strict adherent to laissez-faire principles. For once, he fervently supported high wages for the proletariat, seeing them as both a contributing factor to and a result of national prosperity[48]. He considered the workers' desire to have some days of rest each week to be perfectly reasonable[49], and was in favour of taxes on the luxuries of the rich[50]. Finally, he firmly believed that the government had a compelling role in ensuring free or subsidized education for unprivileged children. As stated in his writings, even common people should have had the right to learn how to "read, write and account"[51] before beginning their working life. In factories, their mind would be made numb by continuous exposure to dull alienating work, and this would likely inspire them to fall into the vice of alcohol or violence[52]. In this context, education became a sort of lifeline, a chance for them to occupy their minds and turn into more respectable and respected people[53].

Notwithstanding these considerations, the spread of Smith's theories of a free-market economy resulted in a government approach that was largely laissez-faire and involved minimal intervention in economic affairs, at least in the first years of industrialization. The authorities initially decided not to impose heavy regulations on industrial activities in the belief that markets would self-adjust, meaning that producers were allowed significant freedom in their establishments. This attitude of the British government fostered innovation and economic development on the one hand, but the

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[48] Rotschild, E. (1995) 'Social Security and Laissez Faire in Eighteenth-Century Political Economy', *Population and Development Review*, 21(4), p. 714.
[49] Ibidem, p. 715.
[50] Ibidem, p. 717.
[51] Smith, A. (1776) as cited in Rotschild, E. (1995), 'Social Security and Laissez Faire in Eighteenth-Century Political Economy', p. 717.
[52] AdamSmithWorks.com (2019) *Adam Smith on Education: Schooling*. Available at: https://www.adamsmithworks.org/documents/adam-smith-on-education-schooling (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[53] Rotschild, E. (1995), 'Social Security and Laissez Faire in Eighteenth-Century Political Economy', p. 717.

lack of laws in defence of labourers' rights often led workers to face unbearable conditions. As stated above, labour in the new factories had to be organized in an innovative way so that business owners could maximise outputs and profits. Although at an early stage of the Industrial Revolution much of the country's manufacturing was still carried out by artisans and craftsmen[54], the increasing exploitation of machinery in industrial plants facilitated the employment of an enormous number of unskilled individuals, including women and children, who simply had to be trained to operate the tools. In the words of pottery magnate Josiah Wedgwood, the ultimate goal was to "make such machines of the Men as cannot err[55]". Wedgwood was famous for his stern leadership and his pioneering role in factory and labour organization. His workforce was taught how to perform one particular task to which they had to stick and by no means did they have permission to wander between different workplaces[56]. This made the production system much more efficient and faster, but the task itself became tedious and alienating for those performing it.

Employees in manufacturing plants also had to observe strict working schedules, which demanded a far more hectic and stressful rhythm of life in comparison to the leisurely pace that characterized cottage industry. Kay reports that "the population employed in the cotton factories of Manchester [rose] at five o'clock in the morning, [worked] in the mills from six till eight, and [returned] home for half an hour of forty minutes [for] breakfast", which generally consisted of "tea or coffee with a little bread"[57]. Then, they went back to their workplace, where they remained till seven o'clock in the evening or later, except for an hour allowed for lunch at midday[58]. In order to ensure the punctuality of their workers, many industrialists implemented innovative systems to track time and attendance, for instance by ringing a bell at each break, or by using rudimentary forms of the modern timesheet[59]. Those who did not show up on time were sanctioned with fines or even corporal punishment; the latter was

[54] Stedman Jones G. (2010) 'Class struggle and the Industrial Revolution' in Foster, J. (ed) *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-Class History 1832–1982*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 46.
[55] AllAboutLean.com (2020) *225th Anniversary of the Death of Josiah Wedgwood – Father of Science in Manufacturing*. Available at: https://www.allaboutlean.com/225th-anniversary-josiah-wedgwood/ (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[56] McKendrick, N. 'Josiah Wedgwood and Factory Discipline', *The Historic Journal*, 4(1), p. 32.
[57] Kay, J.P. *The moral and physical conditions of the working classes,* p. 8.
[58] Ibidem, p. 9.
[59] AllAboutLean.com (2020) *225th Anniversary of the Death of Josiah Wedgwood.*

especially common for children, who were less likely to understand the implications of financial penalties. Finally, in the most serious circumstances, it might even happen that rebels were punished with death. For instance, following a riot in 1783, Josiah Wedgwood called for militia support and had one man hanged[60].

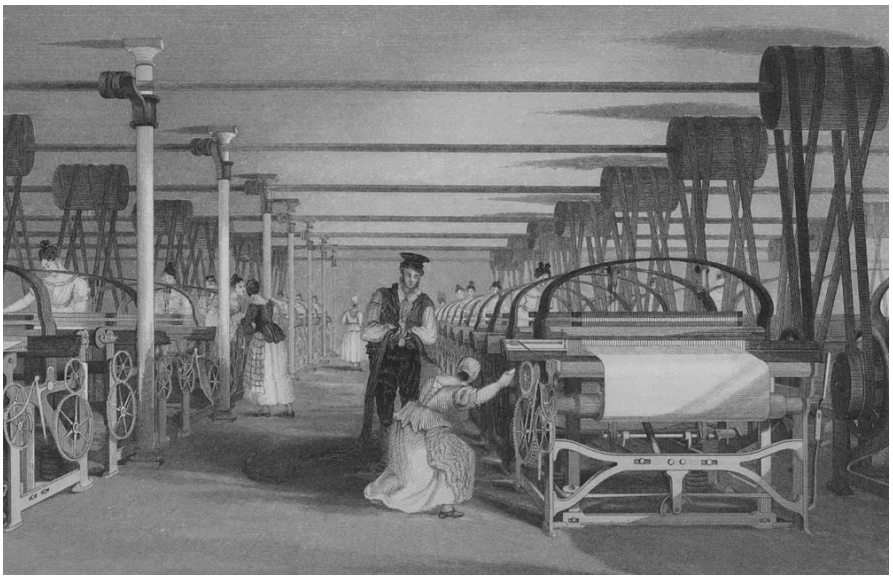

Figure 2. Power loom weaving in a textile mill - engraving by J. Tingle, 1835.

Despite his strict rule, Wedgwood was a relatively good employer by the standards of the time; he offered decent wages, clean housing and provided health care to his workers[61]. Unfortunately, this was not the case in most places where working conditions were even harsher and unforgiving. Firstly, the wages earned by common workers were usually extremely low and barely sufficient for families to be able to afford the rent and the necessary food to survive, with little left for clothing, sickness, education and leisure[62]. Furthermore, factories were mostly dangerous, unsanitary and grimy spaces, made dark and suffocatingly hot by the smoke coming from the steam-powered machinery. Accidents on the job happened regularly, as the rough-hewn machines did not have any safety cover yet and were often operated by children as young as five years old[63]. In this regard, a report commissioned by reformer Edwin Chadwick in 1842 commented:

[60] Ibidem.
[61] Ibidem.
[62] Pike, E.R. (1996) *Hard Times*, p. 52.
[63] History on the Net (2021) *Industrial Revolution Working Conditions: What Were They Like?* Available at: https://www.historyonthenet.com/industrial-revolution-working-conditions (Accessed: 23 March 2024).

> The accidents which occur to the manufacturing population […] are severe and numerous […]. Many are the consequences of the want of proper attention to the fencing of machinery, which appears to be seldom thought of in the manufactories; and many are caused by loose portions of dress being caught by the machinery, so as to drag the unfortunate sufferers under its power. The shawls of the females, or their long hair, and the aprons and loose sleeves of the boys and men, are in this way frequent causes of dreadful mutilation"[64].

Not only were people risking their life daily while working in the factories, they were also completely abandoned if they injured themselves, as they no longer represented useful working capital: their wages would be immediately stopped, no medical assistance was provided and no financial compensation afforded[65].

Life prospects were not much brighter for those employed in other sectors than manufactory. For example, the countless dangers faced by coal miners have already been acknowledged above: collapses, respiratory diseases, gas poisoning and explosions were a commonplace in the vast mines of northern and central England. Among the greatest tragedies in the field, it is worth mentioning the Felling Colliery Disaster, which took place in the north-east of England in 1812. The explosion, caused by the ignition of a mixture of flammable gases, provoked the death of 92 men and boys, including 27 who were not yet fifteen years old[66]. For what concerns agricultural work, small farmers were significantly damaged by the increment of enclosures during the eighteenth century, whereby formerly common land was replaced by large privately held domains. While certainly beneficial from an economic point of view, the enactment of the Enclosure Acts caused the ruin of thousands of minor landowners, who were evicted from their properties and had to search for new employment in the cities. To conclude with, sheer poverty was also rampant among a wide variety of occupations that characterized the urban landscape between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. The collection *London Labour and the London Poor*, written by journalist Henry Mayhew in the 1840s, provides an interesting insight into the precarious and marginal lifestyle of contemporary working people, among which were market traders, costermongers (people who sold goods from a cart in the street), pure finders (who

[64] Pike, E.R. (1996) *Hard Times*, p. 72.
[65] The Sadler Commission: Report on Child Labor (1832).
[66] The Coal Mining History Resource Centre (1999) *Felling Colliery 1812 – An Account of The Accident by Rev. John Hodgson*. Available at: http://www.mineaccidents.com.au/uploads/report-from-reverend-hodgson.pdf (Accessed: 23 March 2024).

collected fog dung for tanneries), prostitutes, dustmen and chimney sweeps. In particular, the latter represented society's outcasts par excellence, their filthy appearance" and "offensive smell" causing them to be looked down upon even by those who had little more than them[67].

1.2. Winds of change: Workers and Reformers

Before long, the unsustainable working and living conditions prompted the British working class to act and secure a better future for themselves. In response to the radical ideas observed in the lower classes during the French Revolution, between 1799 and 1800 the British Government had enacted a series of Combination Acts prohibiting worker associations. However, this legislation did little to prevent the formation of trade unions, organizations of skilled workers that reflected the model of the craft guilds existing since the Middle Ages[68]. Modern trade unions had two main purposes: to safeguard the position of their own members by restricting entry into their profession, and to gain the power of collective bargaining in front of the employers[69]. For instance, a union could threaten a producer with a strike, wherein its members would collectively refuse to work[70]. Another form of reaction by workers in the early phases of the Industrial Revolution was that of riots and demonstrations, which were organized all over the country with the aim of obtaining parliamentary reform. Noteworthy in this context is the Peterloo Massacre, when the army was mobilized to disperse a pacific meeting of protesters. The intervention was brutal: hundreds of people were injured and eleven were killed[71]. Particularly significant is also the action of the Luddites, skilled craftspeople who in 1812 destroyed textile machinery to express dissatisfaction with the growing mechanization that put their job at risk[72].

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[67] Mayhew, H. (1851) *London Labour and the London Poor*. Ed. Douglas Fairhurst, R. (2010). Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 158.
[68] World History Encyclopedia (2023) *Trade Unions in the British Industrial Revolution*. Available at: https://www.worldhistory.org/article/2212/trade-unions-in-the-british-industrial-revolution/ (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[69] Ibidem.
[70] Ibidem.
[71] Britannica (2023) *Peterloo Massacre*. Available at: https://www.britannica.com/event/Peterloo-Massacre (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[72] Adam Smith Institute (2019) *Lord Byron defended the Luddites*. Available at: https://www.adamsmith.org/blog/lord-byron-defended-the-luddites (Accessed: 23 March 2024).

If the government's demeanour towards the workers' demands was initially hostile, the attitude displayed by many contemporary intellectuals went in a different direction. Famous writers such as William Wordsworth and William Blake displayed great sensibility and sympathy towards the misery of the working class, and some of them were even actively involved in the social struggle. Lord Byron, for example, as a member of the House of Lords pronounced a magnanimous discourse in defence of the Luddites, courageously asserting that the machines, which were the outcome of manufactures' greed, were destroying the livelihood of the poor, leaving them with no choice but that of rioting[73]. Or again, poet Leigh Hunt faced two years' imprisonment for libelling the Prince Regent in a series of sharp satires that portrayed the man as a corrupt, evil ruler[74]. With time, also at a parliamentary level it became evident that the extreme poverty, degradation and suffering endured by the British lower classes had reached an untenable extent and could not be ignored anymore. Between 1802 and 1819 a first series of Factory Acts was passed that addressed the issue of child labour, limiting work for children in terms of age and daily hours. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, several were the laws enacted by the Government to regulate and improve the conditions of industrial and urban employment, some proving ineffectual attempts, but by and large marking a pivotal step in the establishment of a fairer labour market and setting the foundation for further efforts to ensure the welfare of subsequent generations.

[73] Adam Smith Institute (2019) *Lord Byron defended the Luddites.*
[74] Romanticismanthology.com, *1813 – Leigh Hunt sentenced to two years' imprisonment for libelling the Prince Regent*. Available at: https://www.romanticismanthology.com/timeline/currentaffairs/currentaffairs_49.html (Accessed: 23 March 2024).

2. THE CONCEPT OF CHILD LABOUR

The fact that the first forms of labour regulation enacted by the British Parliament were specifically aimed at improving the conditions of children in factories is strongly indicative of the extent of a phenomenon as pervasive and dramatic as that of child exploitation in industrial Britain. It is a widely known fact that children were a fundamental instrument for the economic development of the country in the crucial years between 1780 and 1840 and that they represented a central component of the family wage economy[1]. Young boys and girls were seen as exceptionally desirable workers as they could be paid lower wages, they had a smaller physical stature that enabled them to perform a variety of tasks in confined spaces, and they posed less of a threat to their employers in comparison to adults because they were less likely to organize strikes to protest against their unfortunate situation[2]. The countless existing testimonies of those directly involved and the numerous images of children slightly older than toddlers toiling in factories, mills or coal mines give us a clear insight into a phenomenon of enormous scale and intensity, such that child labour has been described as "one of the most shameful events in [British] history" [3].

Most economic historians concur that the Industrial Revolution witnessed a rise in the exploitation of children, but before delving into the investigation of child labour practices in industrialized society it is important to realize that the involvement of children in economic activities was not a novelty. Child labour had always existed in some form in human history[4] and its expansion was very much related to the specific perception of childhood in a certain culture and moment in time. In fact, the modern understanding of childhood as a distinct life stage in which the individual has specific characteristics and needs began to spread only in the eighteenth century with Rousseau's pedagogic theories, and would consolidate no sooner than the twentieth

[1] Horrell, S. and Humphries J (1995) '"The Exploitation of Little Children": Child Labor and the Family Economy in the Industrial Revolution', *Explorations in Economic History*, 32(4), p. 486.
[2] History.com (2022) *Child Labour*. Available at: https://www.history.com/topics/industrial-revolution/child-labor (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[3] Thompson, E.P. (1963) *The Making of the English Working Class*. London: Penguin Books, p. 349.
[4] Momen, N. (2020) 'Child Labor: History, Process, and Consequences', *Encyclopedia of the UN Sustainable Development Goals*, 1, p. 2.

century thanks to personalities like Dewey, Ferrière and Montessori. In pre-modern societies, children were often regarded as small adults who had to acquire the behaviours and temperament of their educators as early as possible. In his 2012 essay *The World Until Yesterday*, anthropologist Jared Diamond observes how in traditional communities such as that of New Guinea children are still considered autonomous beings, allowed to handle dangerous objects and often charged with adult responsibilities[5]. In a similar way, children in pre-industrial Britain were frequently set "to work as soon as they could earn a few pence"[6]. Usually, they were engaged in household activities or agricultural work for which parents needed support: they helped in spinning, harvesting, carrying, cleaning, baking and child-rearing[7], all of which were extremely extenuating tasks that required a great number of hours. Thompson reports the experience of a child who recollects starting work "soon after [he] was able to walk":

> My mother used to bat the cotton on a wire riddle. It was then put into a deep brown mug with a strong ley of soap suds. My mother then tucked up my petticoats about my waist, and put me into the tub to tread upon the cotton at the bottom.... This process was continued until the mug became so full that I could no longer safely stand in it, when a chair was placed besides it, and I held on to the back…[8]

As is evident, young children were no strangers to discipline and fatigue even before the advent of factories. Yet, what made employment in the domestic system profoundly different from later exploitation in the factory system were the circumstances of children's work[9]. Firstly, with regard to the working hours, activities at home were often intermittent and interspersed with periods of rest. Moreover, work was carried out under the protective supervision of parents who, however strict, generally looked after the needs of their offspring[10]. As industrialization intensified, children were instead isolated from their parents, given to ruthless employers for whom they had to toil "thirteen hours a day five days a week and eleven on Saturday"[11], and their tasks became terribly monotonous and repetitive. According to Beales, the worst crime

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[5] Diamond, J. (2012) *The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn From Traditional Societies?* London: Penguin Books, p. 126.
[6] Horrell, S. and Humphries J (1995), 'The Exploitation of Little Children', p. 487.
[7] Thompson, E.P. (1963), *The Making of the English Working Class*, pp. 332.333.
[8] Ibidem.
[9] Horrell, S. and Humphries J (1995), 'The Exploitation of Little Children', p. 486.
[10] Thompson, E.P. (1963), *The Making of the English Working Class,* p. 334.
[11] Collyer, R. (1908) *Some Memories*. Boston: American Humanitarian Association, p. 15.

committed by the factory system was that of adopting and enhancing all the negative aspects of the domestic industry without offering any of its accompanying benefits; in the new factories, child labour was systematized and "exploited with persistent brutality"[12]. Finally, as pointed out by Pinchbeck and Hewitt, the industrial system had the merit of making the phenomenon of child labour impossible to ignore, as the exploitation of children was "more readily observable in the factory than in the obscurity of the cottage [and] the conditions and consequences of employment in the mills [were] increasingly made a matter of concern"[13].

2.1. Reasons for starting work

In order to try and understand the reasons why and the circumstances under which children commenced work so early in industrial Britain, it is important to examine the context from which those children came: their social position, family structure, economic situation and provenance all had a major impact on their life chances. Eighteenth-century children from higher and middle-class backgrounds were certainly more likely to experience childhood as a unique phase characterized by extended education, peculiar clothing, toys and dedicated literature[14]. This was hardly the case for young boys and girls from impoverished communities. At that time, the category of the "poor" was estimated to comprise about 60% of the population, including both the 'paupers', those situated at the very bottom of the social hierarchy and eligible for parish relief and, in more general terms, all members of the labouring classes[15]. Poor families usually could not afford the luxury of allowing their children to enjoy a carefree childhood devoid of adult responsibilities; instead, they had to employ a whole series of strategies in order to make a living, which included looking for cheaper housing, economizing on food, discontinuing their children's education and, of course, encouraging them to take up casual or even full-time employment[16].

The participation rate of children in the family economy was also strongly influenced by the structure of the household to which they belonged. Research shows

[12] Thompson, E.P. (1963), *The Making of the English Working Class,* p. 335.
[13] Pinchbeck, I. and Hewitt, M. (1973) as cited in Horrell, S. and Humphries J (1995), 'The Exploitation of Little Children', p. 487.
[14] Payne. D.E. (2008) *Children of the Poor in London 1700-1800*, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Hertfordshire, p. 13.
[15] Ibidem, p. 14.
[16] Ibidem, p. 18.

that children born in larger families were at higher risk of facing extreme disadvantages throughout their life in comparison to those coming from smaller family units[17]. Humphries illustrates how young members of families over-burdened with children were often required to leave home and reside with relatives, to take on roles as farm or domestic servants, to become live-in apprentices, or to seek accommodation elsewhere for the purpose of attending school or securing employment[18]. Furthermore, she explains that with numerous mouths to feed it was much more difficult to make the meagre wages suffice for providing food for everyone. As a result, a number of the siblings were most likely to die before reaching adulthood. Data reveal a rather high infant mortality rate, with some fluctuations depending on the occupational group. For instance, among agricultural workers there was an average of only 5.68 surviving children out of 7.94 births estimated per family. Among miners, the category that had the largest households, this figure dropped to 5 children surviving out of an average of 8.23 children born[19].

In addition, a child's opportunities were determined by whether both parents, only one of them or neither were present to support them. Parental mortality was extremely common at the time, with about 40% of children above the age of 16 who had experienced the loss of mother or father, these occurrences varying significantly based on social class[20]. A woman's death was frequently caused by complications during childbirth, abortion, or infectious disease[21], which left the father with the often impossible challenge of keeping the family together[22]. In the event of the male parent passing away or disappearing, many are the testimonies of resourceful mothers who tenaciously tried to provide for their children. Nevertheless, it was not uncommon for mother-led families to be forced into extreme poverty by the lack of a father's earnings, with the only remaining solutions of begging in the streets or, after 1833, of seeking refuge in a workhouse[23]. Another consequence of losing one or both parents was

[17] Humphries, J. (2010) *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 55.
[18] Ibidem, p. 60.
[19] Ibidem, p. 58.
[20] Watts, S. (1984) 'Demographic facts as experienced by a group of families in eighteenth-century Shifnal, Shropshire', *Local Population Studies*, 32, p. 43.
[21] National Library of Medicine (2006) *British maternal mortality in the 19th and early 20th centuries*. Available at: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1633559/#ref1 (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[22] Humphries, J. (2010), *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution,* p. 64.
[23] Under the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, the workhouse system became one of the main solutions adopted by the British government to deal with the problem of poverty in the country. Many workhouses

internment in an orphanage. Here, children were typically retained until they reached the age of 13, and then were placed with families who expressed an interest in adopting boys or girls solely for the purpose of apprenticeship or inexpensive labour. In this context even adoption, which was meant to be a selfless and charitable act, acquired a purely instrumental value[24].

Certainly, as illustrated above, fathers' wages played a cardinal role in the family economy. While the majority of healthy working-class men in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were employed, a significant percentage of women remained home attending to domestic chores and childcare and, if they did work, their jobs were often sporadic or, in any case, paid much less than men's. Given these circumstances, children were regularly sent to work instead of their mothers[25]. It is also crucial to consider that in many households a part of the family finances was spent to support the alcohol and tobacco addiction of the "paterfamilias"[26]. Royston Pike, editor of an invaluable collection of memoirs from the industrialization era, reports an extremely disconcerting but most certainly not isolated example of parents living off the earnings of their children, whose wages were squandered to finance destructive vices:

> A man and his wife, living in a cellar in Silver Street, Hulme, had three children, the eldest of which at that time did not exceed twelve years of age, and the youngest seven or eight. The parents were most dissipated characters, living in a state of almost constant idleness, working only at intervals, and that not very long a time. The children worked in the factory, and regularly brought home their weekly earnings. These parents have been frequently known to lock up the three children on a Saturday night, after having given to them a miserable pittance of what they called tea and bread, and go to the public-house together, and spend a considerable portion of that money in drink, and to return home […] in a state of beastly intoxication, and some times to abuse the poor children whose hard-earned money they had been so profligately spending. On the following morning, they sent the children out to beg bread […] for their breakfast […][27].

As Pike himself explained, this is an extreme case; however, numerous are the testimonies of children experiencing dramatic situations at the workplace as well as at

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were established where impoverished people who had no home or occupation were offered a shelter and basic necessities in exchange of labour.

[24] Humphries, J. (2010), *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution,* p. 78.

[25] Ibidem, p. 118.

[26] Ibidem, p. 101.

[27] Pike, E.R. (1996) *Hard Times*, p. 149.

home, where they ended up being victims of avaricious parents who primarily used the money for their own satisfaction.

Another passage from Pike's volume invites to reflect on how child labour was simply the norm in the years of the Industrial Revolution, even under relatively normal circumstances:

> In a visit to a mill near Bury, on the 23rd of November last, I noticed a girl who was working, as I was informed, 12 hours a day, and had been doing so for more than two years who appeared to me to be too young […]; and on examining her father, by whom she was employed as his piecer, he admitted that she was between eleven and twelve years of age, […] Here, then, was a father, in the receipt of good wages and in regular employment, who had been knowingly working his own child twelve hours a day […]. It is not at all improbable that he was one of those who sent up petitions on Parliament to interfere for the protection of the poor factory children, the 'white slaves', who were so cruelly over-worked by 'the hard-hearted avaricious masters'…[28]

The actions of many parents were influenced by the social norms prevailing in the communities to which they belonged. Even if a child's family was economically secure and could afford to provide appropriate education, it was often the fear of other people's judgement that prevailed. Children who were not sent to work at an extremely young age were held up as spoiled and their mothers were accused of being too weak and indulgent[29].

The fact that the phenomenon of child labour was so deeply rooted in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century culture is also made evident by the existence of works such as *Industry and Idleness*, a series of 12 plot-linked engravings created by William Hogarth as early as 1747, and whose specific purpose was to make little children aware of the rewards deriving from hard work and, conversely, the dangers of idleness. The first and last picture of the sequence are especially helpful in comprehending the nature and scope of the message. At the very beginning, the young protagonists are seen operating matching looms in a corner of the workshop where they are both employed as apprentices. Although the two boys are initially placed on an equal footing, there is a substantial difference in the way they handle their tasks: while the one on the right is diligently concentrating on his weaving, the other is lazily leaning

[28] Pike, E.R. (1996) *Hard Times,* p. 154.
[29] Humphries, J. (2010), *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution,* p. 178.

against a post, almost dozing off and heedless of the impending work. It does not come as a surprise that the first boy's name is "Goodchild", as he clearly embodies the well-behaved industrious apprentice. On the contrary, his peer, who is significantly named "Idle", is passive and negligent, and consequently doomed to a future of suffering[30].

Figure 3. William Hogarth - Industry and Idleness, Plate 1; The Fellow 'Prentices at their Looms.

The last engraving discloses the fate of the two characters, with Goodchild reaping his reward of being named Lord Mayor of the City, and Idle (pictured on the far-lower right) becoming a drunkard who lives a life of misery and violence[31]. Hogarth's series is a clear representation of the widespread idea that a hardworking child was to have much better chances in life. However, while it is undeniable that this belief was an important influencing factor when it came to choosing between early employment and schooling, it is vital to remember that the main reason why children started working at a very young age was the sheer poverty through which many families had to live.

[30] Cowley, R. LS. (2019) "*Industry and Idleness* by William Hogarth (1697-1764) and the 'Doctrine of Opposites.'", *The British Art Journal*, 20(3), p. 45.
[31] Ibidem, p. 55.

Figure 4. William Hogarth - Industry and Idleness, Plate 12; The Industrious 'Prentice Lord-Mayor of London.

A final reference should be made to the legislative question. As explained in the previous chapter, in the early decades of the Industrial Revolution the British government largely adhered to the principles of laissez-faire, meaning that labour regulation was virtually non-existent. Legislation in this regard had basically come to a halt with the bills enacted in the sixteenth century, such as the Statute of Artificers which primarily sought to establish maximum local wage rates and to control the conditions of employment of labourers and apprentices[32]. The apprenticeship system, which was mostly based on contracts between the family and the single employer[33], generally condemned young boys and girls to years of harsh exploitation, and the few existing organizations that advocated the rights of working children did not have sufficient influence yet to compel parliamentary action towards the initiation of a social reform in their defence. The reports of the Children's Employment Commission provide evidence that as late as 1842 children aged six, seven or eight were left completely at the mercy of cruel drunken masters who paid them just enough for them to purchase a new piece of clothing when the oldest ones were too worn out[34]. In the early nineteenth century, not even the law could protect unprivileged children from a society that

[32] Woodward, D. (1980) 'The Background of the Statute of Artificers: The Genesis of Labour Policy, 1558-1563', *The Economic History Review*, 33(1), p. 34.
[33] Humphries, J. (2010), *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution,* p. 256.
[34] Thompson, E.P. (1963), *The Making of the English Working Class,* p. 335.

regarded them as little more than "waste" individuals[35], as means to increase profits and as additional hands to contribute to the family economy.

2.2. Working children: narratives of a childhood lost

2.2.1. The apprenticed child

As far back as the Middle Ages, apprenticeship was widely practiced in Britain, regarded as a fundamental rite of passage that marked the delicate transition from childhood to the adult world. Even in the eighteenth century, having a little boy apprenticed to a trade master meant taking responsibility for his life prospects and increasing the chances of him becoming a skilled respectable worker himself[36]. In most cases, families and employers negotiated a customized contract that bound master and apprentice for a definite period of time, usually five to seven years, and during which the master undertook to instruct the boy in the crucial techniques of his work. The apprentice was offered training, board and lodging, and in exchange had to provide labour services to his master and sometimes to pay a fee. Although apprenticeship in a profitable trade was a major aspiration for most families of the time, many historians and economists have criticized this practice, dismissing it as a mere means for employers to acquire inexpensive labour[37]. This view is corroborated by the same testimonies of the men who toiled as apprentices in their younger years, and who complained that their term far exceeded the time actually required to learn the trade[38]. Nonetheless, even though isolation from the family and hard work often caused much suffering to those involved, pre-industrial apprenticeship still somehow responded to the necessity to transmit expertise from one generation to the next. Moreover, this system allowed a certain degree of freedom to families and sometimes to the children themselves, as they were occasionally given a say in the choice of their master[39].

A completely different fate awaited the countless impoverished children and orphans who were supported by the local parishes and sheltered in the workhouses. The

[35] Hindle, S. (2004) "'Waste' Children?' Pauper apprenticeship under the Elizabethan poor laws, c. 1598-1697" in Lane, P., Raven, N. and Snell, K.D.M. (eds.) *Women, Work and Wages in England*, 1600-1850. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, p. 17.
[36] Humphries, J. (2010), *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution,* p. 256.
[37] Wallis, P.H. (2005), 'Apprenticeship, Training and Guilds in Preindustrial Europe', *Working Papers 5064, Economic History Society*, p. 4.
[38] Humphries, J. (2010), *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution,* p. 264.
[39] Humphries, J. (2010), *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution,* pp. 256-258.

Elizabethan Poor Laws, enacted between 1598 and 1601, had mandated the provision of monetary and material assistance to the deserving poor, but had also granted local authorities the power of setting the unemployed to work in order to prevent them from falling into idleness and being a burden on their community[40]. In this context, apprenticeship became a way of dealing with the large number of pauper children, while at the same time reducing relief expenditure through their reallocation. Finally, the huge demand for workers that came with the advent of the Industrial Revolution triggered a further surge in the trafficking of poor children, who were forced by their guardians to work in mills, factories, mines or to perform a series of urban jobs such as that of messenger, domestic servant, street-trader and chimney sweep[41].

Although not all employers were tyrannical and cruel, it is safe to say that in most cases parish apprentices went through extremely devastating experiences, especially in the early factories. In his 1836 book *The Curse of the Factory System*, former child worker John Fielden recounts that thousands of helpless boys and girls were deported to toil in the textile mills of Northern England, their "small and nimble fingers" never allowed to rest, and their frail bodies battered by hunger and violence[42]. Another valuable testimony of the deplorable conditions endured by working children in the early nineteenth century is that of Robert Blincoe, whose memoirs were collected by one John Brown and published in 1832. Left an orphan, Blincoe was a resident at Saint Pancras poorhouse, London, till the age of seven. After that, he was apprenticed together with some of his peers to the Lowdam Mill in Nottingham. The young man remembers being cruelly deceived by the parish officers, who mockingly told the lot that their new master would make them into "ladies and gentlemen", that "they would be fed on roast, beef and plum pudding, they would be allowed to ride their masters' horses, and have silver watches, and plenty of cash in their pockets"[43]. Truth is, people at the parish were glad to get rid of a bunch of mouths to feed and did not display the slightest remorse in misleading poor innocent children. The words used to describe

[40] Hindle, S. (2004) '"Waste" Children?', p.19.
[41] Humphries, J. (2010), *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution,* p. 212.
[42] Pike, E.R. (1996) *Hard Times,* p. 77.
[43] Brown, J. (1832*) A Memoir of Robert Blincoe, an Orphan Boy; Sent from the workhouse of St. Pancras, London, at seven years of age, to endure the horrors of a cotton-mill, through his infancy and youth, with a minute detail of his sufferings, being the first memoir of the kind published*. Manchester: Doherty, J., p. 13.

Blincoe's arrival in Nottingham indeed foretell a quite different reality from the one envisaged:

> When the waggons drew up near the dwelling and warehouse of their future master, a crowd collected to see the *live stock* that was just imported from the metropolis, who were pitied, admired, and compared to lambs, led by butchers to slaughter. […] They looked over the children and finding them all right, according to the INVOICE, exhorted them to behave with proper humility and decorum. To pay the most prompt and submissive respects to the orders of those who would be appointed to instruct and superintend them […], and to be diligent and careful, each one to execute his or her task, and thereby avoid the punishment and disgrace which awaited idleness, insolence, or disobedience[44].

Or again:

> The apprentices were required to wash night and morning; but no soap was allowed, and without it, no dirt could be removed. Their tangled locks covered with cotton flue, hung about their persons in long wreaths, floating with every movement. There was no cloth laid on the table, […] no plates, nor knives, nor forks […], and Blincoe saw no other beverage drunk, by the old hands, than pump water […][45].

The story of Robert Blincoe is just one of the numerous accounts exposing the abuse perpetrated against children in industrialized Britain; the vividness of the narrative, the rawness of the words and the dramatic intensity of the protagonist's experience make it a precious testimony to the pervasiveness of this attitude of indifference towards the vulnerabilities of childhood and, more broadly, towards human rights.

2.2.2. Factories, mines and the urban landscape

The excerpts from Royston Pike's work presented in the previous sections encourage readers to explore the Industrial Revolution from a more humane and authentic perspective. Of particular interest in this respect are also the passages devoted to the appalling conditions endured by working children in factories and mines. It has already been made clear that both male and female children as young as seven years old were forced to work for extended hours in extremely dangerous and unsanitary environments. The *Report of the Select Committee on Factory Children's Labour*, drafted by the Sadler Commission in 1832, contains evidence that working hours often reached 14 to 16

[44] Ibidem, pp. 15-16, italics in the text.
[45] Ibidem, p. 19.

hours a day, with little more than 40 minutes allowed for lunch breaks[46]. Moreover, the documents reveal that in order to ensure children's compliance to the strict rules of the factory, it was quite customary for overseers to beat them or even whip them with a leather strap[47]. In this regard, Pike reports an extract from the records of the Factory Commission, published one year after the *Sadler Report*, which caused considerable controversy at the time:

> 'The boys are often severely strapped; the girls sometimes get a clout. The mothers often complain of this. Has seen the boys have black and blue marks after strapping.' […] 'Three weeks ago, the overseer struck him in the eye with his clenched fist so as to force him to be absent two days; […] the boys were beat so that they fell to the floor in the course of the beating, with a rope with four tails, called a cat. Has seen the boys […] crying for mercy[48].

Similar barbarities were happening all over the country, often with the tacit approval of the local authorities. In a spinning-mill near Dundee, Scotland, children who were late in the morning were "dragged naked from their beds by the overseers" and then strapped[49]; at Wigan, little girls were punished by putting a rope around their neck, shoulders and backs to which a weight was tied. Then, as a form of further humiliation, they were forced to walk back and forth in the room so that other children could see them. What is perhaps even more shocking than the violence committed within factory walls is the total lack of empathy displayed by those who should have condemned it. In fact, as the case of a "little girl who was weighted[50]" was brought before the local judge after an exposé was published on the *Manchester Courier* in 1833, the alarming truth revealed by the victim was ignored in favour of the contrived version provided by the employer, who accused the girl of being a "lazy, idle, good-for-nothing" little runaway[51]. The man even claimed to have been encouraged by her mother to teach the child how to behave, and they believed him. Thus, although the public disclosure of these outrageous realities was beginning to stir common

[46] Excerpt from the Sadler Commission's *Report on Child Labour* (1832), pp. 1-2. Available at: https://www.caeducatorstogether.org/cabinet/file/71f9aa5a-9bdd-43fe-aebe-293d53865a2f/Sadler_Document_Assignment.pdf (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[47] Ibidem, p. 2.
[48] Pike, E.R. (1996) *Hard Times,* p. 140.
[49] Ibidem, p. 150.
[50] Ibidem, p. 145.
[51] Ibidem, p. 148.

sensibilities, on a more practical level economic interests continued to prevail over social justice right up to the eve of the enactment of the 1833 Factory Act.

Extremely challenging conditions were also faced by those employed in the vast coal and iron mines of Northern England and Scotland. Here, thousands of children spent hours, if not days, working in complete isolation and darkness. Both boys and girls were extensively employed to reach tunnels that were too narrow for adults to access, primarily serving three functions: they were either *trappers*, *hurriers* or *thrusters*. Trappers were tasked with the duty of opening and closing the doors that allowed fresh air into the depths of the mine[52]. There is proof that this job was commonly carried out by children of four or five years of age, first under the supervision of some relative who knew the work[53], but then left on their own with an immense responsibility, because even a slight distraction on their part could result in a fatal accident[54]. Hurriers and thrusters had instead to push and pull the heavy carts filled with coal through the tunnels, with the significant risk of getting lost since they were usually not allowed a candle or safety light[55]. The harsh circumstances and the unhygienic state of the place often led these children to develop serious illnesses in their adult years, to the extent that "each generation of this class of the population […] was commonly extinct soon after fifty"[56]. Despite the situation being quite dire, a Commission to investigate mining labour was established only in 1840. The records unveiled the severe occupational hazards together with the brutality of the people in authority, who did not miss an opportunity to mistreat the unfortunate workers. As in factories, children in mines were malnourished or fed with low-quality food, they were kept in conditions of absolute deprivation as well as regularly battered by their overseers or even by their stronger companions. Below are some of the dramatic testimonies contained in the 1842 report of the Children's Employment Commission:

> The first time I went to work I went at half past five in the morning and stayed in the pit until 10 at night. The second time I stopped till half past day. The third day I left at half

[52] StMU Research Scholars (2017) *Child Labor in the Coal Mines of England*. Available at: https://stmuscholars.org/child-labor-in-the-coal-mines/ (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[53] Pike, E.R. (1996) *Hard Times,* p. 167.
[54] Ibidem, p. 160.
[55] StMU Research Scholars (2017) *Child Labor in the Coal Mines of England.*
[56] Pike, E.R. (1996) *Hard Times,* p. 161.

past eight and the fourth at eight. Neither I nor the other boys had anything more than a cake and a half each either day to eat and nothing to drink[57].

Or again:

I ran away from him because he used me so bad. He stuck a pick twice into my bottom. He used to hit me with the belt an mawl and fling coals at me. When I left him, I used to sleep in the cabins upon the pit's bank and in the old pits that had down working where I laid upon the shale. I used to get what I could to at and ate for a long time the candles that the colliers had left behind. I had nothing else to eat[58].

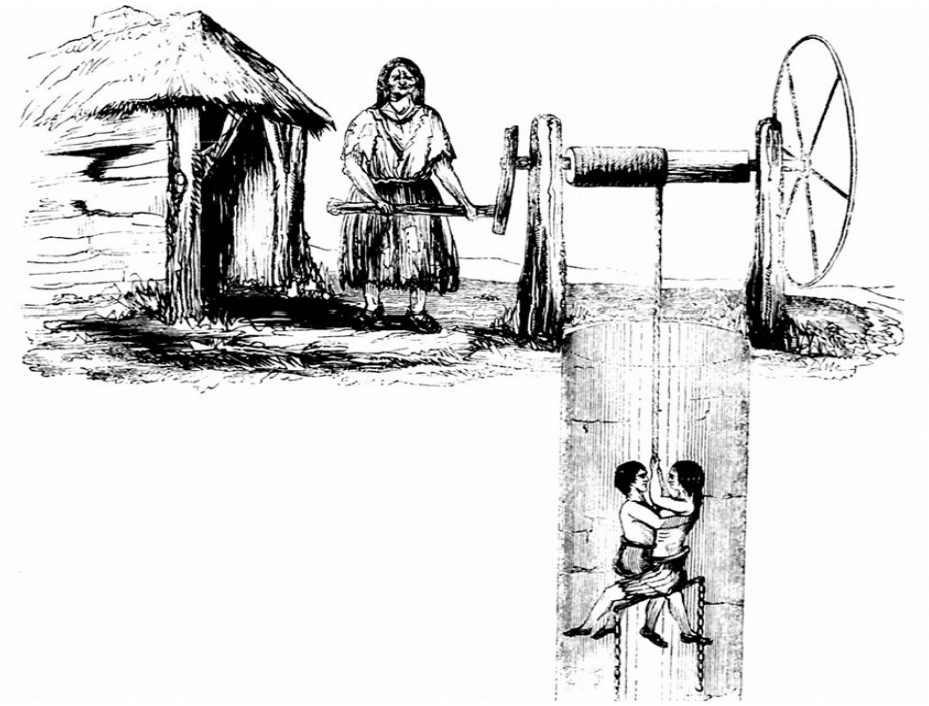

Figure 5. A boy and a girl being drawn up a pit shaft in Messrs Ditchforth and Clay's colliery, England - from an appendix to the First Report of the Royal Commission on the Employment of Children in Mines and Manufactories, 1842.

Finally, special attention should be paid to the reality of female workers, who were expected to perform the same tasks as their stronger male peers, as in the tunnels no distinction was made between one gender and the other. This caused young women great discomfort, especially because men and boys alike often laboured "in a state of

[57] The Coal Mining History Resource Centre (2000*) Report of the Children's Employment Commission 1842*, p. 19, William Hollingsworth. Available at: https://www.cmhrc.co.uk/cms/document/1842_Yorks_2.pdf. (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[58] The Coal Mining History Resource Centre (2000) *Report of the Children's Employment Commission 1842,* p. 23, Thomas Moorhouse.

disgusting nakedness and brutality"[59]. Seventeen-year-old Patience Kershaw recounts her dreadful experience as a miner in Halifax, West Yorkshire:

> My father has been dead about a year; my mother is living and has ten children, five lads and five lasses; […] 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, […] I go to Sunday school, but I cannot read or write; I go to pit at 5 o'clock in the morning; I do not stop or rest any time for the purpose[60].

She goes on to say:

> I wear a belt and chain at the workings to get the corves out. The getters are naked, excepting their caps. They pull off all their clothes. I see them at work when I go up. They sometimes beat me if I am not quick enough, with their hands. They strike me on my back. The boys take liberties with me sometimes. They pull me about. I am the only girl in the pit, there are 20 boys and 15 men. All the men are naked. I would rather work in the mill than the coal pit[61].

The testimonies mentioned above offer just a small glimpse of the unimaginable sufferings and dangers faced daily by little labourers in factories and mines. However, even though mining and manufactural work were highly common between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries[62], one should not forget the large number of casual occupations that were frequently carried out by small children in the streets of the overpopulated British cities. These are often forgotten children, perhaps because they are numerically less significant than those regularly employed in other fields, but their memory has been preserved in the works of those who had the courage to show compassion towards them. Mayhew tells us about the numerous street vendors of London, who sold a wide variety of goods in order to earn a few pence and help their family survive. Among the traded wares were for instance fruit, onions, match boxes, leather straps, belts, firewood, newspapers, toys and costume jewellery[63]. Dicken's biographer Andrea Warren describes the English capital in 1835 as a vibrant metropolis marked by "glittering wealth and dismal poverty", and whose every corner was filled

[59] The Coal Mining History Resource Centre (2000) *Report of the Children's Employment Commission 1842,* p. 27.
[60] Ibidem*,* p. 64.
[61] The Coal Mining History Resource Centre (2000) *Report of the Children's Employment Commission 1842,* p. 28.
[62] Humphries, J. (2010), *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution,* p. 212.
[63] Ibidem, p. 123.

with young "sidewalk gamblers, […] musicians, acrobats, jugglers and actors"[64], who performed during the day and went back to their filthy alleys at night[65]. While a part of these children had economically active parents and were simply contributing to the family economy, the majority belonged to the poorest stratum of society[66], orphans or people who lived on the streets while trying to avoid being forced into a workhouse, where living conditions appeared to be even more alarming[67].

A final but no less relevant case is that of child chimney sweeps. Chimney sweeping had always been regarded as a particularly undignified and demeaning job due to its association with dirt and the notorious reputation of those performing it[68]. Not infrequently were adult chimney sweepers spotted in some grimy tavern, gambling and drinking until late at night. Furthermore, it was a widely held belief that washing was not a priority for most of them. Mayhew observes that "there seems never to have been any attempt made by them to wash the soot off their face" and that "scarcely one of them […] [had] a second shirt or any change of clothes"[69]. Yet, in spite of their gruesome living conditions, each of these men was often responsible for several children, young apprentices retrieved from the workhouses or purchased from impoverished parents who could not afford to support them[70]. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, child chimney sweeps were a common sight in London, and they were kept in the same miserable conditions as their masters, rarely washed and with little to eat[71]. Their life expectancy was never too long, as the harshness of their tasks and the prolonged exposition to soot had irreparable effects on their health[72]. Many boys suffered from asthma and got sick with pneumonia because of their walking the streets before dawn even in the inclement winter temperatures and their sleeping in cold damp rooms without even a mattress to rest their bodies on. Consumption was also quite prevalent due to malnutrition and poor clothing, and deformations of spine, legs, arms

[64] Warren, A. (2011) *Charles Dickens and the street children of London*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, p. 6.
[65] Ibidem.
[66] Amy, H. (2012) *The Street Children of Dicken's London*. Stroud: Amberley Publishing, introduction.
[67] Warren, A. (2011) *Charles Dickens and the street children of London*, p. 6.
[68] Mayhew, H. (1851) *London Labour and the London Poor*, p. 158.
[69] Ibidem.
[70] Historic-UK.com (2021) *Chimney Sweeps and Climbing Boys.* Available at: https://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/History-Boy-Chimney-Sweep/ (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[71] Mayhew, H. (1851) *London Labour and the London Poor*, p. 159.
[72] Philips, G.L. (1949) *England's climbing boys: A History of the Long Struggle to Abolish Child Labor in Chimney Sweeping.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p, 5.

and ankles were a natural consequence of their carrying heavy bags of soot all day. Finally, they were at a high risk of developing the so-called "chimney sweeper's cancer" of the scrotum because of poor hygiene[73].

Besides the several diseases caused by the chimney sweeping, one should consider that the premature death of these innocent children often occurred on the job, where they were used as "living brushes"[74] that had to climb up confined and intricate spaces with minimal possibility of movement. In fact, the many chimneys of the modern city residences were proper mazes, with several flues that connected the fireplace to the roof-top. Moreover, in wealthier households, a fireplace was installed in every room so that the occupants could be as comfortable and warm as possible, meaning that even a single home could have multiple chimneys[75]. Here, climbing-boys as young as six[76] had to crawl through extremely narrow flues "stretched in zig-zag fashion, now vertical, now horizontal, down through the walls of the building to its respective hearth"[77]. At times, the passages were so narrow that they had to remove their clothes to avoid getting stuck, but in so doing they were in greater danger of sustaining burns if the walls were still hot from the fire[78]. The testimony of a master chimney sweep who miraculously managed to save his apprentice from a tragic and painful death sheds light on the perilous nature of the job:

> "Well, what is it like?" I said. "Very narrow," says he, "don't think I can get up there" […] "You had better *buff it*, Jim," says I. I suppose you know what that means; but Jim wouldn't do it, and kept his trowsers on. So down he goes, and gets on very well till he comes to the shoulder of the flue, and then he couldn't stir. He shouts down, "I'm stuck." I shouts up and tells him what to do. "Can't move," says he, "I'm stuck hard and fast." […] So I locks the door, and buffs it, and forces myself up till I could reach him with my hand, and as soon as he got his foot on my hand he begins to prize himself up, and gets loosened, and comes out at the top again. I was stuck myself, but I was stronger nor he, and I manages to get out again[79].

If this one boy managed to survive, many children were not so fortunate due to less favourable conditions and, oftentimes, the cruelty of their masters. On 3 June 1817,

[73] Ibidem.
[74] Ibidem, preface.
[75] Ibidem, p. 1.
[76] Historic-UK.com (2021) *Chimney Sweeps and Climbing Boys.*
[77] Philips, G.L. (1949) *England's climbing boys*, introduction.
[78] Historic-UK.com (2021) *Chimney Sweeps and Climbing Boys.*
[79] Mayhew, H. (1851) *London Labour and the London Poor*, p. 161.

an eleven-year-old chimney sweep called John Fraser remained trapped in a flue for five hours, struggling to free himself from that horrible situation. In the end, his master opted for wrapping a rope around Fraser's legs and then pulled so hard that the boy's neck broke[80]. Another particularly dramatic case was that of Patrick Usher in 1788. The nine-year-old apprentice was brutally murdered by master chimney sweep James Murphy, who beat him "with an oak brush on the head and kicked him in the belly, and about the body"[81]. The boy had disobeyed his master's order to climb up a too narrow flue and, as a consequence, was punished with death.

Figure 6. Chimney Sweeps Boys Trapped in a Chimney - illustration from The Chimney Sweeper's Friend and Climbing-Boy's Album by James Montgomery.

As early as 1785, about 500 climbing boys used to roam the streets of London in the service of uncaring masters who provided them with just the bare essentials to survive[82]. Throughout the country, the phenomenon of child exploitation in chimney sweeping was not as widespread as that of children's employment in manufacture or other trades; however, the outstandingly dehumanizing conditions child chimney sweeps had to endure sparked particular interest in their plight and fuelled the debate on the possibilities for improving their circumstances. With their soot-stained faces and their weary bodies, these children became a mirror for the shortcomings of a society

[80] Philips, G.L. (1949) *England's climbing boys*, p. 4.
[81] Kelly, J. (2020) 'Chimney Sweeps, Climbing Boys and Children Employment in Ireland, 1775-1875' *Irish Economic Social History*, 47(1), p. 37.
[82] Philips, G.L. (1949) *England's climbing boys*, introduction.

deeply marked by the disparity between rich and poor, and unable to take care of the unprivileged. Many intellectuals spoke out in support of this marginalized category. As early as 1789, William Blake published his famous poem *The Chimney Sweeper*, in which he expressed profound understanding and sympathy towards the sufferings of climbing boys. In 1824, the composition was included in the collection *The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing-Boy's Album*, arranged by Scottish poet James Montgomery. The volume contains pieces of immense literary and humanitarian value which, alongside the works of many other distinguished contemporary writers, represent an attempt to support the strenuous fight against child exploitation. In the next chapters, a selection of the most representative works embodying this attitude will be examined and considered within their production context, with the specific purpose of illustrating how the intellectual class of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries did not remain indifferent to the hardships faced by the poor, but instead actively contributed to initiating social change.

3. THE DEBATE ON CHILD EXPLOITATION

The events concerning the well-being of child labourers became the subject of intense political and social debate. Two were the main attitudes displayed by the protagonists of public life in the early years of industrialization. On one side were those who emphasized the central role of children in the economic development of the country, and who argued that juvenile employment was not only beneficial to the nation but also to the children themselves. On the other hand, reformists expressed their solidarity with the sufferings of working children and called for a law that could abolish, or at least limit, their exploitation. Among those in favour of child labour, notable figures include economists Andrew Ure, Edward Baines and William Cooke Taylor. With their so-called "factory guidebooks", these three business theorists established themselves as pioneers of a new literary genre aimed at investigating and describing the evolution of production processes in modern manufactories[1]. In particular, Andrew Ure was a fervent supporter of the emerging capitalist system and a strong opponent of factory legislation. In his 1835 dissertation *The Philosophy of Manufactures*, he described the purpose and effect of scientific improvement in factories as "philanthropic", since mechanization and repetitive labour had relieved workers from the inconvenience of fabricating goods by hand[2]. Ure constructed a proper utopia of the industrial system, in which machinery had the merit of making toil light and sometimes pleasant. Even children were not excluded from this social fantasy, for they were portrayed as "lively elves" who experienced no fatigue in carrying out the simple task of operating the machines. Ure wrote:

> I have visited many factories, […] during a period of several months, entering the spinning rooms, unexpectedly, and often alone, at different times of the day, and I never saw a single instance of corporal chastisement inflicted on a child, nor indeed did I ever see children in ill-humour. They seemed to be always cheerful and alert, taking pleasure in the light play of their muscles, -enjoying the mobility natural to their age. […] The work of these lively elves seemed to resemble a sport, in which habit gave them a pleasing dexterity. Conscious of their skill, they were delighted to show it off to any

[1] Edwards, S. (2001) 'Factory and Fantasy in Andrew Ure', *Journal of Design History*, 14(1), p. 17.
[2] Excerpts from Ure, A. (1835) *The Philosophy of Manufactures*. Available at: http://faculty.pingry.org/lhadbavn/documents/WorkersandOwnersDocuments.pdf (Accessed: 23 March 2024), p. 1.

> stranger. As to exhaustion by the day's work, they evinced no trace of it on emerging from the mill in the evening; for they immediately began to skip about any neighbouring play-ground, and to commence their little amusements with the same alacrity as boys issuing from a school[3].

As is evident from this passage, Andrew Ure's essay is not a scientific account of working conditions in manufactural plants. It is a genuine piece of fiction, in which the abundance of poetic terms and the light tone serve the author's specific purpose of presenting the factory environment in a positive light, as a place of improvement and innovation[4]. Here, he argues, little children spent their working days cheerfully and, after their tasks had been completed, they were still full of energy to play with their peers.

Following the same line as Ure, albeit with a slightly different perspective, was Sir Edward Baines. A member of Parliament and newspaper editor, Baines published several works of great political and historical interest in which he too celebrated the prominence of industrialized Britain. Furthermore, in his essays, as in Ure's, we encounter a rather controversial viewpoint on the employment of children in factories. In *History of the Cotton Manufacture in Great Britain*, the author expresses his belief that child abuse in the workplace was the exception and not certainly the norm. In his own words, factory labour was in fact "far less injurious" and "much less irksome [and] arduous" than "many of the most common and necessary employments of civilized life"[5]. Surely, there were a few isolated cases of young individuals who suffered due to work that was not commensurate with their strength, but in general the only defect of an otherwise perfectly functioning industrial system were the long working hours that made it impossible for children to breathe the fresh air they needed to stay strong and efficient. Yet, according to Baines, this was a marginal consideration as doctors had clearly demonstrated that no risk was posed to the person's health by the lack of air circulation in the room.

If Baines downplayed the effects of industrialization on the juvenile population of Britain, William Cooke Taylor did not fail to acknowledge and highlight the negative aspects of this process of modernization. He did not deny that work in manufactural

[3] Ibidem.
[4] Edwards, S. (2001) 'Factory and Fantasy in Andrew Ure', p. 17.
[5] Baines, E. (1835) *History of the Cotton Manufacture in Great Britain,* in Pike, R.E. (ed) *Hard Times*, p. 213.

establishments was extremely demanding and hard; yet, he was convinced that the factory system represented a significant step forward in terms of workers' welfare if compared to the outdated domestic industry. Those distant days were really the "days of infant slavery", when the "creatures were sent to work as soon as they could crawl" and "their parents were the hardest taskmasters"[6]. In contrast, the act of operating the machines in modern factories was described as easy, monotonous but safe, and certainly preferable to the misery to which these poor children would have been compelled if exempted from their employment. As Cooke Taylor saw it, approving a law against juvenile labour would have meant depriving unprivileged children of the opportunity to learn a trade and, consequently, to support themselves because "he who is to live by labour must early be trained to labour"[7]. Factory work allowed young people to earn their bread; it made them feel capable and taught them the value of discipline, all of which eventually prevented them from starving or ending up as mendicants on the streets[8].

The idea of child labour as a remedy for starvation raised many doubts back then as it does now, but it was widely shared by those who saw the presence of a juvenile workforce as a "national blessing"[9], a miracle that had helped the country compensate for part of the considerable expenses incurred during the American and French Revolutions of the eighteenth century. We are talking about many prominent personalities who welcomed Britain's newly conquered dominant economic role with great enthusiasm, but who gave little thought to the price paid by common people. In this respect, Cooke Taylor makes an interesting reference to William Pitt the Younger, the celebrated Prime Minister who allegedly suggested solving the national taxation problems by replacing adult workers in factories with children. Legend has it that in response to the manufacturers' question about how they could afford to pay taxes while also giving high wages to their labourers, he affirmed "Then take the children"[10]. While there is no conclusive evidence that these harsh words actually came out of the

[6] Cooke Taylor, W. (1842) *Notes of a Tour in the Manufacturing Districts of Lancashire,* in Pike, R.E. (ed) *Hard Times*, p. 213.
[7] Cooke Taylor, W. (1844*) Factories and the Factory System: From Parliamentary Documents and Personal Examination*. London: How, J., p. 23.
[8] Ibidem, pp. 23-24.
[9] Ibidem, p 21.
[10] Pike, E.R. (1996) *Hard Times*, p. 208.

minister's mouth[11], it is safe to assert that such a strong desire for economic success at any cost was highly prevalent among most contemporary industrialists, who did not hesitate to deny or minimize child labour issues for fear of losing a valuable economic asset. As recalled by Alison Watson, "the use of child labour during Britain's industrialization was widespread, economically important, and largely unquestioned morally"[12]. Thus, a collective attitude of condemnation was not yet to be expected. Lastly, as is also evident from Cooke Taylor's word, the economic writers of the time largely agreed on the "incorrigible"[13] tendency to idleness within the working class. In this context, the right to work, for children as well as adults", represented a moral imperative for the good of the community, a means to keep the workers industrious and away from perilous vices[14].

3.1. A short history of child labour regulation and its protagonists

In 1833, the first effective Factory Act was passed by the British Parliament, concurrently with the establishment of a professional Factory Inspectorate responsible for its enforcement. Although this new law was the first one to yield significant results, the way to its approval was paved by a long struggle for the regulation of labour, carried out by those who sympathized with the workers' cause. In 1802, Sir Robert Peel promoted the drafting of the very first piece of factory legislation, which took the name of Health and Morals of Apprentices Act and whose effects primarily concerned the well-being of parish apprentices in cotton mills. Peel himself was an industrialist, as well as a politician, and owner of a renowned textile mill located on the Rivel Irwell near Radcliffe, in North-eastern England. Here, a great number of children were employed, bought from the workhouses of Birmingham and London[15] and forced to live in deplorable conditions: in the mill ventilation was inadequate, the spaces were extremely unclean, and children had to toil for as long as fourteen to fifteen hours per day, often with the requirement of working night shifts for an entire consecutive year[16].

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[11] Ibidem.
[12] Watson, A. (2004) *An Introduction to International Political Economy*. London: A and C Black, p. 137.
[13] Coats, A.W. (1958) 'Changing Attitudes to Labour in the Mid-Eighteenth Century', *The Economic History Review*, 11(1), p. 35.
[14] Ibidem.
[15] HistoryofInformation.com (2018) *Robert Peel Asks that Posters of the Apprentice Act be Displayed in Mills and Factories*. Available at: https://historyofinformation.com/detail.php?id=4533 (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[16] Ramsay, A.A.W. (1971) *Sir Robert Peel*. New York: Barnes & Noble, p. 5.

When questioned about the grimy situation by a Factory Commission, even Peel had to admit that working conditions in his establishments were "very bad", but he tried to justify himself by claiming that it was not always possible for him to visit his factories since he had business elsewhere[17]. Whenever he did, clear instructions were given to supervisors not to overwork the poor children, but the order was promptly disobeyed as soon as "[Peel's] back was turned[18]. The factory owner was not entirely responsible for these circumstances; yet, his shortcoming was that he failed to see a possible solution to improve the conditions of children in the alteration of payment methods for his overseers, whose earnings were directly proportionate to the output and therefore dependent on the amount of work carried out by the labourers[19].

A significant intervention was finally planned following the outbreak of a severe fever epidemic in the mill, which according to Manchester doctor Mr. Percival was "supported, diffused and aggravated, by the ready communication of contagion to numbers crowded together; by the accession to its virulence from putrid effluvia, and by the injury done to young persons through confinement and too long-continued labour"[20]. After meticulous investigation, on December 2 ,1802, a law was enacted that required factory rooms to be cleaned and disinfected at least twice a year, and to have enough openings to ensure sufficient air circulation. Furthermore, the bill stated that each apprentice was to be provided with two sets of clothing, linen, underwear and shoes, and with a new set every year after that"[21]. Working hours had to be limited to twelve hours a day and night shifts were abolished for pauper apprentices. These are just some of the provisions outlined in the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act, which among other things also addressed the delicate topic of the educational and religious upbringing of labouring children. Although well-meant, this early piece of legislation had a limited effect, not only because it applied exclusively to those who had an apprenticeship contract, but also because of the absence of specific means and professional figures in charge of its enforcement. There is written evidence that Peel requested sheets reporting the dictates of the Act to be posted on the walls of every factory, but the encountered opposition and the leniency in the implementation of the

[17] Ibidem, p. 6.
[18] Ibidem.
[19] Ibidem.
[20] Harrison, A. and Hutchins, B.L. (1903) *A History of Factory Legislation*. London: P.S. King & Son, p. 8.
[21] *Statutes at Large: Statutes of the United Kingdom*, 1801-1806 (1822) London: His Majesty's Printers.

law meant that no substantial change did occur[22]. In fact, in order to evade intervention from the government, many mill owners simply stopped hiring parish apprentices and instead took up children of "free" parents, for whom working conditions remained largely unaltered[23].

A final consideration could be made regarding Peel's actual interest in supporting such a progressive law. After all, he himself was a businessman who benefited from the hard work of his employees and thus it is curious that he promoted a bill for labour regulation. An objection to his supposed altruism could be raised by considering that he might have introduced an Act of Parliament just to make sure that the reforms affected all factories and not only his own, so as to prevent competitors from gaining an advantage in terms of productivity[24]. Nevertheless, Peel's biographer Anna Ramsay argues that "[his] position was […] too securely established to be threatened by competition" and that "he was beyond doubt actuated by a sincere desire to improve the state of the factory children"[25]. If we were to acknowledge this perspective, then we could assert that Peel was among the first champions of the rights of British children during the Industrial Revolution.

Another relevant personality in this context is Robert Owen, also a prominent entrepreneur who devoted much of his life to defending the rights of those in need. As reported in his autobiography, Owen was born in North Wales in 1771 to Anne and Robert Owen, who was a local saddler and ironmonger. He received no superior education, but since childhood he displayed great intelligence and a strong passion for reading. Above all, however, he showed a remarkable inclination for business, which allowed him to become a partner of the famous Chorlton Twist Company at the tender age of 23. A man of great sensitivity, Owen decided to invest part of his wealth and resources in social services, and in his establishment of New Lanark he tested out an innovative idea of society whereby significant importance was given to the labourers' welfare and the education of children[26]. He was determined to demonstrate that a factory could remain productive even without resorting to the violence perpetrated against the employees in most manufactural plants. At New Lanark, all corporal

[22] Ramsay, A.A.W. (1971) *Sir Robert Peel*, p. 7.
[23] Clayton, J. (1908) *Robert Owen; pioneer of social reforms*. London: A.C. Fifield, p. 21.
[24] Ramsay, A.A.W. (1971) *Sir Robert Peel*, p. 7.
[25] Ibidem.
[26] Clayton, J. (1908) *Robert Owen*, p. 8.

punishments were banished, and the spaces were kept clean and liveable. Moreover, at the workers' village, Owen founded several elementary and infant schools in the belief that children should be trained from a very young age in the principles of good temperament and righteous habits[27]. He was greatly unimpressed with the traditional teaching methods that he had personally experienced in the school of his small town, where "it was considered a good education if one could read fluently, write a legible hand, and understand the four first rules of arithmetic"[28]. Instead, Owen's children took singing and dancing lessons, they performed military exercises as a means to acquire discipline, and they learnt about history and geography while engaging in familiar conversation. Owen also emphasized the importance of achieving control through kindness and respect. In his schools, "no punishments were to be inflicted on the children, and no prizes awarded. No angry word was to be heard […], the school hours were to be made enjoyable, and the instruction an interesting playtime"[29]. Although it was challenging for Owen to recruit teachers and supporters for such a groundbreaking project, and although many dismissed his methods as passings trends[30], he managed to show that this kind of education worked in making children more benevolent and hardworking. Regarding his own success, the industrialist wrote enthusiastic words:

> The children, being always treated with kindness and confidence, and being altogether without fear, […] exhibited an unaffected grace and natural politeness which surprised and fascinated strangers. The conduct of the children was to most of the visitors so unaccountable that they knew not how to express themselves, or how to hide their wonder and amazement. […] in the dancing-room, and often surrounded by many strangers, [they] would, with the utmost ease and natural grace, go through any of the dances of Europe with so little direction from their master that the visitors would be unconscious that there was a dancing master in the room. In their singing lessons 150 would sing at the same time, their voices being trained to harmonize […]. The girls were thus drilled and disciplined as well as the boys, and their numbers were generally nearly equal. And it may be remarked that being daily brought up together they appeared to feel for and to treat each as brothers and sisters […][31].

[27] Ibidem.
[28] Owen, R. (1920) *The Life of Robert Owen by Himself*. London: Bell, G., p. 3.
[29] Clayton, J. (1908) *Robert Owen*, p. 15.
[30] Ibidem, p. 8.
[31] Owen, R. as cited in Clayton, J. (1908) *Robert Owen*, p. 17.

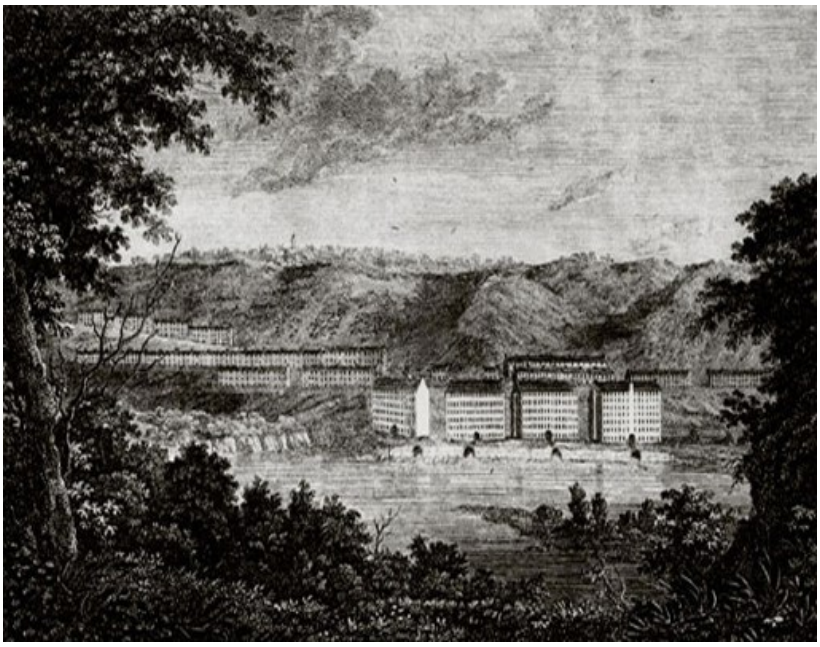

Figure 7. New Lanark - engraving by Robert Scott, c. 1799.

Owen's philosophy of what school should be is extremely modern in its implications that children learn better when they are exposed to positive moral and behavioural stimuli, and in that it is not different from the educational models which emerged from the second half of the twentieth century. However, is spite of his impressive results, Owen realized that a real change in children's conditions across the country was impossible without systematic parliamentary intervention. In 1815, he organized a meeting of Scottish manufacturers in Glasgow, where he presented his proposal of remitting the heavy tax that had been imposed on the importation of cotton and read a draft containing some possible measures to improve the life circumstances of children and adults employed in manufacture. If the first proposition was approved without hesitation, the second one sparked considerable indignation among those present at the gathering, even if his requests were fairly moderate. He demanded that children under ten be exempted from employment, that the workday be reduced to ten hours instead of fourteen, and that night shifts be reserved for those over eighteen[32]. Owen turned to Sir Robert Peel to bring his Bill to the House of Commons, but only in 1819 a Cotton Mills and Factories Act was passed, and it did so in such a mutilated and modified version that only a distant memory remained of its proposer's initial draft: the employment ban was restricted to children under the age of nine and limited to the textile sector , while the working day was reduced to twelve hours only for those under

[32] Clayton, J. (1908) *Robert Owen*, p. 24.

sixteen[33]. Furthermore, also in this case the lack of efficient enforcers for the implementation of the Bill allowed transgressors to act undisturbed most of the time.

In the following years, several attempts were made to have a powerful legislation approved by Parliament, and many were the personalities from business and politics who actively participated in the social struggle. One of them was John Cam Hobhouse, a Radical politician and author of numerous political essays, mostly remembered for his close friendship with Lord Byron, who in 1825 demanded a further reduction in working hours for labourers of the textile industry. The goal was just partially achieved, as only on Saturdays were workers granted permission to leave the factories after nine hours on duty[34]. Nevertheless, Hobhouse managed to achieve another important victory: with the Cotton Mills Regulation Act, magistrates obtained leave to act on their own initiative in summoning witnesses to hearings, and local judges who were also mill owners or related to a mill owner were banned from acting as factory inspectors[35]. In this way, enforcement of factory regulations was made more effective.

However, the most meaningful results were attained with the enactment of the 1833 Factory Act, a series of laws formulated with the specific purpose of establishing, once and for all, a regular and reasonable working day for textile employees, and whose approval was preceded by thorough parliamentary inquiry. By the 1830s, an intense campaign for the improvement of factory conditions had swept across the political and economic landscape of Britain, even engaging the most liberal mill-owners whose understanding of their workers' rights was beginning to change for the better[36]. Strong was the influence of the Ten Hours Movement, led by fiery reformers Richard Oastler and Michael Thomas Sadler, and aimed at restricting working hours for children under sixteen[37]. Sadler's contribution was particularly relevant for the passing of the Factory

[33] UK Parliament. *Early factory legislation*. Available at: https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/19thcentury/overview/earlyfactorylegislation (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[34] The History of Parliament (2009) *Hobhouse, John Cam (1786-1869)*. Available at: https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832/member/hobhouse-john-1786-1869 (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[35] Ibidem.
[36] UK Parliament. *The 1833 Factory Act*. Available at: https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/19thcentury/overview/factoryact/ (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[37] Ibidem.

Act, as he was given the task of directing the work of the Royal Commission during its investigations in textile factories. Sadler was a man of great intelligence and education, he was resolute and passionate and, like Hobhouse, held radical views. His juvenile experience as Treasurer of the Poor-rates in Leeds had allowed him to witness firsthand the sufferings and misery of the poor, which deeply affected his personality and future commitment to social services[38]. In 1829 he was elected to Parliament as a Tory and wasted no time in bringing his battle for the protection of working-class children before the House of Commons.

As emphasized by Nardinelli, the *Report of the Select Committee on Factory Children's Labour*, published in 1832 under Sadler's supervision, was specifically designed to paint a ghastly picture of factory life, and to portray industrial establishments as "hellish institutions for the destruction of childhood"[39]. In fact, a commonly raised criticism against what has become known as the *Sadler Report* is its partiality in representing the facts. The document, which was initially intended to provide a balanced account of the industrial reality, contained only the testimonies of carefully selected witnesses whose life experiences aligned particularly well with the objectives of the committee, while mill-owners, who were supposed to carry out the defence, never actually had the opportunity to speak out. Moreover, Sadler and his team have often been accused of training testifiers to answer in a way that would evoke the greatest possible outrage in the public[40]. Contemporary opposers and several more recent critics have labelled the *Report* as "biased, incomplete, sometimes inaccurate or even deliberately misleading, and [referring] to conditions that had long been ameliorated"[41]. However, as much as some of its passages have since been refuted or acknowledged as intentionally exaggerated, Sadler's work had the noble merit of finally giving voice to the outcasts, to those who had been forgotten by the well-meaning society and whose vicissitudes were not much rosier than those narrated, although perhaps not as spectacular.

[38] Seeley, G. (1842) *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Michael Thomas Sadler, Esq*. London: Seeley, R.B. and Burnside, W., p. 15.
[39] Nardinelli, C. (1980) 'Child Labor and the Factory Acts'. *The Journal of Economic History*, 40(4), p. 740.
[40] Ibidem.
[41] Pike, E.R. (1996) *Hard Times*, p. 116.

Public response was immediate and decisive: Parliament could no longer ignore such a pressing issue and effective legislative measures had to be taken. On August 29, 1833, Royal assent was granted to a set of regulations that prohibited children under nine from working in factories. Children between nine and thirteen now had a limit of 48 hours per week, and young persons under eighteen could not work at night. In addition, the Act established that children under thirteen should receive elementary education for a minimum of two hours daily[42]. While these laws certainly represented an important step forward, what made the 1833 Factory Act stand out compared to the previous bills was the concomitant creation of a Factory Inspectorate which was accountable to the Home Office and endowed with the authority to impose penalties for violations[43]. The presence of trained professional inspectors obviously did not mean that mistreatment of children was immediately put to an end: at the very beginning, this sort of new industrial police was too small in numbers to really be effective, and inspectors often feared creating conflicts with the mill-owners, their admonitions taking the form of "repeated warnings" rather than real measures with legal consequences[44]. Despite the initial problems, however, in the long run the creation of this inspectorate laid the groundwork for the birth of a much necessary government regulatory system[45], and its relevance was considered such that some described it as "perhaps the most important innovation in British labour legislation"[46].

Throughout the nineteenth century, several other Factory Acts were passed by the British Parliament, which collectively reflected a newfound awareness of the needs of childhood, and which represented intermediate stages leading to the ultimate eradication of child labour. The 1844 Bill introduced the half-time system, requiring young textile employees to work for half the day and attend school for the other half[47]. In addition, the limit of twelve working hours was established for children and women alike, together with the prohibition of cleaning machinery while it was in motion[48].

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[42] UK Parliament. *The 1833 Factory Act*.
[43] Ibidem.
[44] Bartrip, P.W.J. and Fenn, P.T. (1983) 'The Evolution of Regulatory Style in the Nineteenth Century British Factory Inspectorate', *Journal of Law and Society*, 10(2), p. 205.
[45] UK Parliament. *The 1833 Factory Act*.
[46] Bartrip, P.W.J. and Fenn, P.T. (1983) 'The Evolution of Regulatory Style in the Nineteenth Century British Factory Inspectorate', p. 205.
[47] Nardinelli, C. (1980) 'Child Labor and the Factory Acts', p. 204.
[48] UK Parliament. *Later Factory Legislation*. Available at: https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/19thcentury/overview/laterfactoryleg/ (Accessed: 23 March 2024).

Protection for workers was further extended in 1867, when existing regulations were applied to any factory with 50 employees or more. From this moment on, government inspections were no longer limited to the textile industry but could target a variety of fields such as pottery, printing, iron processing and glass making[49]. Finally, significant improvements in labourers' conditions regarding safety, working hours and age limits were achieved with the Acts of 1878, 1891 and 1895.

With reference to the real impact of factory legislation, Nardinelli raises the question whether these laws actually represented a decisive factor in determining a permanent decline of child labour. While it is safe to affirm that child exploitation was significantly reduced after the 1830s, some critics argued that the presence of children in factories was already decreasing in relation to that of adults prior to the 1833 Factory Act, and that legislation only sped up the process[50]. According to Nardinelli, this reduction could be due to a series of circumstances, foremost among them being the great technological changes Britain was going through. In the early years of the Industrial Revolution, factories functioned solely thanks to waterpower and thus had to be located in the countryside, where water sources were to be found. These rural areas were often scarcely populated, and frequently the only way for industrialists to obtain labourers was to recruit young pauper apprentices from parishes and workhouses. With the implementation of steam-powered machinery, factory owners could finally build their establishments near towns and urban centres where it was easier to secure an adult workforce[51]. Furthermore, it has already been observed how children were particularly desirable workers because of their small stature that allowed them to perform a variety of tasks for which adults were mostly unsuited. For instance, in textile mills they were assigned the duty of piecing together broken threads. Improvements in machinery operation resulted in less waste and fewer broken threads, and this reduced the necessity for children[52]. In addition to technological progress, one last factor that greatly impacted on the decline of child labour was the increase in real wages. If one considers that the main reason why young boys and girls were put to work so early in their life was the precarious economic condition of their family, it could be asserted that as the average

[49] Ibidem.
[50] Nardinelli, C. (1980) 'Child Labor and the Factory Acts', p. 743.
[51] Ibidem, pp. 743-744.
[52] Ibidem, p. 745.

incomes of British families increased during the nineteenth century, the number of employed children decreased[53].

The above considerations help us better understand how the disappearance of children from factories was not an immediate accomplishment, nor was it simply determined from above. Instead, it was the result of a long and complex process that did not come to completion until the twentieth century and that was influenced by a multiplicity of circumstances, among which were the intervention of dedicated kind-hearted people, the enactment of relevant legislation, modernization and rising incomes. The complexity of this phenomenon appears even greater if one acknowledges that improvements did not occur simultaneously in all productive fields. As it has previously been stated, the first Acts concerned exclusively the textile industry, while the other sectors of manufacture were still exempt from regulations. In a similar way, we have to wait till 1842 to see the passing of a Bill that safeguarded the rights of children employed in mines. With the Mines and Collieries Act, promoted by Sir Anthony Ashley Cooper, all women and girls and all boys under ten were finally excluded from underground coal mine employment. Lord Ashley, seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, is remembered as one of the most successful social and industrial reformers of the nineteenth century[54]. Leading a Royal Commission of inquiry, he set out to expose the unconceivable evils endured by the mining population, and he skilfully exploited the arts of rhetoric to elicit the utmost compassion from the public. Ashley was firmly convinced that no man could achieve his goals without the support of public opinion[55]; therefore, he initiated an intense campaign that engaged all the major newspaper of the time. When the first report of the Committee came out in 1842, the *Morning Chronicle* described it as "almost [resembling] a volume of travels in a remote and barbarous country"[56], while the *Quarterly Review* commented that "the earth seems now for the first time to have heaved from its entrails another race, to astonish and move us to reflection and sympathy"[57]. In this case too, as it had happened with the *Sadler Report* ten years prior, the dismay of the readers was immense, and was further heightened by

[53] Ibidem, p. 748.
[54] Britannica (2023) *Anthony Ashley Cooper, 7th earl of Shaftesbury*. Available at: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Anthony-Ashley-Cooper-7th-earl-of-Shaftesbury. (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[55] Heeson, A. (1981) 'The Coal Mines Act of 1842, Social Reform, and Social Control', *The Historical Journal*, 24(1), p. 70.
[56] Ibidem, p. 71.
[57] Ibidem.

the pictures included in the exposé with the purpose of making the gruesome accounts even more vivid. It was evident to everyone that children could not work under such conditions, and that they necessitated a law to protect them.

The 1842 Mines Act was supplemented in 1850 with the Coal Mines Inspection Act, which established a new body of mine inspectors tasked with enforcing safety regulations in the hope of promoting a decrease in workplace accidents[58]. Safety norms were enhanced with the 1860 Coal Mines Regulation Act, which also raised the minimum working age from ten to twelve. In spite of the new legislation, however, throughout the nineteenth century the deaths provoked by mining accidents continued to be numerous and the number of employers evading the law was still high[59]. Again, in mining as in manufacture, the road to real improvement in the living and working conditions of British children was long and arduous.

One more businessman that is worth mentioning while discussing the struggle for children's rights in the years of the Industrial Revolution is Jonas Hanway, a wealthy eighteenth-century merchant and philanthropist whose efforts were largely directed at bettering the life circumstances of young sweeps. Having read an anonymous letter about climbing boys in *The Public Advertiser* and being deeply moved, Hanway initiated a whole series of humanitarian projects to raise public awareness for the cause of these poor children, who were treated as nothing more than "little slaves"[60]. In 1770, he founded a Friendly Society promoting the participation of any master sweep willing to implement better treatment for his apprentices. The attempt failed, as no master discerned any benefit for the business in such a proposal, and the organization was quickly dissolved[61]. Hanway persisted by creating the Committee in Behalf of Chimney-Sweeper's Young Apprentices, whose members were entrusted with the task of sending letters to all the master chimney sweepers of London, with the request that they started treating their boys kindly while also educating them in the principles of good religion. The messages, which even contained indenture forms, were mostly

[58] UK Parliament. *Coal mines*. Available at: https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/19thcentury/overview/coalmines/#:~:text=The%20Mines%20and%20Collieries%20Bill,frequency%20of%20accidents%20in%20mines (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[59] UK Parliament. *Coal mines*.
[60] Philips, G.L. (1949) *England's climbing boys*, p. 5.
[61] Ibidem, p. 6.

ignored by their recipients[62]. However unsuccessful his political initiatives, Hanway's contribution was fundamental in informing the British population about the plight of climbing boys. He published numerous pamphlets and essays on the matter, among which the most famous is probably *A Sentimental History of Chimney Sweepers, in London & Westminster, Shewing the Necessity of putting Them under Regulations to Prevent the grossest Inhumanity to the Climbing Boys. With a Letter to a London Clergyman on Sunday Schools calculated for the preservation of the Children of the Poor.* The collection of letters, despite its pretentious title, is quite brief and comes across as a mournful plea to the "inhabitants of vast cities", so that they could exercise "their humanity towards those who call the loudest for it"[63].

Hanway's efforts were interrupted with his death in 1786, but his legacy was promptly picked up by some of his most faithful friends and followers such as David Porter, he himself a chimney sweep with progressive ideas regarding regulation, and Sir Thomas Bernard, a retired lawyer who had made philanthropy his raison d'être. Several were also the organizations founded in the first half of the nineteenth century with the specific purpose of mobilising support and obtaining climbing boys' reform. One of them was the Society for the Protection and Instruction of Chimney Sweeper Apprentices, born in 1800, whose cause attracted considerable interest among clergymen, male and female intellectuals, and landed aristocrats[64]. Despite the fervent battle waged by many brave and influential personalities, an official stance from the Government was extremely slow to arrive. The proposals advanced in 1788, 1804, 1818 and 1819 were made ineffective by a reluctant House of Lords, its members more concerned with the economic side of the problem than with the agony of children[65]. The emancipation of child chimney-sweeps would have meant that the entire cleaning system, and even the structure of chimneys, had to be modified to allow more corpulent adults or bulkier machinery to pass through. This, according to the reactionary wing of Parliament, was "carrying legislation a little further than was necessary"[66]. We need to wait till 1875 to see tangible results: with the Chimney Sweepers Act, promoted again by Lord Shaftesbury, chimney sweeps were now required to be licensed and registered

[62] Ibidem, p. 7.
[63] Ibidem, p. 9.
[64] Van Manen, N. (2010) *The Climbing Boys Campaigns in Britain, c. 1770-1840: Cultures of Reform, Languages of Health and Experiences of Childhood*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of York, p. 69.
[65] Philips, G.L. (1949) *England's climbing boys*, p. 5.
[66] Ibidem, p. 6.

with the police[67], while anyone who was under 21 years of age was forbidden to climb down a chimney[68]. By effectively reinforcing supervision within the profession, this bill finally put the horrible practice of using children as "living brushes" to an end.

3.2. Childhood and Literary Activism

In the previous paragraphs, the humanitarian effort of many influential personalities from politics and the business world has been extensively investigated. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain, numerous were the entrepreneurs, merchants and MPs who vigorously demanded the regulation, if not the abolition, of child labour. Nevertheless, it is vital not to forget the contribution of another professional category, that of intellectuals, whose members certainly did not remain indifferent to the sufferings of contemporary poor. It was mentioned earlier how Lord Ashley engaged all the major newspapers of the time in his campaign against child exploitation in mines, as he recognized the indispensable importance of "[appealing] to and [exciting] public opinion" in order to achieve one's goals[69]. According to Ashely, it was not enough for social discourse to take place within the Houses of Parliament; instead, it was necessary to educate ordinary citizens and make them aware of the problem. In a similar way, many contemporary writers and artists used their pen and creative talent to publicly denounce the harsh realities to which a good portion of the British population was condemned.

Everyone remembers Charles Dickens, whose works represent some of the most vivid and upsetting accounts of social injustice during the Victorian Era. Dickens was a firm believer in the power of literature to act as a platform to encourage public discussion about social and ethical change[70], and brilliantly employed the stories of his characters, many of whom were children, to shed light on the most serious evils of nineteenth-century society. Moreover, despite his primary role as a writer, he was also

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[67] UK Parliament. *Children and Chimneys*. Available at: https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/19thcentury/overview/childrenchimneys/#:~:text=In%20the%20early%201830s%2C%20as,under%20the%20age%20of%2014 (Accessed: 23 March 2024).

[68] Yourlocalsweep.com (2016) *History of the English Chimney Sweep*. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20120617211216/http://www.yourlocalsweep.co.uk/History.htm (Accessed: 23 March 2024).

[69] Heeson, A. (1981) 'The Coal Mines Act of 1842', p. 70.

[70] TheVictorianWeb (2012) *Charles Dickens as Social Commentator and Critic*. Available at: https://victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/diniejko.html (Accessed: 23 March 2024).

personally involved in the political debate and active in charity work, promoting improvements in healthcare, schooling and religious education for impoverished children lodged in workhouses[71]. In 1851, he gave a speech in London's Department of Health, where he expressed his support in favour of the new Sanitary Reform; in 1858, he helped establish one of the first children's hospitals in the capital, and throughout his life he devoted much of his time and money to aid numerous charitable organizations[72].

Figure 8. Image of a ward at the Hospital for Sick Children which Dickens helped fund, 1859.

If the universal recognition of Dickens as a social critic is indisputable, one should also remember that long before him Romantic writers had already manifested their disappointment with a world that was becoming progressively enslaved to mechanization and incapable of valuing human sentiments. Poets like Wordsworth, Blake and Shelley revolted against a system that was destroying the beauties of the rural world and which was turning individuals into machine-like beings, victimized by the greed of rich capitalists[73]. In their works the urbanized city, where the majority of the British population lived, stands in stark contrast with nature: while the former is

[71] Nerz, S. (2017) *Social Criticism in Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol*, Term Paper, University of Bonn, p. 9.
[72] Bleeckerstreetmedia.com. *Charles Dickens's Gift of Giving*. Available at: https://bleeckerstreetmedia.com/editorial/charles-dickens-tradition-of-giving. (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[73] Güvenç, O. (2014) 'William Blake and William Wordsworth's Reactions to the Industrial Revolution', *Cankaya University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 11(1), p. 114.

depicted as an unnatural frightening place which causes men to suffer, the latter represents the main source of inspiration, and is described as the quintessential place where the human soul can heal from the corruption brought by industrialization[74]. In his 1807 sonnet *The World is Too Much With Us*, William Wordsworth explicitly expresses his discouragement about the present by juxtaposing two entities that should live in harmony with one another ("us and "the world"), but which had instead drifted apart, as contemporary people were only concerned with "Getting and spending" (line 2) and had forgotten the importance of feeling, appreciating and finding meaning in what was around them. The decadence that characterizes the world of modernization and economic growth is also perfectly portrayed by William Blake who, in his poem *London*, takes the reader into the desolate streets of the capital, populated by the tormented faces of the passers-by with their "Marks of weakness, marks of woe" (line 4). Here, one can hear the cries of "every man" and "every infant" (lines 5-6) who are oppressed by the authorities under a sort of social and intellectual tyranny, and with no option left but that of succumbing.

Alongside the celebration of nature and this critical view of the urbanized landscape, a cardinal theme of Romantic poetry is that of childhood, whose centrality immediately suggests a mindset diametrically opposed to the mainstream idea that children were just underdeveloped individuals[75] who had to take charge of their adult responsibilities as soon as possible. In English Romanticism, the child is perceived as a "qualitatively" distinct creature, whose natural state is especially close to the original goodness of humanity[76]. This is the reason why, according to the Romantics, children are particularly deserving of support and protection, and they need to be brought up in an environment that allows them to successfully grasp all the wonders of this unique phase of life. In Wordsworth, like in Rousseau's philosophy of natural education, childhood is an "age of sensation"[77], during which the young individual connects with nature through the five senses in a spontaneous way, in opposition to the adult who filters the world through the lenses of reason and thus has more difficulty perceiving the

[74] Ibidem.
[75] Jordan, J.O. (2001) *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 92.
[76] Ibidem.
[77] Oliver, J.M. (1980) *Wordsworth's Theory of the Child's Unconscious Response to Nature in The Prelude*, Dissertation, McMaster University, p. 4.

beauty of what really is[78]. In the short lyrical poem *My Heart Leaps Up*, first published in 1807, the poet brilliantly illustrates this ability of children to marvel at the simplest things of the natural world around them. The speaker reflects on the profound joy he feels when he witnesses the appearance of a rainbow in the sky, a joy that is as intense now as it was when he was just a little boy, and he expresses his fear of losing this childlike enthusiasm and curiosity as he becomes older. Indeed, he prefers to die rather than live without such a strong appreciation for nature. It is evident here that the situation has been reversed as compared to what was happening in the real world: it is no longer the child who must learn to imitate the adult, but it is the grown-ups who are invited to preserve the innocence and purity of childhood. The seventh verse of the poem is of particular relevance, as it defines the child as "the father of the Man", highlighting the crucial role of children in determining the character of their adult-selves. With these words, the privileged position of the child, who becomes a parent and a sort of teacher for the adult, is again emphasized.

Wordsworth was not the only Romantic author to make childhood a focal point of his poetry. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's works are rich in references to this peculiar stage of life and convey strong nostalgic feelings towards a period "when Peace, and Cheerfulness and Health / Enriched [him] with the best of thought"[79]. Childhood is portrayed by Coleridge as the moment in the life of an individual when the powers of vision and imagination are at their peak, and it is precisely this visionary component of childhood that sparks in him the desire to be a young boy once again[80]. In *To the River Otter* we find a perfect example of this melancholy that pervades the poet, as an extremely sentimental and ecstatic description of the river, which is located near Coleridge's childhood home, is provided from a child's perspective. The sonnet concludes with a disconsolate sigh; "Ah!" (line 14), the poet writes, and immediately after he expresses his pain for not being a "careless child" (line 14) anymore. Perhaps, however, if we consider the purpose of this research we could say that the most interesting aspect about Coleridge's idea of childhood is his notion of the influence of

[78] Ibidem, p. 2.
[79] Coleridge, S.T. (1791) *Absence: A Farewell Song on Leaving School at Jesus College, Cambridge.*
[80] Abid, H.H. and Ubeid, A.H. (2020) *Nostalgia for Childhood: A Study in the Romantic Poetry*, University of Anbar, p. 10.

the educational environment on a child's development[81]. He agrees with Wordsworth in stating that there is a profound connection between children and the natural world: nature has a significant impact on the child's mind, and direct and spontaneous contact with its elements is crucial for nurturing a child's imaginative abilities[82]. In his 1798 poem *Frost at Midnight*, Coleridge reflects on his own youth spent in the city, and he finds relief in knowing that his son, Hartley, will have the chance to grow up in the countryside instead:

> My babe so beautiful! it thrills my heart
> With tender gladness, thus to look at thee,
> And think that thou shalt learn far other lore,
> And in far other scenes! For I was reared
> In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,
> And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.
> But *thou*, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
> By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
> Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
> Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
> And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear
> The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
> Of that eternal language, which thy God
> Utters, who from eternity doth teach
> Himself in all, and all things in himself.
> Great universal Teacher! he shall mould
> Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask (lines 48-64).

Finally, a sentiment of nostalgia for the pleasures of childhood can be observed in the works of later Romantic poets, such as Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats. Shelley wrote several poems that touch upon childhood themes, exploring the innocence and wonder of youth in opposition to the problematic nature of adulthood[83]. In *Julian and Maddalo: a Conversation*, the two protagonists witness the joy of a little girl, who is described by the author as a "lovely child. Blithe. Innocent. And free" and as "[spending] a happy time with little care" while they, on the contrary, are subjected "to such sick thoughts" (lines 165-168). In his *Letter to Maria Gisborne*, the poet expresses

[81] Oliver, J.M. (1980) *Wordsworth's Theory of the Child's Unconscious Response to Nature in The Prelude*, p. 12.
[82] Ibidem, p. 13.
[83] Abid, H.H. and Ubeid, A.H. (2020) *Nostalgia for Childhood*, p. 11.

his current feelings of loneliness and mentions yielding "to the impulse of an infancy / outlasting manhood" (lines 72-73), while in the short lyric *A Lament*, he reflects extensively on the loss of the delights and naivety of his younger years. The words he employs perfectly express his anguish over the passing of time, and convey his regret for the joys of which age robbed him:

> Out of the day and night
> A joy has taken flight;
> Fresh spring, and summer, and winter hoar,
> Move my faint heart with grief, but with delight
> No more—Oh, never more! (lines 6-10)

Furthermore, in Shelley we encounter again the idea of a childhood endowed with visionary abilities. In the poem *Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude*, the infancy of the hero was nurtured "by solemn vision, and bright silver dream" and "Every sight / And sound from the vast earth and ambient air. / Sent to his heart its choicest impulses" (lines 67-70). A similar image is to be found in John Keat's *'Tis the Witching Time of Night*, in which the reader is introduced to the character of small child playing the lyre "in a flame of fire" (line 34). With his little hands he plays "a little tune and sings" (line 46) while the poet addresses him as a "bard" (line 48). Childhood, with its abundance of imagination and vision, emerges as the life stage in which the poet is shaped[84], and this conception is emphasized by Keats in the final verse: "A Poet now or never, little child" (line 56).

The works analysed in this section feature a portrayal of childhood which is quite distant from the real conditions endured by much of England's juvenile population, victim of exhaustion and overworking, and forced to live in dirty overcrowded slums. Infancy, for most Romantic poets, was a cheerful untroubled time upon which they looked back with nostalgia and regret. Factories, abuse and neglect are replaced in their works by the beauty of the rural world, where the innocent child grows serenely and is educated in a natural way. In a sense, albeit in a personal and innovative manner, the Romantic concept of childhood echoes that expressed by French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his famous work *Émile ou De l'éducation*, published in 1762. The protagonist, Émile, is a young boy whose education is entrusted from the early years to a sapient teacher who raises him in an ideal bucolic setting. He is

[84] Ibidem, p. 16.

constantly in contact with nature and learns in relation to his own curiosities; his mentor's only task is that of understanding what the child is fascinated by in the world and then satisfying his hunger for knowledge. According to Rousseau, a return to the natural world, far away from any automatism and imposition, was the only possible path for humanity to reclaim its original goodness in a society that had only produced despair and alienation. As already stated above, the introspective reflection of English Romanticism fits perfectly within this atmosphere of rejection and opposition to a dehumanizing present. Furthermore, despite their works taking a different direction from that of direct condemnation, the contribution of Romantic poets was of considerable value in bringing about a change in the widespread conception of childhood. Scholars highlight an increasingly marked interest in childhood themes within eighteenth-century literature, with children finally being represented and valued as unique individuals rather than miniature adults[85]. This view, according to which children are complex beings with their own characteristics, needs and talents, will be instrumental in the emergence of the new cultural and educational models that will eventually lead to the abolition of child labour[86].

In spite of this widespread tendency to escape from a reality that was considered harsh and unforgiving, there certainly were some protagonists of the Romantic Age who dealt with documenting the more hideous side of eighteenth-century childhood. William Blake gave voice to the sufferings of climbing boys in his famous poem *The Chimney Sweeper*, published in two parts in 1789 and 1794. The composition, which recounts the sad story of an orphan sold into labour by his own father, will be analysed in detail in the next chapter as part of James Montgomery's work; yet, in this context it would be appropriate to digress momentarily on the persona of Blake and his all-encompassing concern for the conditions of the poor. Eccentric and ahead of his time, William Blake was born in the Soho district of London in 1757, son to a couple of religious Dissenters whose revolutionary approach to life impacted greatly on the poet's future aversion towards all forms of conventional authority and institution. Due to his family's modest circumstances, he began working at fourteen as an apprentice to a well-respected engraver in the city and, at the same time, discovered an intense passion for painting

[85] Oliver, J.M. (1980) *Wordsworth's Theory of the Child's Unconscious Response to Nature in The Prelude*, p. 6.
[86] Ibidem, p. 4.

and writing poetry. While during his lifetime Blake never achieved the success he deserved as an author and artist because of his extravagant personality and progressive political ideas, he is now considered one of the most fascinating representatives of the Romantic era, one whose creativity and imaginative faculties have inspired generations of artists. In great part of Blake's work, as in that of the other Romantics mentioned above, we find a strong desire to estrange oneself from the prevailing materialist reality. Nonetheless, in Blake's case, nature as a place where the soul can find solace is replaced by an imaginary universe. According to him, imagination is the only means available to mankind to overcome the fragmentation of the contemporary world and to perceive the divine nature of existence. In his illuminated texts, such as *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, this visionary world is presented through a complex system of myths and symbols, using a language that could be defined as opaque and esoteric.

On the contrary, other poems like *The Chimney Sweeper*, *London* and *Holy Thursday* somehow contrast with this mystical tone for their striking simplicity and the straightforwardness in the way they expose the drawbacks of contemporary society. In *London*, Blake talks about the infants' constant "cry of fear" that one can hear in the streets of the capital, while in *Holy Thursday* he focuses his attention on the bleak reality of the orphans' lives by making reference to the annual ceremony held on Ascension Day, also known in England as Holy Thursday. Every year since the beginning of the eighteenth century, custom dictated that on this occasion charity children would parade through the cities, singing their gratitude to God and their Nation for the protection and education they had been given[87]. They peacefully marched in rows of two with "their innocent faces clean" (line 1), accompanied by the officers in charge of their surveillance. In his 2006 essay *The Invention of Childhood*, Hugh Cunningham thoroughly investigates this tradition from the past, explaining that England took great pride in such a blatant display of gratefulness from the destitute. What the children truly felt about all that is impossible to determine and perhaps, as Cunningham keenly observes, did not really matter to those who took credit for making them so disciplined and well-behaved[88]. While in the first part of the poem, published in 1789 in *Songs of Innocence*, Blake shares in the audience's emotion at this impressive spectacle, in the second part from *Songs of Experience* he communicates all his acumen

[87] Cunningham, H. (2006) *The Invention of Childhood.* London: BBC Books, p. 106.
[88] Ibidem, p. 107.

in identifying social and moral injustice. Here, the emphasis is on the poverty, sorrow and absence of hope that define these children's lives. He asks himself:

Is this a holy thing to see,
In a rich and fruitful land,
Babes reducd to misery,
Fed with cold and usurous hand?

Is that trembling cry a song?
Can it be a song of joy?
And so many children poor?
It is a land of poverty!

And their sun does never shine.
And their fields are bleak & bare.
And their ways are fill'd with thorns.
It is eternal winter there.

For where-e'er the sun does shine,
And where-e'er the rain does fall:
Babe can never hunger there,
Nor poverty the mind appall.

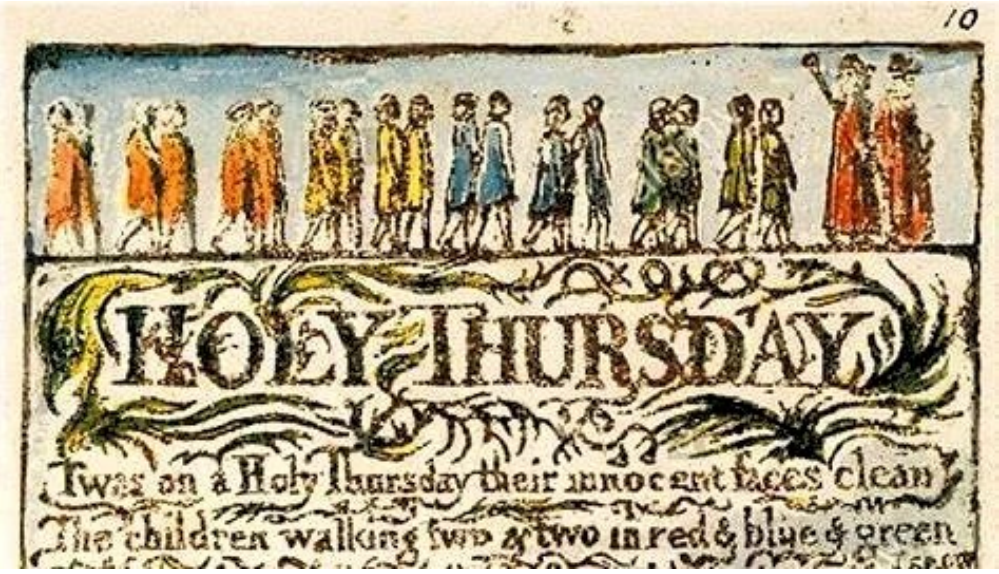

Figure 9. Close-up of the illustrations for Holy Thursday in Songs of Innocence, with charity children marching diligently behind their guardians.

Throughout his life, Blake never failed to express solidarity towards the most vulnerable both with his art and through association with political movements calling for democratic reform. Like him, many others did not remain silent in the face of injustice. For instance, the famous children's writer Jane Taylor gives us a powerful glimpse into the harsh realities experienced by the impoverished in her poem *Poverty*, whose heart-wrenching verses recount the despair of a mother who cannot provide for her cold and starving children. Noteworthy in this context is also the essay *The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers,* written by the famous essayist Charles Lamb and first published in the *London Magazine* in 1821. Through his typical erudite and elegant style, Lamb manages to convey a strong sense of humanity towards those who were normally considered as outcasts in society[89]. Elia, the speaker and pseudonym of the author, openly expresses his desire to meet "one of those tender novices, blooming through their first nigritude, the maternal washings not quite effaced from the cheek"[90], and he shows himself to be extremely kind and compassionate in their regard. Indeed, he even recognizes in their smile a sort of nobility, implying that noble character is something intrinsic to the person and cannot depend merely on social class. Even though the essay offers no real solution to the chimney sweepers' problems, its significance lies in the fact that Lamb wrote it with the purpose of restoring dignity to the poor, of portraying them as worthy of respect and generosity.

An even more ambitious goal is the one James Montgomery set for himself when, a few years later, he began recruiting those among the intellectuals of the time who were willing to contribute to a work of strong social criticism. Journalist, poet and philanthropist, Montgomery dedicated a large part of his life and literary activity to the defence of important political and humanitarian causes, including the French Revolution, the abolition of slavery and the fight against the exploitation of chimney sweeps' apprentices. His struggle against child labour culminated with the collection *The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing-Boy's Album*, published in 1824 and seeing the participation of numerous contemporary poets, prose writers and professionals. The publication contains lyrical compositions, essays and testimonies, but also medical reports, data and petitions, all aimed at illustrating the countless risks and

[89] Podmeswarbooks.com. *The Chimney Sweeper by Charles Lamb (1775-1834).* Available at: https://podmeswarbooks.blogspot.com/2017/12/the-chimney-sweeper-by-charles-lamb.html (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[90] Lamb, C. (1913) 'The Praise of Chimney Sweepers' in *Essays of Elia*. London: J.M. Dent and Sons.

disastrous consequences of employing children in such a perilous job as chimney sweeping. Moreover, the initial appeal to King George IV of England, significantly invoked as "the Father of all his people" makes the ultimate objective of the collection unmistakable: not only did its contributors want to document this gruesome situation in order to move the readers to greater compassion, but they intended to convince those in command to initiate tangible change through parliamentary reform. Although perhaps less renowned than the works mentioned in the previous sections, *The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend* deserves particular attention as it represents a perfect synthesis of all the most important elements of the spirit of English Romanticism. With its marked sentimentalism and the heroic fervour of its proponents, it is an exemplary case of how literature necessarily becomes intertwined with the historical, social and cultural context from which it originates, whilst potentially contributing to modifying it and aiding future generations in understanding it on a deeper level. In light of these considerations, the next and final chapter of this essay will be devoted to a more in-depth analysis of this collection, with particular attention also given to the life and merits of its editor, a man who made philanthropy his lifelong vocation.

4. THE PHILANTHROPIC SPIRIT OF JAMES MONTGOMERY

Figure 10. James Montgomery, 'Illustrated History of Hymns and Their Authors' by Edwin Long, c. 1882.

James Montgomery was born on November 4, 1771, in Irvine, a coastal town in Southwest Scotland. His father was John Montgomery, a Moravian pastor in charge of a small congregation, while his mother, Mary Blackley, was reported to be the daughter of a respectable member of the same community[1]. He was raised in the Moravian Church, one of the oldest Protestant denominations, officially founded in the eighteenth century but tracing its origins back to the Bohemian Reformation of the fifteenth century. Over the years, Moravians had scattered across Europe and America, where they had established several settlements in which civic and church life were deeply intertwined

[1] Everett, J., Holland, J., Montgomery, J. (1854) *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of James Montgomery: Including Selection from His Correspondence, Remains in Prose and Verse, and Conversations on Various Subjects, Volume 1*. London: Longman, Brown, Green, & Longmans, pp. 5-6.

and the passage of time was marked by daily worships and religious festivals[2]. At the age of four, a young James was taken away first to Grace Hill, a Moravian community in Ireland, and then to Fulneck, near Leeds, where he was to be trained theologically. As pointed out by one of his biographers, Jabez Marrat, this was a pivotal moment in Montgomery's life, as he was abruptly removed from the idyllic setting of the Scottish countryside and set to face the burdens of what would be a tumultuous life, filled as much with glory as with sorrow[3].

Even as a small child, the future writer showed hints of a proud and combative spirit. In one of his letters, he remembered being captivated by the ardour of the celebrations for King George's birthday, with guards "[firing] over the houses" and the people cheering from their open windows. He, an early dreamer, "got [his] little drum, and resolved to be a soldier"[4]. His resolute personality did not waver when, during his stay at Fulneck Seminary, he displayed a strong determination to become a poet. Little was his interest in his teacher's lectures about Greek, Latin, French and history; he would get lost in his imagination and use the concepts he had heard in class for his initial attempts at poetry[5]. In a letter from 1794, he recounted the circumstances under which his burning passion for literature was born, attributing his enthusiasm to the reading of a moving poem by Robert Blair:

> At school, even when I was driven like a coal ass through the Latin and Greek grammars, I was distinguished for nothing but indolence and melancholy, brought upon me by a raging and lingering fever with which I was suddenly seized one fine summer day, as I lay under a hedge with my companions, listening to our master whilst he read us some animated passages from Blair's Poem on the Grave. My happier school-fellows, born under milder planets, all fell asleep during the rehearsal; but I, who am always asleep when I ought to be waking, never dreamed of closing an eye, but eagerly caught the contagious malady; and from that ecstatic moment to the present, Heaven knows, I have never enjoyed one cheerful, one peaceful night[6].

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[2] Britannica (2024) *Moravian Church*. Available at: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Moravian-church (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[3] Marrat, J. (1879) *James Montgomery, Christian Poet and Philanthropist*. London: Wesleyan Conference Office, pp. 5-6.
[4] Everett, J., Holland, J., Montgomery, J. (1854) *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of James Montgomery,* p. 12.
[5] Marrat, J. (1879) *James Montgomery, Christian Poet and Philanthropist*, p. 12.
[6] Everett, J., Holland, J., Montgomery, J. (1854) *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of James Montgomery,* p. 39.

From this passage emerge the firsts facets of a reflective and sensitive soul, capable of being emotionally affected by the beautiful and tragic aspects of life.

In 1783, his indolence towards an education that he felt did not suit his character was compounded by the pain for the loss of his parents. The devoted Christian couple had resolved to dedicate their lives to the evangelization of the West Indies and set off for the Barbados, where the Moravian Church was organizing missions to aid the enslaved negroes of St. Thomas plantations[7]. Despite predictions of success, the inhospitable climate, hard labour and the spread of as yet undiagnosed diseases severely undermined the health of the two missionaries, who died within a few months of each other, leaving James orphaned back at home. These were for him years of great suffering; in fact, even though his parents disapproved of his desire to become a poet, Montgomery was very close to his family, and admired their faith as well as their willingness to put themselves at the service of others[8]. Alone and convinced that he did not want to become a Minister in the Moravian Church, the young man was first appointed by his guardians to work in a retail shop in Mirfield, a job he soon decided to leave to independently move to Wrath, South Yorkshire, where he was hired as an apprentice for a shopkeeper. There, Montgomery was annoyed by the monotony of a job he had only accepted because he needed the money, but his days were made lighter by the amiable relationship he established with his host family and thanks to the precious moments he managed to take for himself to cultivate his love for writing.

During his rounds delivering goods on behalf of his master, he had indeed the opportunity to enjoy the beauty of nature outside the city, to study the sway of leafy trees and the rich green of the grass, and to smell the delicate scent of the flowers[9]. It is precisely these enchanting views of the rural world that, in way similar to his Romantic contemporaries, drove him to profess his devotion to poetry. In this regard, he composed charming verses:

> O heavenly Muses! to you I consign
> Myself and my genius, with all that is mine;
> With you I can live, with you I can dwell,
> Or in the full city or eremite's cell.

[7] Marrat, J. (1879) *James Montgomery, Christian Poet and Philanthropist*, p. 23.
[8] Ibidem, p. 30.
[9] Ibidem, p. 33.

'T was in the young dawn of my reason, your rays
Illumined my path, and directed my ways
My youth you attend, though unfruitful and green,
And scarcely arrived at the goal of eighteen;
O still lead me on, if secured from death's rage,
From youth to full manhood, and glorious old age;
Though poverty chill should depress my cramped wing,
Forbid me like Homer or Milton to sing,
E'en still you can warm and enlighten my breast
If only with fancy and utterance blest.
All things are unstable -- all under the sky,
All riches, and pleasures, and honours must die;
But you shall survive, and your heavenly lay,
Though the skies shall evaporate, and earth shall decay,
In fullest perfection exalt the glad strain,
For music and poetry for ever shall reign![10]

During his time in Wath, Montgomery wrote a lot and tried multiple times to have his poems published by some local newspaper, unfortunately without any success. Luck, at least on a professional level, would start to turn in his favour only in 1792, when he moved to Sheffield to work as a clerk in a counting-house[11].

Just a few years after the French Revolution, the city of Sheffield was a lively place, witnessing political upheaval in the form of heated clashes between opposing factions of thought. At twenty-three, an enthusiastic James Montgomery passionately took the side of those defending the revolutionary values of liberty, equality and fraternity[12]. Throughout his life, the poet would always be a staunch supporter of individual freedom and the rights of the unprivileged; yet, his Christian upbringing would urge him to express himself with moderation and avoid all kinds of extremism. In the words of Marrat, he always presented himself to the public "rather as a philanthropist than as a partisan"[13], and this was his attitude when he replaced journalist Joseph Gales as director of the local newspaper *Sheffield's Register.* The periodical, which Montgomery re-founded as *The Iris*, championed liberal ideas and stated its allegiance to the Constitution in its pure form, while at the same time criticizing

[10] Montgomery, J. as cited in Marrat, J. (1879) *James Montgomery, Christian Poet and Philanthropist*, p. 32.
[11] Marrat, J. (1879) *James Montgomery, Christian Poet and Philanthropist*, p. 36.
[12] Ibidem, p. 40.
[13] Ibidem, p. 42.

militarism and political violence[14]. Despite its pacifist stance, the articles featured in *The Iris* were not well-received by the conservative authorities who, terrified by the danger of rampant radicalism, used any pretext to cast the publisher in a negative light. Between 1795 and 1796, Montgomery was incarcerated twice on charges of sedition, spending a total of nine months in York Castle prison, and having to pay two fines of £20 and £30[15]. From his cell, he wrote to a friend:

> My time, on the whole, passes away in a smooth and easy manner. I employ myself in reading, writing, walking, &c., and never, on the whole, enjoyed better spirits in my life. My friends at Sheffield are become almost enthusiastic in my favour; their number is greatly increased: my enemies are silent, and many of the most bitter have relented: […] My business, which I confess was and is my greatest cause of concern and anxiety, on account of its intricacy, and the care required in its management, has hitherto gone on with almost unprecedented smoothness and success[16].

As is evident from this excerpt, although Montgomery had to face considerable difficulties, the prison sentences he endured only appeared to increase public recognition of him as an enlightened intellectual and active contributor to his community.

In the following years, Montgomery published several lyrical works among which are *Prison Amusements*, a series of compositions in which he reflected on his experience in confinement, and *Wanderer of Switzerland*, a long poem where the sensations aroused by the sight of majestic alpine landscapes intertwine with considerations on the historical events surrounding Napoleon's advance in Europe. Of particular interest is also *The West Indies*, written in celebration of the abolition of slave trade approved by the British Parliament in 1807. In this piece, too, a strong fascination with the uncontaminated nature of the Caribbean blends with the author's fierce philanthropic spirit. Being the son of two martyrs who had selflessly given their lives for a humanitarian cause, Montgomery could not help but express his admiration for the committed missionaries who spread the Church's message of peace in those distant countries:

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[14] SheffieldHistory.co.uk (2010*) James Montgomery & The 'Sheffield Iris', 1792-1825*. Available at: https://www.sheffieldhistory.co.uk/forums/topic/9215-james-montgomery-38-the-39sheffield-iris39-1792-1825/ (Accessed: 23 March 2024).

[15] Ibidem.

[16] Montgomery, J. as cited in Everett, J., Holland, J., Montgomery, J. (1854) *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of James Montgomery,* p. 262.

And thou, poor negro! scorned of all mankind;
Thou dumb and impotent, and deaf and blind;
Thou dead in spirit! toil-degraded slave,
Crushed by the curse on Adam to the grave;
The messengers of peace, o'er land and sea,
That sought the sons of sorrow, stooped to thee;
The captive raised his slow and sullen eye;
He knew no friend, nor deemed a friend was nigh,
Till the sweet tones of pity touched his ears,
And mercy bathed his bosom with her tears.
Strange were those tones, to him those tears were
strange;
He wept, and wondered at the mighty change,
Felt the quick pang of keen compunction dart,
And heard a still small whisper in his heart,
A voice from heaven, that bade the outcast rise
From shame on earth to glory in the skies![17]

Among the poems composed by Montgomery on the abolition of slavery in the British colonies, it is also worth recalling *The Rainbow, Slavery that was* and *Slavery that is not*, in which the right to freedom is strongly advocated and juxtaposed with the unnaturalness of the slave's condition.

One final mention should be made of *The World before the Flood*, perhaps the poem to which Montgomery owes his fame more than any other, written in 1813 and infused with profound religiosity. In fact, even though Montgomery had long broken ties with the Moravian Church, his faith remained strong, as strong was his suffering from the absence of a community with whom he could share his beliefs. In a letter to his friend Mr. Aston he admitted feeling "the Christian's sufferings without the Christian's hope of that eternal weight of glory which shall reward them"[18]. He assumed he was destined for "eternal damnation", as the education he had received made it impossible for him to be content "under any other form of religion than that which [he] imbibed with [his] mother's milk", but at the same time his "wild and ungovernable imaginative mind" had caused him to break loose "from the anchor of faith"[19]. Eager to give back meaning to his life, in 1814 Montgomery reconciled with the Church of his parents, and

[17] Ibidem, p. 77.
[18] Marrat, J. (1879) *James Montgomery, Christian Poet and Philanthropist*, p. 91.
[19] Ibidem, p. 92.

here finally felt he had found his place. He participated in numerous meetings organized by Moravian volunteers in the Sunday Schools of Sheffield, and for a number of years he even worked as a teacher every Saturday, happy to bring some hope to those in need.

It was precisely this strong Christian piety that, in 1824, motivated Montgomery to take on the challenge of editing and publishing *The Chimney Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing Boy's Album*, aimed at exposing the misery of one of the most marginalized and neglected groups in society, that of young sweeps. Besides, for several years he had already been part of a committee for the improvement of living conditions within this category, actively volunteering in charity work and extensively discussing the "national crime"[20] of employing climbing boys in his newspaper. In 1825, Montgomery stepped down from the leadership of *The Iris*, but nevertheless continued to write socially conscious poetry and prose till the end of his life, while simultaneously offering his contribution to the several charities whose efforts he had so generously praised in the pages of his publication. In the summer of 1836, a complete collection of his poetical works appeared in three volumes, earning him appreciation from multiple eminent personalities in the Romantic milieu. William Wordsworth, for instance, communicated his interest and admiration for the Scottish poet in a friendly letter, to which he kindly attached a copy of the new edition of his works:

> I can assure you with truth, that from the time I first read your *Wanderer of Switzerland*, with the little pieces annexed, I have felt a lively interest in your destiny as a poet; and though much out of the way of new books, I have become acquainted with your works, and with increasing pleasure, as they successively appeared. […] In admiration of genius, and as a grateful token of profound respect for the pure and sacred uses to which that genius has been devoted, these volumes are offered to James Montgomery by his sincere friend, William Wordsworth[21].

Montgomery's poetical gifts were also celebrated by Hartley Coleridge in a heartfelt and flattering sonnet, in which the Sheffield writer is acclaimed as a "Christian bard":

> 'Poets there are, whom I am well content
> Only to see in mirror of their verse,
> Feeling their very presence might disperse
> The glorious vision which their lives present:

[20] Griswold, R.W. and Montgomery, J. (1853) *Poetical Works of James Montgomery, Volume 2*. Boston: Phillips, Sampson and Company, p. 30.
[21] Wordsworth, W. as cited in Holland, J. (1856) *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of James Montgomery, Volume 5*. London: Longman, Brown, Green, & Longmans, p. 203.

But never could my shaping wit invent
  An image worthy of a Christian bard,
  Such as thou art - but ever would discard
Conceit too earthy and irreverent
To be thy likeness. Therefore I regret
  The fate or fault, or whatsoe'er it be,
Hath made thy holy lineament as yet
  A vague imagination unto me,
I more should love and better understand
Thy verse, could I but hold thee by thy hand[22].

For his services to British literature and with formal approval of well-respected figures such as poet Robert Southey and historian Sharon Turner, in 1835 Montgomery was granted a Royal pension of £150 a year. Tenacious, compassionate and kind-hearted, he passed into history as the "poet of Christian missions"[23] and, even after his death in 1854, the memory of his contributions as a writer and philanthropist earned him a place of honour among those "genuine British writers" who were not afraid to speak out in favour of "a poor and afflicted people"[24].

4.1. The origins of his volume

"Before the indefatigable energies of these champions, united in a patriotic cause, neither this nor any other factitious evil could exist twelve months"[25]. These are the powerful words employed by James Montgomery in the preface to *The Chimney Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing Boy's Album* to describe the determination and ardour of his collaborators who fought daily against the crimes of a corrupt and indifferent society. In fact, although it is the name of the Scottish author that appears on the title-page of the collection, he was certainly not alone in his battle. On the contrary, numerous were the benefactors and intellectuals who offered their contribution to the realization of the volume and, more in general, who actively participated in the intense campaign for the abolition of climbing boys that was inflaming Sheffield in those years. First and foremost is Samuel Roberts, an enlightened entrepreneur whom Montgomery

[22] Coleridge, H. as cited in Marrat, J. (1879) *James Montgomery, Christian Poet and Philanthropist*, p. 130.
[23] Marrat, J. (1879) *James Montgomery, Christian Poet and Philanthropist,* p. 129.
[24] Montgomery, J. (1824) *The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing Boy's Album*. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, preface.
[25] Ibidem.

immediately identifies as the real projector of the work. In the very first page, the poet reveals having been "urged by a public-spirited friend to join in the plan" and having had "no heart to refuse"[26]. Mr. Roberts was a local silverware manufacturer, highly regarded in Sheffield as one of those prominent individuals to which the city owed its prestigious reputation in metalwork. Visionary and deeply passionate about his craft, Roberts was involved in charity and local administration[27]. Together with Montgomery, he was at the head of the Sheffield Society for abolishing the use of Climbing Boys and bettering the conditions of Chimney-Sweepers' Apprentices, founded in 1807 with the aim of safeguarding the rights of the "infantine and juvenile victims of so unnatural a practice"[28]. The association promoted local initiatives to enhance children's welfare, it fostered their education by supporting Sunday Schools in the city, and its members were even engaged in projects to develop an effective machine that could replace climbing boys in their tasks[29].

Unfortunately, we cannot know for certain who the other members of the Society were. As Van Manen confirms in his extensive dissertation on climbing boy campaigns in Britain, no document reporting the names of the subscribers has survived. Yet, some assumptions about the affiliations to the organization could be made based on the signatories of the petitions it promoted. Among them were cutlers, booksellers, printers, stationers, clergymen, bankers, attorneys and textile industrialists[30], with different political ideas but united in the spirit of humanitarianism. In this context, special attention should be paid to the role of cutlers and silverware manufacturers; in fact, the Cutler's Company of Sheffield was renowned for its charitable activities and its generosity in hosting events for the relief of young sweeps[31]. While the representatives of the middle class were numerous, there is no evidence of the involvement of aristocrats in any of the undertakings of the Society[32].

Going back to Roberts, among his merits is also the drafting of the *Resolutions and Petition to Parliament, Respecting Children Employed by Chimney Sweepers as Climbing Boys, Agreed Upon at a Public Meeting of the Inhabitants of Sheffield*, first

[26] Ibidem.
[27] Van Manen, N. (2010) *The Climbing Boys Campaigns in Britain,* p. 85.
[28] Griswold, R.W. and Montgomery, J. (1853) *Poetical Works of James Montgomery,* p. 29.
[29] Van Manen, N. (2010) *The Climbing Boys Campaigns in Britain*, p. 86.
[30] Ibidem, p. 83.
[31] Ibidem.
[32] Ibidem, p. 84.

presented to the public in March 1817. In the preceding ten years of work, the directors of the Sheffield Society had realized that all efforts to improve the conditions of climbing boys were futile if not supported by concrete legislative intervention. Too many obstacles had been encountered, most of them determined by the fact that the government supported the interests of master chimney sweeps and service users instead of being concerned about the risks faced by the children involved[33]. In 1817, a large gathering was organized in Sheffield to garner approval from the townspeople so that the cause could be brought before the House of Commons. The daunting responsibility of submitting the petition to Parliament was taken on by Lord Milton, 4th Earl Fitzwilliam, whose charismatic qualities, according to Montgomery, were so effective in moving his audience to compassion that a Committee to investigate the situation was immediately established[34]. The results of the inquiries, along with more petitions from other sources, prompted MPs to draft an Act for the Suppression of Climbing Boys (and girls[35]). Unfortunately, however, the approval of the Bill was postponed multiple times because of alleged "technical difficulties"[36]. Montgomery is quite displeased when he explains that, in 1819, the draft was "summarily thrown out" following "some very strange discussion"[37]. As stated by the philanthropist, two were the main reasons for this failure, the first being related to the content of the Bill. Legal authorities had in fact raised serious doubts whether more attention should be devoted to old chimneys or to young children in the process of creating a law. The chimneys were described as "inveterately crooked" and thus unfixable, whereas it was implied that children could easily become physically crooked due to the contorted positions they were forced into while practicing their job[38]. The second reason, which is depicted as even more nonsensical, is reported by Montgomery using the very words of the noble Earl who articulated it:

> I might illustrate the confined humanity of the supporters of this measure, by repeating a story, commonly told in Ireland. It was usual in that country to sweep chimneys by tying a string to the leg of a goose, and dragging the unfortunate bird down the chimney. This practice was reprobated by many humane persons, who

[33] Griswold, R.W. and Montgomery, J. (1853) *Poetical Works of James Montgomery,* p. 29.
[34] Ibidem.
[35] In the preface of *The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing Boy's Album,* Montgomery attests the documented presence of girls in the profession.
[36] Griswold, R.W. and Montgomery, J. (1853) *Poetical Works of James Montgomery,* p. 30.
[37] Ibidem.
[38] Ibidem.

> looked upon the goose as very ill-treated; but an honest Irishman having asked what he should use instead of the goose, one of the humane gentlemen replied, *'Why don't you get a couple of ducks?'*— Such was the humanity that dictated this measure, which, dwelling on the sufferings of the Climbing Boys, forgot every care for the safety of society, which, considering the few children employed in sweeping chimneys, threw out of its protection the many children who should be exposed to the hazards of fire, and to be tossed out of the windows[39].

Figure 11. Engraving by Georg Cruikshank for 'The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend' illustrating the offensive narrative in which climbing boys are compared to geese and ducks.

This anecdote was used to highlight the shortsightedness of those supporting the measure in focusing solely on the immediate suffering of the climbing boys while neglecting broader societal concerns. The paragraph suggests that compassion towards chimney sweeps, while important, should not overshadow the greater potential risks posed to society as a whole if this practice is not carried out adequately anymore. As absurd as it may sound, Montgomery explains, this "story commonly told in Ireland" made the atmosphere in the rooms of Parliament so light and cheerful that the Bill was immediately "tossed out of the window"[40].

The realization of the volume here discussed is also listed among the many initiatives promoted by Samuel Roberts with the purpose of gathering support for the new legislation, and by no coincidence was its editorship entrusted to James Montgomery. In fact, the poet had been director of the Sheffield Literary and

[39] Ibidem.
[40] Ibidem.

Philosophical Society since 1822, when he himself had founded it, and was therefore well-connected and appreciated in the city's literary circles, with the possibility of recruiting contributors from within the membership of his association[41]. Together with Roberts, it was decided to arrange a collection divided into two main sections: the first part, which included a selection of tracts and documents collected during the seventeen years of work of the Society, presented the gruesome reality of chimney sweeping through authentic accounts and parliamentary evidence. The second part consisted of poems, tales and essays written by "living authors of distinction" specifically for the occasion (with only two exceptions)[42]. In the preface, Montgomery recounts having turned to a total of twenty illustrious writers of the day, out of whom only eight sent him publishable material. The remaining compositions were provided by trusted friends of the editor who, while being perhaps less known to the public, were certainly equally passionate about the cause. Sometimes, these more obscure authors are indicated only by their initials in the signature of their works, which complicates the task of uncovering their identity. Nevertheless, to both the latter and the former category of writers was Montgomery deeply grateful, as he was profoundly thankful to the man who had "magnanimously" accepted to become the patron of the London Society for abolishing the use of Climbing-Boys in sweeping chimneys and to which the volume was dedicated[43]. As previously mentioned, the man in question was King George IV of England, whose involvement in the project, however symbolic, helps us understand the enormous significance of the campaign.

4.2. *The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend*: on exposing the harrowing conditions of climbing boys

Following a brief letter signed by Viscount Sidmouth in which the patronage of George IV over the London Society is officially attested, the collection opens with a composition written by a certain M.R. expressively in praise of and appealing to His Majesty. Through vivid natural imagery and biblical references, the poet depicts the sovereignty and benevolence of God, drawing parallels between the majestic force of the Lord and the divine attributes of the King. The poem begins with an idyllic

[41] Van Manen, N. (2010) *The Climbing Boys Campaigns in Britain*, p. 85.
[42] Montgomery, J. (1824) *The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing Boy's Album*, preface.
[43] Ibidem.

description of natural phenomena: the torrent "[gliding] along the dell" (line 4), its waters "[cheering] the little hills / And [feeding] the nectar'd bell" (lines 6-7); the clouds launching lightning and rain to make the flowers bloom, and the ocean over which the mythical halcyon birds fly serenely, soothing the winds and waves into tranquillity[44]. The author then proceeds to proclaim the greatness and authority of God, who has the power to direct the whirlwinds, command the storms and place the "glorious" rainbow in the sky (line 33). In addition, the mention of him opening his "wide hand" (line 39) to feed the eagle's offspring is highly evocative of his care and generosity towards all earthly creatures. In the last stanza, the same compassion is humbly requested of King George IV, described by Montgomery in a footnote as the monarch who more than any of his predecessors had felt alive "to the sufferings and welfare of others"[45]. In the poem, his mercy and protection are implored for "the friendless and the weak" (line 50), those "infants in despair" (line 53) who toil as climbing boys in England's chimneys.

None of the bucolic elements that pervade the first poem are retained in the rest of the first section of the collection, which continues instead with an extensive essay on the circumstances surrounding the employment of climbing boys throughout the country. The author, one S.R. whose identity unfortunately remains undisclosed, begins with a rosy description of contemporary Britain, highlighting its abundance of raw materials, its economic prosperity and the good spirits of its citizens[46]. He affirms with confidence that "never was there a nation so blessed as Great Britain" and that "never was Great Britain so prosperous as at this moment"[47]. Here, even the poorest are not forgotten, thanks to the magnanimous work of numerous Christian charities and the generosity of the monarchs who rule with mercy and justice, "firmly enthroned in the hearts of an affectioned people"[48]. Britain is praised for having discarded almost every practice which is immoral or unfair, and the projectors of the collection hope that it will continue on this path towards the eradication of all iniquities. At this point, the issue of child chimney sweeps is introduced as one of those rare cases in which the loud cry for

[44] GreekMyths-Greekmythology.com. *The Myth of Halcyon – Halcyon Days*. Available at: https://www.greekmyths-greekmythology.com/the-myth-of-halcyon-the-halcyon-days/. (Accessed: 23 March 2024).
[45] Montgomery, J. (1824) *The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing Boy's Album,* p. 3.
[46] Ibidem, p. 8.
[47] Ibidem.
[48] Ibidem.

help from the weak is still largely disregarded and their sufferings diminished. The author's pride in the achievement of his nation is quickly transformed into a profound indignation as he portrays the condition of these children as worse than that of African slaves. In fact, while the latter were condemned to a life of exploitation by foreigners, climbing boys were kidnapped by their own countrymen, or worse, sold into the job by their own parents. Moreover, the labour of the "negroes" was hardly as harsh as chimney sweeping, whose destructive effects were relentlessly endured by these "tender infants" at home[49]. Regarding the tribulations of the "British Slaves", S.R. writes:

> They are deprived of that natural rest which is so essential to the health and strength of children. They are continually exposed to the most dreadful and fatal accidents. They have their flesh torn by the sharp points of projecting stones or lime; they are frequently wedged, unable to move, and almost suffocated with soot, in narrow and crooked flues; they are often falling down those which are too wide for them. They have been sent up chimneys while the fire was in the grate, to force their way through the heated soot. They have been scalded by steam arising from water thoughtlessly thrown into the fire below; nay they have not unfrequently been compelled to ascend and descend chimneys when on fire, sometimes perishing in the attempt. They have been precipitated from the tops of high chimneys in the loosened pots, and dashed upon the pavement below. They have been slowly roasted to death in the flue of an oven. They have been dug dead out of the sides of chimneys, in which they have been stuck fast, suffocating for hours. They have been extricated from places in which they were fastened, by means of ropes and iron crows, life itself having been the price of the rude operation[50].

Especially severe is also the writer's disappointment with the authorities, accused of having long downplayed the issue and of having failed to recognize its gravity. Once again, the derisive attitude displayed by the "noble Earl" in the House of Lords is brought into play:

> This really is inconceivable - incredible! It is not that the subject has escaped the vigilant eye of the legislature; it has been pressed - it has been forced upon it, it has undergone the strictest investigation that could be bestowed upon it, and the worst consequences have been stated; viz. that perhaps one or two chimneys in a hundred must be altered a little, which, after that investigation, has been declared to be all the loss and evil that could be apprehended from the total abolition of this most inhuman of all practices. Nay, so convinced were the legislators of the fact, that the bill for the

[49] Ibidem p. 12.
[50] Ibidem, pp. 14-15.

> abolition passed, almost without opposition, through one house, and would, in all probability, have passed through the other, had it not been turned into ridicule by one of the noble lords, who loved his jest better than he seemed to love little children. So children perished that senators might laugh![51]

To support the necessity of prohibiting a practice considered barbaric and inhumane, detailed evidence was provided in the subsequent documents of the collection, demonstrating how this occupation was unsuitable for any human being at any age. In *Instances of Oppression and Cruelty*, a total of twenty-six cases are listed, documenting the deaths, sufferings, and abuses experienced by young chimney sweepers on a daily basis. Although the tragic stories of some unfortunate climbing boys have already been recounted in the second chapter, it is crucial in this context to examine a couple of the testimonies reported by Montgomery, as they can help us better understand the dynamics of the problem and how the situation was inappropriately handled by the judicial system. First and foremost, there are several cases that vividly illustrate how easy it was to become trapped in the narrow flues due to the intricate structure of nineteenth-century chimneys. One witness recounts assisting an eleven-year-old chimney sweep on a cold winter night:

> I attended him all the time; having finished this, he went up the chimney in the back two pair of stairs room; he did not say anything till he got up to the top of it; then he hallooed out, as is usual; I hallooed up the chimney to him, and desired him to do it clean down. […] I hallooed up to him, to know why he did not, and he did not answer. I hallooed twice again, and then he cried out, "he had stuck". […] On this I ran immediately to my master, to get another boy, and my master and the other boy came directly. My master immediately put this boy up the same two pair of stairs chimney; he went up a little way, and returned in a minute, and he said Holt answered him, and was in a chimney down below. We instantly tried the one pair of stairs chimney, and found it was not that. We then tried the back parlour chimney, by hallooing, but he did not answer. We then put the boy up this chimney, and he told us that Holt answered him. My master and I then went into the back yard, and directed the second boy to remain in the chimney, in order to know. A bricklayer was procured without any delay, and he, with our assistance, broke a hole in the chimney, in the part where the second boy knocked at, who was inside. He then told us that Holt must be up higher. We immediately broke another hole about a yard and a half

[51] Ibidem, pp. 15-16.

> higher, and my master, who was on the ladder, looked in, and immediately exclaimed, "Oh, dear! The boy is dead"[52].

As is evident, the passages these children had to navigate were so cramped and labyrinthine that not only was it extremely common to get stuck in them, but it was also incredibly difficult to render timely assistance.

Other examples describe fatalities caused by the excessively high temperatures in the chimneys, lack of proper care and prolonged exposure to the elements. What is particularly interesting about these cases are the verdicts of the coroners in the face of each death. Most of them were in fact dismissed as accidents, with the children declared to have "Accidentally suffocated", "Died from the inclemency of the weather" or "by misfortune". The evasive conduct of the authorities is made manifest from these judgements, as they overlooked the central issue that these "accidents" could have been avoided if the children in question had not been forced to undertake such a degrading task. A clear sign of this denial attitude is also the laxity in punishing the guardians of the climbing boys should there be evidence of mistreatment and violence. While there are documented instances where masters showed common sense and somehow demonstrated concern for their apprentices' safety[53], the majority were sadistic individuals, eager to worsen the children's already unimaginable sufferings with their brutal beatings. In one of the testimonies, it is stated:

> In the beginning of the year 1808, a chimney-sweeper's boy being employed to sweep a chimney in Marsh Street, Walthamstow, in the house of Mr. Jeffery, carpenter, unfortunately in his attempt to get down, stuck in the flue, and was unable to extricate himself. Mrs. Jeffery, being within hearing of the boy, immediately procured assistance. […] the boy was taken out in about ten minutes […] His master was sent for, and he arrived soon after the boy had been released. He abused him for the accident, and after striking him, sent him with a bag of soot to sweep another chimney. The child appeared so very weak when taken out that he could scarcely stand, and yet this wretched being, who had been up ever since three o'clock, had before been sent by his master to Wanstead, which, with his walk to Marsh Street, made about five miles[54].

Or again:

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[52] Montgomery, J. (1824) *The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing Boy's Album*, p. 32.
[53] Case II reports the story of James Dunn, master chimney-sweeper, who realized a particular chimney was too dangerous to climb and therefore refused to let his apprentice get into the flue.
[54] Montgomery, J. (1824) *The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing Boy's Album*, pp. 29-30.

> At the Dublin Sessions, T. Young, a master-sweep, was indicted at the instance of the Lord Mayor, for extreme cruelty to his apprentice. The boy was examined on oath, in the arms of a nurse; he appeared, from excessive torture, hardly able to speak; he said, that he lived with the prisoner as an apprentice; that the prisoner used to burn straw and powder under him, to make him go up the chimneys quick; and used to pull him down by a cord tied to his leg; it was this cruelty that caused the sores, which prevented him from going up the chimneys when ordered. The prisoner has often thrown him into a tub of water, in order to make his sores pain him[55].

In the second instance, after the poor boy's statement was corroborated by that of other witnesses, the defendant was fined £50 and sentenced to two years in prison, but multiple were the accounts where the accused were acquitted or not even brought to trial. In this regard, the case of Mr. Moles and his wife is reported, who were tried on May 31, 1816, for beating six-year-old John Hewley to death[56]. They were both declared innocent of the crime of murder, and only the husband was detained to face the court for misdemeanour.

In the following paragraphs, two more documents belonging to the first section of the collection will be taken into consideration, included by Montgomery in the volume as they shed light on two delicate issues related to the employment of sweeper boys which were deemed as absolutely unacceptable by the contributors of the *Chimney-Sweeper's Friend.* The first record is a chronicle which had appeared in the Boston Gazette in 1812, narrating the true story of Mary Davis, a mother whose child was kidnapped to work as a chimney sweep. Mary's story is one like many others, depicting a young woman abandoned by her husband after he had to depart for military service, afflicted by poverty and overwhelmed by the responsibility of having to raise a baby on her own. The author of the account seems to deliberately appeal to the maternal sentiment of his readers when he describes the intense sufferings of this mother, which are somehow alleviated by the boundless love she feels for her offspring. Similarly, the ultimate purpose is that of moving the public to compassion when it is dramatically announced that the child, being only seven years old, was heartlessly torn away from his mother by an evil nursemaid, who kidnapped him while the woman was at work. "Could a weakened, human, female frame, support all this and live?"[57], asks the writer.

[55] Ibidem, p. 40.
[56] Ibidem, p. 37.
[57] Ibidem, p. 52.

Yet, just when it appears that all hope is lost, a “feeble” ray of sunshine sets on Mary’s midnight gloom: she is informed that the delinquent who had taken the boy was a native of Leeds. Despite the fatigue and the stinging cold, and without either friends or support, Mary embarks on a perilous journey and is rewarded when, in a small inn, she recognizes her lost little boy in one of the chimney sweeps sitting by the fireplace. The despair they had both felt just moments before is immediately replaced by the greatest joy imaginable and their fortune only increases after the events are made public, as many kind-hearted souls decide to financially help the couple live a dignified and happy life.

Figure 12. Engraving by Georg Cruikshank on the opening page of 'The Chimney Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing Boy's Album’.

Mary’s story, which was purposefully romanticized to some extent, leverages on some of the deepest sentiments that define our being human: a mother’s love for her child, the pain of seeing one’s baby taken away, and the solidarity towards the vulnerable, all of which leads the readers to empathize with the woman and to root for her in her mission of reuniting with her family. The themes of the abduction and illegal sale of children into the job of chimney sweeping recurs several times in the collection, both in the pleas of the petitioners and in the lyrical compositions, and it is used strategically with the purpose of eliciting maximum public dismay. Noteworthy in this context is the poem *The Stolen Child* by Ann Gilbert, which appears in the second section of the volume and recounts the experiences of a four-year-old climbing boy in Bridlington, Yorkshire, whose manners were so polite and refined that the townspeople

became convinced he had been kidnapped from some aristocratic family. A similar allusion had already been made by Charles Lamb in his *Praise of Chimney Sweepers* when, in speaking of the "nobility" he saw in some climbing boys' soot-stained faces, he subtly suggested that they were really little aristocrats abducted from their luxurious homes[58].

The second document to be taken into account is an excerpt from Dr. Buchan's book *Advice to Mothers, on the subject of their own health, and on the means of promoting the health, strength, and beauty, of their offspring*. Intended to provide all-encompassing guidance for women in all stages and circumstances of motherhood, the volume contains an entire chapter devoted to the effects of unfavourable employments on the development and health of children, with chimney sweeping standing out among the most dangerous occupations. The author feels such intense pity for these "poor souls" that he affirms he would be mistaken "if any creature can exist in a state of greater wretchedness, or is a juster object of commiseration than a boy forced to clean chimneys in this country"[59]. Buchan takes firm position against those who believe the toil of climbing boys is necessary, asserting instead to have witnessed people in other nations using far more efficient methods for chimney cleaning that posed no risk to anyone's life. He, too, appeals to the humanity of his readers and of magnanimous politicians, hoping they can be moved by learning about what these children must endure, namely injuries, risk of deformities and terrible "maladies unknown to the rest of mankind". In particular, there is one disease that is mentioned as especially "painful in all its attacks" and "most certainly destructive in its event"[60]: the so-called soot-wart, subsequently renamed as chimney-sweeper's cancer.

The topic of occupational illness was widely employed in philanthropic rhetoric to influence the public in the direction of climbing boys' reform. In his essay, Dr. Buchan makes reference to Dr. Percival Pott who, in his *Chirurgical Observation*s from 1775, first defined the causes of the chimney-sweeper's cancer of the scrotum, describing it as a "cancerous irritation caused by soot, not a venereal disease, as had long been assumed […]; it was a local irritation that could be effectively removed by

[58] Podmeswarbooks.com. *The Chimney Sweeper by Charles Lamb (1775-1834).*
[59] Montgomery, J. (1824) *The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing Boy's Album*, p. 70.
[60] Ibidem, p. 76.

operation, if surgery was conducted early"[61]. Pott's assertions find confirmation in the works of several other eighteenth-century authors, one of them being Jonas Hanway, the champion of little sweeps' rights already mentioned in the previous chapter. In his *A Sentimental History of Chimney Sweepers in London & Westminster*, Hanway told his readers:

> If I am rightly informed, the climbing frequently occasions great heat in the scrotum, which if irritated by friction brings on cancerous disorders. I have heard of four such, who were attended in one workhouse at one time. This disorder might probably be prevented by proper precautions. Constant lavations when they return home from their work, must be of great moment to them[62].

In a similar way, enlightened master chimney sweep David Porter asserted:

> It affects the scrotum first by small pimples with violent itching, which is increased by rubbing, and soon becomes an ulcer, and grows into an incurable cancer: it drains the patient of his juices, and commonly terminates in his death. Medical gentlemen think the cause is obstructed perspiration, from being too seldom washed, and too thinly clad. I am inclined to their opinion from none of my apprentices having ever had any symptoms of it[63].

Although quite effective from a political point of view, these early examples of philanthropic literature on the matter usually remained quite vague and were not supported by appropriate medical evidence[64]. The approach to work-related diseases changed during the nineteenth century, as reformists began to realize the importance of employing authentic documentation to corroborate their arguments and make them more convincing. For instance, the London Society for Superseding the Necessity of Climbing Boys started engaging in extensive correspondence with various medical practitioners and apothecaries, relying in particular on the expertise of one Dr. Wright, surgeon at Guy's and St. Bart's hospitals. Among the chimney sweeps he visited, Wright identified recurrent cases of cancer, deformity, eye inflammations, respiratory diseases,

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[61] Pott, P. (1775), *Chirurgical Observations Relative to the Cataract, the Polypus of the Nose, the Cancer of the Scrotum, the Different Kinds of Ruptures, and the Mortification of the Toes and Feet, Volume 3*, p. 177.

[62] Hanway, J. (1785) *A Sentimental History of Chimney Sweepers, in London & Westminster, Shewing the Necessity of putting Them under Regulations to Prevent the grossest Inhumanity to the Climbing Boys. With a Letter to a London Clergyman on Sunday Schools calculated for the preservation of the Children of the Poor.* London, pp. 27-28,

[63] Porter, D. (1801) as cited in Van Manen, N. (2010) *The Climbing Boys Campaigns in Britain,* pp. 305-306.

[64] Van Manen, N. (2010) *The Climbing Boys Campaigns in Britain,* p. 306.

burns, developmental delays and other disorders resulting from inadequate diet, clothing and housing[65]. Further north, the Sheffield Society for abolishing the use of Climbing Boys also began to enlist the contributions of competent doctors for its initiatives, and the inclusion of Dr. Buchan's intervention in *The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend* is a perfect example of this.

The backing of medicine helped make the allegations of torture and mistreatment against children more arduous to deny and facilitated the presentation of the most severe cases to the magistrates. Moreover, many of these doctors' letters, accounts of hearings and reports of coroners' investigations were instrumentally used in petitions or directly submitted to parliamentary committees, with the aim of affecting legislation[66]. The remaining part of the first section of Montgomery's work contains the copies of several reports and petitions signed by various groups supporting the proposed measures which, in light of the considerations discussed in this chapter, urged the government representatives "not to shut [their] ears against the cry of the oppressed"[67] and to consider switching to alternative sweeping methods and ending the agony of these small boys. In particular, among the included pamphlets were a *London Petition to Parliament*, a *Petition of the Company of Cutlers within Hallamshire*, *Dr. Lushington's Speech in support of the Bill for the better regulation of Chimney-Sweepers and their Apprentices*, and a *Report from the Committee of the House of Commons*. All these documents possess essential significance in documenting the widespread progressive disposition among numerous intellectuals and businessmen of the time, and they represent milestones towards the ultimate eradication of the child chimney sweep phenomenon, which will occur in the second part of the nineteenth century.

4.3. *The Climbing-Boy's Album*: poetic responses to child exploitation

4.3.1. On versifying children's sufferings

If Montgomery received several positive responses to his request to contribute a sonnet or an elegy for his collection, it is also important to note that his hope of including some of the most "distinguished characters" of his time among the signatories of *The*

[65] Ibidem, p. 307.
[66] Ibidem, p. 308.
[67] Ibidem, p. 87.

Chimney-Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing Boy's Album was not entirely fulfilled. In the preface to the volume, the editor expresses genuine gratitude to those who, while in favour of the emancipation of climbing boys, had not directly offered their literary subscription. Among them were Sir Walter Scott, Joanna Baillie, Wordsworth, Samuel Rogers, Thomas Moore and Charles Lamb. As stated by Montgomery himself, the reason for such refusal was the belief that poetry could not be the most suitable means to address such a "grave subject of utility" as the plight of climbing boys[68]. To Montgomery's letter in 1824, Baillie answered:

> It is very gratifying to me that you have thought me capable of assisting the good cause you have in hand; and you do me justice in supposing that I am friendly to it. But with what heart shall I do your bidding, since after having considered your benevolent plan, as well as I am able, I feel myself completely convinced that it will not serve your poor climbing-boys half so essentially as one poem of some length written by yourself… Nay, you must pardon me for being so presumptuous as to say that poetry, even from your pen or that of any of our most distinguished Poets, would not be so useful to [climbing boys] as a plain statement of their miserable lot in prose, accompanied with a simple, reasonable plan for sweeping chimneys without them… There is a jealousy in people's minds regarding everything that is told them in verse, & or everything which in that garb attempts to work upon the feelings[69].

And again, in a second letter:

> …you forget that I firmly believe any verses whatever would do harm instead of good. Even when I recommended it to you to write one longer poem in behalf of your Boys instead of gathering a number of shorter ones from various Authors, it was not that I thought it would do any good, but only less harm. It is just the very way to have the whole matter considered by the sober pot-boilers over the whole kingdom as a fanciful & visionary thing[70].

The Scottish poetess was convinced that a versification of the sufferings of child chimney sweepers would have rendered the topic too picturesque and romantic, thus making it more difficult for the public to approach the matter with the required

[68] Scott, W. as cited in Slagle, J.B. (2012) 'Literary Activism: James Montgomery, Joanna Baillie, and the Plight of Britain's Chimney Sweeps', *Studies in Romanticism*, 51(1), p. 61.
[69] Baillie, J. as cited in Holland, J. and Montgomery, J. (1855) *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of James Montgomery, Volume 4*. London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, p. 60.
[70] Baillie, J. as cited in Slagle, J.B. (2012) 'Literary Activism', p. 67.

seriousness. Instead of a poem, she sent "in plain simple prose"[71] an account detailing the "old Scottish mode of sweeping chimneys by means of a rope and a bunch of heather, or bushes, worked up and down the flue, between a man at the top and another at the bottom"[72].

In a similar way, Walter Scott preferred to provide a more practical contribution to the cause and sent Montgomery a short text containing information on an innovative way to build chimneys "so as scarcely to contract soot", and describing a "very simple and effectual machine" for sweeping away the remaining sediments[73]. Scott, who had already implemented these advancements in building his own residence, penned:

> I assure you I am a sincere friend to the cause which you have so effectually patronised; and in building my house at this place (Abbotsford) I have taken particular care, by the construction of the vents, that no such cruelty shall be practised within its precincts. I have made them circular, about fourteen inches in diameter, and lined them with a succession of earthen pots, about one and a half inch thick, (like the common chimney tops) which are built round by the masonry, and form the tunnel for the passage of the smoke. The advantage is, that the interior being entirely smooth, and presenting no inequality or angle where soot could be deposited, there is, in fact, very little formed; and that which may adhere is removed by the use of a simple machine[74].

Although Montgomery acknowledged the "kind communications" of his fellow intellectuals with "especial gratitude"[75], it is clear that he held a different point of view. He maintained a firm belief in the efficacy of poetry to promote change and to give even the most delicate issues universal resonance. Furthermore, as he openly stated at the outset of his work, his committee was now prepared to employ any necessary means to achieve its goals, even if it entailed encountering failure, because failure was still a better option than incurring in the "responsibility of having foregone one forlorn hope of serving a generation of outcast children and advancing their cause with the public"[76].

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[71] Slagle, J.B. (1999) *The Collected Letters of Joanna Baillie*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, p. 424.
[72] Montgomery, J. (1824) *The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing Boy's Album,* preface.
[73] Scott as cited in Slagle, J.B. (2012) 'Literary Activism', p. 61.
[74] Montgomery, J. (1824) *The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing Boy's Album,* preface.
[75] Ibidem.
[76] Ibidem.

According to Montgomery, "in a righteous cause, every miscarriage of persevering philanthropy [was] a step towards final and inevitable success"[77].

For all these reasons, the poet exerted considerable effort in seeking out writers who were willing to collaborate, and he personally authored four poems for the volume, collectively entitled *The Climbing Boy's Soliloquies*. The first of these compositions is *A Word with Myself*, in which Montgomery reflects on the public scorn directed at sweeper boys, derogatorily described by British society as gay, selfish and proud. The writer is perfectly aware of the "villainous" (line 3) nature of the chimney sweeps' profession; yet, he asserts that such acknowledgement does not entitle the more privileged individuals to mock them and dismiss them entirely. On the contrary, he expresses a wish for the country that "[brands] with every name / Of burning infamy [the chimney sweep's] art" to "bear the shame, / And feel the iron at her heart" (lines 5-8). A *Word with Myself* embodies a profound sense of humanity and conveys a strong notion of equality among all men. Montgomery writes about his not being able to turn a blind eye to the plight of those innocent souls, who are "Stript, wounded, left by thieves half dead" like a biblical Lazarus imploring bread "at rich men's gate" (lines 10-12). At the root of his compassion lies the belief that climbing boys, despite their marginalized status and sufferings, are equal to everyone else. It is emphasized that each of these children was born as the speaker's equal, with the same rights and dignity as any other human being:

A frame as sensitive as mine,
  Limbs moulded in a kindred form,
A soul degraded yet divine.
  Endear to me my brother-worm.

He was my equal at his birth,
  A naked, helpless, weeping child;
And such are born to thrones on earth,
  On such hath every mother smiled.

My equal he will be again,
  Down in that cold, oblivious gloom.
Where all the prostrate ranks of men
  Crowd, without fellowship, the tomb.

[77] Ibidem.

My equal in the judgment day.
He shall stand up before the throne,
When every veil is rent away,
And good and evil only known (lines 13-28).

Notwithstanding their different life circumstances and social positions, the narrator recognizes the shared humanity with the chimney sweep, thereby sensing a moral duty to advocate for him and challenge the injustice and neglect he is forced to face. Such is the poet's determination to champion the cause, that he would be willing to accept any animosity directed at the climbing boys to be turned against him "like a trodden snake" (line 38) should he ever forget their plight.

Figure 7. 'The London Sweep', from a daguerreotype by Beard, 1861.

In the other three poems of the series, which are respectively titled *The Complaint, The Dream* and *Easter-Monday at Sheffield*, there is a shift in the viewpoint, with the author adopting the perspective of a youthful chimney sweep who contemplates his own condition and inner turmoil. By using vibrant imagery and poignant symbolism, the poet immerses the readers in the emotional and psychological landscape of the sweeper boy, revealing his fears, struggles and fleeting moments of

hope. In *The Complaint,* the predominant emotion is one of profound emptiness and isolation. From the very beginning, the protagonist makes manifest his state of solitude, and wonders what the meaning of his life is if he has no one to share his existence with. He asks himself:

> WHO loves the climbing-boy
> Who cares If well or ill I be?
> Is there a living soul that shares
> A thought or wish with me?
>
> I've had no parents since my birth,
> Brothers and sisters none;
> Ah! what to me is all this earth
> Where I am only one? (lines 1-8)

Further intensifying an already dramatic situation is the anguish stemming from being imprisoned, from lacking autonomy over one's own being because, as he declares, nothing he beholds is his, "not the light of the day, / not the very breath [he draws]" (lines 12-13); everything has been entrusted by law to his master. In spite of his immense suffering, however, the chimney sweep has retained the childlike wonder towards the world: he is enchanted by the morning light and drawn to the joy of the people around him, but his condition has condemned him to experience a strong sense of estrangement that does not allow him to participate in it:

> Affection, too, life's sweetest cup,
> Goes round from hand to hand,
> But I am never ask'd to sup
> Out of the ring I stand.
>
> If kindness beats within my heart,
> What heart will beat again?
> I coax the dogs, they snarl and start;
> Brutes are as bad as men.
>
> The beggar's child may rise above
> The misery of his lot;
> The gipsy may be loved, and love;
> But I - but I must not (lines 33-44).

Therefore, even more than poverty, what appears to preclude happiness for the unfortunate child is the lack of love and affection within his life, the absence of someone who takes care of him.

A fundamental theme that we find in all three poems is that of the chimney sweep's aspiration and longing to escape from reality through dreams. In *The Complaint*, the speaker fantasizes about merging with the elements of nature and voices his desire to become "one among the birds" (line 55), to dwell with the fish in the sea, and to live as free as a snail that can enjoy springtime storms and peacefully sleep on flowers. However, the dream is shattered swiftly in the last stanza, as the climbing boy realizes he will never attain the carefree state of those creatures, "for [he] was born to be a man, / And if [he lives, he] will". The final statement reflects deep sorrow and shows an awareness that starkly contrasts with the naivety pervading the previous sections of the poem: the boy has relinquished his innocence and comprehends that his path to adulthood hinges on his ability to endure the oppression and violence that come with his occupation and social status.

As in a continuum, the same sense of resignation is present in the initial lines of *The Dream*, where the sweeper boy ponders the use of dreaming when he knows that his dreams will likely never come true. Nevertheless, occasionally, he finds himself compelled to indulge in his fantasies, as they provide him with some solace from the pain of his existence. Once again, the rural world emerges as a shelter from the corruption and chaos of the urbanized and industrialized city, a place where the protagonist can live in communion with the natural creation. The young sweep envisions engaging in a dance with the tempest, propelled by the forceful wind and walking in the pristine snow. Not for a minute does he fear the atmospheric phenomena; in this setting, he feels liberated and strong as a giant. This pleasant sensation persists until, even in his dream, he is confronted by his master, who pulls him by his hair and drags him on "for many and many a mile" (line 30) till they approach the vicinity of a grandiose residence. Here, the boy is forced to clean a chimney under the most dreadful conditions. Montgomery writes:

> Master soon thwack'd them out my head-
> The chimney must be swept!
> Yet in the grate the coals were red;
> I stamp'd, and scream'd, and wept.

I kneel'd, I kiss'd his feet, I pray'd;
  For then - which shows I dreamt -
Methought I ne'er before had made
  The terrible attempt.

But, as a butcher lifts the lamb
  That struggles for its life,
(Far from the ramping, bleating dam,)
  Beneath his desperate knife;

With his two iron hands he grasp'd
  And hoisted me aloof;
His naked neck in vain I clasp'd,
  The man was pity proof (lines 61-76).

No matter how desperately the child pleads, his master shows no mercy and establishes that he will have to climb the chimney while the coal in the fireplace is still burning. In the subsequent stanzas, the portrayal of the ascent effectively illustrates the hazardous nature of such a task:

So forth he swung me through the space,
  Above the smouldering fire;
I never can forget his face,
  Nor his gruff growl, "Go higher."

As if I climb'd a steep house-side,
  Or scaled a dark draw-well,
The horrid opening was so wide,
  I had no hold, I fell:

Fell on the embers, all my length,
  But scarcely felt their heat,
When, with a madman's rage and strength,
  I started on my feet;

And, ere I well knew what I did,
  Had clear'd the broader vent;
From his wild vengeance to be hid,
  I cared not where I went.

The passage narrow'd as I drew
  Limb after limb by force,

Working and worming, like a screw,
  My hard, slow, up-hill course.

Rougher than harrow-teeth within,
  Sharp lime and jagged stone
Stripp'd my few garments, gored the skin,
  And grided to the bone (lines 77-100).

This passage eloquently demonstrates how children were really exploited as living brushes, dehumanized and coerced to crawl slowly through confined spaces, akin to screws fitting into a crevice.

Finally, when all hope seems lost and the child appears doomed to perish in that "black tomb" (line 132) that is the flue, something unexpected occurs: he recovers his strength and manages to climb to the top of the chimney. From the rooftop, and in a rare moment of elation, he witnesses "the glorious dawn of day / Come down on field and flood" (lines 167-168). The rest of the poem unfolds as a blur between dreams and reality, reflecting the boy's disoriented state of mind. Each time he reaches the roof and appears to have found salvation, he awakens abruptly and is compelled to re-experience both his harsh days and his illusory dreams in an unending, inescapable loop. The only way out of this anguishing situation seems to be death, and it is perhaps exactly to death that the child is alluding when, in the third retelling of his dream, he speaks of being so captivated by the sunrise that he is transformed into "another child":

I look'd at this, I thought it smiled,
  Which made me feel so glad,
That I became another child,
  And not the climbing-lad:

A child as fair as you may see,
  Whom soot hath never soil'd;
As rosy-cheek'd as I might be,
  If I had not been spoil'd.

Wings, of themselves, about me grew,
  And, free as morning-light,
Up to that single star I flew,
  So beautiful and bright (lines 209-220).

Unfortunately, even the boy's ultimate aspiration for a peaceful death in his sleep proves to be vain because, as he stretches his hand "through the blue heaven" (line 221), the dream breaks "like a sea-bubble on the sand" (line 223): he awakens on his pallet of straw and his agony resumes once more.

The final piece Montgomery wrote for *The Chimney Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing Boy's Album* is *Easter Monday at Sheffield*, a long poem inspired by the charity banquet for young chimney sweeps held in the city of Sheffield every year. As previously indicated, on Easter Monday, the Sheffield Society for abolishing the use of Climbing Boys annually organized a sumptuous luncheon, extending invitations to all child chimney sweepers residing in the district. Dressed in his laundered albeit second-hand attire, for this one time in the entire year the speaker of the poem experiences a sense of normalcy and dignity, not harbouring any shame as he walks among the people on the streets who, for once, look at him more with curiosity and kindness than with scorn. Great is the boy's emotion as he steps into the Cutler's Hall, where the tables have been adorned with all sorts of delicacies: at each seat, plates and utensils "fit for kings" (line 104) have been meticulously arranged, wine is being served, and the room is filled with the delicious smell of roast-beef, plum-pudding and gingerbread. Everything seems perfect in this moment of celebration, with the children eating merrily and being greeted by the other guests with deference akin to nobility. Beneath this veneer of joy, however, it is clear that the atmosphere in the story is permeated by a profound sense of melancholy.

Firstly, the speaker's happiness for the warm acclaim received from the women on the streets quickly gives way to sadness as he considers that they are holding their own little children close: the realization dawns on him that those women are loving mothers to someone else, while he has never experienced either affection or "the sweetness of a mother's kiss" (line 82). Furthermore, the poem unveils a deep-seated dichotomy within the thoughts and emotions of the protagonist, who endeavours to relish the present moment but is simultaneously unable to shake off reflections on his true circumstances, to which he was condemned until the previous day and will be condemned to again at the conclusion of the meal. While recollecting the lot's arrival at the hall, the boy recounts:

This noon was not a resting time!
At the first stroke we started all,
And, while the tune rang through the chime,
Muster'd, like soldiers, at the hall.

Not much like soldiers in our gait;
Yet never soldier, in his life,
Tried, as he march'd, to look more straight
Than Bill and I, to drum and fife.

But now I think on't, what with scars,
Lank bony limbs, and spavin'd feet,
Like broken soldiers from the wars,
We limp'd, yet strutted through the street (lines 57-68).

The children had attempted to adopt a solemn demeanour in their "Easter-finery clad" (line 172), but soon it becomes evident that with their gaunt frames and limping gait they bore more resemblance to war-weary veterans than soldiers ready for battle. A similar sentiment is evoked during the banquet scene:

Tears, words, were in a twinkle gone,
  Like sparrows whirring through the street,
When, at a sign, we all fell on,
  As geese in stubble to our meat.

The large plum-puddings first were carved,
  And well we younkers plied them o'er;
You would have thought we had been *starved*,
  Or *were to be*, - a month and more (lines 121-128).

Or again:

The ladies and the gentlemen
  Took here and there with us, a seat;
They might be hungry, too, - but then
  We gave them little time to eat.

Their arms were busy helping us,
  Like cobblers ' elbows at their work,
Or see-saw, see-saw, thus and thus;
  A merry game at knife and fork.

O, then the din, the deafening din,
  Of plates, cans, crockery, spoons, and knives,

And waiters running out and in;
We might be eating for our lives (lines 137-148).

In these excerpts, too, the cheerful spectacle of the climbing boys eating heartily is tinged with a degree of bitterness, knowing that their eagerness stems from the hunger and misery they have to endure on all other days of the year.

One last crucial aspect to consider when analysing *Easter Monday at Sheffield* is the profound religiosity with which the entire piece is infused, reflecting the author's strong Christian faith. Prior to partaking in the meal, the children are encouraged to express gratitude to the Lord, and afterwards they are extensively told about the glorious endeavours "Of Him who heaven and earth did make" (line 250). The protagonist, who had never had the opportunity to attend Sunday School and thus never had encountered the name of God except perhaps in his master's curses, finds great hope in these narratives, as they affirm that God's compassion extends to the poor and vulnerable as well. In his heart, he feels that those words are true and promises to pray every night from that day onward, harbouring a newfound confidence that he will ultimately find solace in His reign.

In conclusion, with his series *The Climbing Boy's Soliloquies* Montgomery paints a comprehensive picture of the hardships faced daily by youthful chimney sweepers. As a philanthropist personally involved in charitable work, he proudly highlights the significance of volunteer initiatives in bringing some comfort to these abused children. However, the concurrent emphasis on the fleeting nature of these moments of relief within a life of perpetual suffering and deprivation reflects the poet's firm conviction that charitable interventions alone are insufficient in addressing the issue. Instead, he advocates a systematic overhaul of the established system that will put a definite end to the employment of children in the chimney sweep profession.

4.3.2. Other contributions

In *Easter Monday at Sheffield*, Montgomery makes mention of a young female chimney sweep, whom the speaker notices sitting "close at a Quaker-lady's side" (line 201). The reference to a Quaker woman within a poem dedicated to the plight of climbing boys is not accidental, as Quakers, much like Moravians, were prominently engaged in nineteenth-century philanthropic activities aimed at improving the conditions of the

poor[78]. Several were the intellectuals affiliated with the Quaker Society of Friends that actively supported the cause of child chimney sweeps, including for instance William and Ann Alexander, authors of multiple pamphlets seeking to draw attention to the circumstances of this "degraded class of society"[79]. Additionally, historical sources indicate that it was a Quaker lady named Fairbank who, in 1806, motivated Samuel Roberts to initiate the campaign that ultimately led to the establishment of the Sheffield Society and the subsequent publication of Montgomery's work[80].

Two Quaker poets heeded Montgomery's invitation for literary contributions to *The Chimney Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing Boy's Album*: Bernard Barton and Jeremiah Holmes Wiffen. The former, also known as the Quaker poet, is perhaps best remembered for his friendship and correspondence with Charles Lamb, an unexpected association which arose from Barton's criticism of the essayist's playful treatment of Quakers in his *Essays of Elia*[81]. Unlike Lamb, however, Barton did not disappoint Montgomery's expectations when, in 1824, he submitted for the collection a piece titled *The Climbing-Boy's Album*. In the poem, which unfolds as a poignant plea for justice and social reform, the author directly addresses the readers, appealing to their humanity and compassion to attend to the plight of those who are marginalized and oppressed:

> GENTLE Reader! If to thee
> MERCY'S dictates sacred be,
> If thy breast with PITY glow
> For the meanest sufferer's woe,
> Let our Album's humble page
> For their sake thy heart engage;
> For thine own despise us not,
> While we plead THE OUTCAST's lot;
> Mercy's votaries here below,
> Shall, hereafter, Mercy know (lines 1-10).

Furthermore, in his verses Barton makes a clear distinction between the content of the present volume and the superficial beauty found in other forms of art and literature,

[78] Philips, G.L. (1947) 'Quakers and Chimney Sweeps', *Bulletin of Friends Historical Association*, 36(1), p. 12.
[79] Alexander, A. as cited in Philips, G.L. (1947) 'Quakers and Chimney Sweeps', p. 13.
[80] Roberts, S. (1849) *Autobiography and select remains of the late Samuel Roberts*. London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, p. 54.
[81] Allpoetry.com. *Bernard Barton*. Available at: https://allpoetry.com/Bernard-Barton (Accessed: 23 March 2024).

where the focus often lies on “flowers, and shells, and landscapes fair” (line 23). While these works can offer fleeting pleasure through their aesthetic appeal, Montgomery’s work is praised for his attempt to delve into the harsher realities of life, seeking to evoke a deeper emotional response from those “Heads that think, and hearts that feel” (line 39). Finally, in the final stanzas the poet issues a decisive call to action to various social groups, including fathers, mothers, Britons and Christians “of each sect and name” (line 51), all of whom are urged to recognize their duty in confronting injustices and to extend their compassion and assistance to those in need.

The second poem written by a Quaker author is *The Sweep-Boy’s Lament* by Jeremiah Holmes Wiffen. While historically less renowned than Barton, Wiffen pursued a livelihood as a librarian to the Duke of Bedford and dedicated his leisure time to cultivating his passion for poetry, thereby earning considerable recognition among his contemporaries[82]. In *The Sweep-Boy’s Lament*, his aptitude for literary expression and his Romantic influences emerge from the nuanced portrayal he makes of a young chimney sweep’s distress and profound yearning for freedom. Here too, as in Montgomery, emphasis is placed on the innate zest for life that defines human experience but remains inaccessible to the climbing boys. The speaker strongly asserts his despair over living in captivity and expresses his envy towards those fortunate enough to be spared from constant cruelty. Once again, we encounter the motif of dreams and the rural world as destinations for escape from the infernal urban environment, with its darkness and “smoky streets” (line 50):

> I would I were the simplest thing,
> So might I but be free,
> Some bird to wanton on the wing,
> Or butterfly, or bee!
> They know no pain, but are as gay
> As the wild squirrel on his spray: -
> I wish ‘twas so with me;
> But no, oh no! think what I will,
> I am the same sad creature still (lines 55- 63).

[82] Philips, G.L. (1947) ‘Quakers and Chimney Sweeps’, p. 14.

Furthermore, once again the poem becomes a bearer of strong Christian values, affirming the benevolence of a God that does not abandon the weakest but instead takes their sufferings on His shoulders:

> I say my prayers! For I have heard
> There is a God on high,
> Without whose bidding not a bird
> Can perish from the sky;
> A God that does not love the strong
> Who do unhappy children wrong,
> But listens to our cry;
> He surely does! For when I pray,
> My sorrow seems to fly away (lines 73-81).

Despite the assurance of heavenly salvation proffered by faith, the importance of safeguarding chimney sweeps' rights also during their lifetime is reaffirmed in the final stanza, where Wiffen uses the child's voice to implore divine assistance in making the climbing boys' "weak appeal" (line 88) reach as many people as possible.

The works authored by Wiffen and Barton are just two of the twenty-five compositions comprising the second section of *The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing-Boy's Album*. Together with Montgomery's poems which have been analysed above, they emerge as emblematic representations of the prevailing themes within the anthology, not only encompassing elements of violence, darkness and suffering, but also highlighting the significance of Christian faith, the philanthropic endeavours of charity organizations and the crucial albeit rare instances of optimism. Particularly fitting in this context are also the poems submitted by Alan Cunningham and Ann Gilbert who, in *The Orphan Child* and *The Stolen Child* respectively, narrate the remarkable tales of children rescued from the "cruel trade"[83] of chimney sweeping by kind-hearted, charitable women. Other valuable poetical contributions were provided by W.B. Clarke, John Bowring and Henry Neele, and there are even a short play named *The Chimney Sweeper* and a brief prose story entitled *Frank and Will, Two Little Chimney Sweeps*.

One final piece worthy of examination due to its contemporary resonance and distinctive position within the collection is *The Chimney Sweeper* by William Blake. As

[83] Cunningham A. (1924) 'The Orphan Child' in Montgomery. J (ed.) *The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing-Boy's Album,* pp. 258-261, line 69.

previously noted, Blake's poem was not specifically penned for Montgomery's publication in 1824, but its inclusion in the volume was strongly recommended by Charles Lamb who, while not personally offering direct literary contribution, directed the editor's attention to this "rare and curious little work"[84]. In fact, Blake had already approached the subject of child exploitation in chimney sweeping about three decades before, creating a lyrical work divided into two parts: the initial segment was included in the collection *Songs of Innocence,* published in 1789, whereas the second section first appeared in 1794 as part of *Songs of Experience*. The *Songs* did not achieve significant success during Blake's lifetime primarily due to the limited popularity of the author, whose works were mostly self-published and appeared in small editions, thus failing to reach a wide audience. Nevertheless, a few other writers of the period, including Lamb, expressed admiration for Blake's art already before his death in 1827. Montgomery too, prompted by the famous essayist, recognized Blake's potential as a storyteller and decided to feature his *Songs of Innocence* poem in *The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend*.

Blake's work represents a humanitarian endeavour of immense significance, whose focus perfectly aligns with the concerns of Montgomery's collection. Through his verses, Blake appeals to the humanity of the public by recounting the excruciating experience of the narrator, a young chimney sweep who is given a personal voice and life story. In the first stanza, the protagonist starts by describing his first years: his mother has died and he has been sold by his father to a master sweeper, for whom he now spends his days toiling and sleeping on the same bags of soot he had previously swept. The reader is immediately led to empathize with the appalling conditions endured by the child: once again, there is no trace of joy and affection in this poor creature's life, marked only by loss and cruelty from an extremely early age. What is notably evocative is also the insertion, in the second stanza, of a secondary character named Tom Toddy[85], a small boy who has joined the workers and cries when his head is shaven. The speaker comforts him by saying that with a bald head his hair could not be ruined by soot, and the bittersweet consolation is enough to assure Tom a peaceful

[84] Montgomery, J. (1824) *The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing Boy's Album,* p. 343.
[85] In Blake's original version, the name of the young sweep is Tom Dacre, with an alleged reference to Lady Dacre's almshouses in London. Scholars concur that the modification was made by Charles Lamb perhaps due to the belief that, by not recognizing the allusion, many might have considered the name Dacre too aristocratic for a climbing boy.

sleep, during which he dreams happily about his companions being liberated by an angel from the black coffins (metaphor for the chimneys) in which they are imprisoned:

> And so he was quiet, and that very night
> As Tom was a sleeping, he had such a sight,
> That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, and Jack,
> Were all of them lock'd up in coffins of black.
>
> And by came an angel, who had a bright key,
> And he open'd the coffins, and set them all free;
> Then down a green plain, leaping, laughing, they run,
> And wash in a river, and shine in the sun (lines 9-16).

In the fifth stanza, the angel finally tells Tom that "if he'd be a good boy, he'd have God for his father & never want joy" (lines 19-20). This whole vision is again a clear refence to the child's desire to escape his current reality, a desire he can only fulfil in his dreams. The last lines feature Tom awakening the following morning and facing his day reassured by the angel's speech that "if all do their duty, they need not fear harm" (line 24). By giving a name to Tom and the other characters in the dream, Blake seeks to impart an identity and dignity to those frequently overlooked children, whose lives are undervalued by a society that is primarily preoccupied with economic concerns. In this song, as in many others of the collection, the author's critical attitude is made evident by the ironic discrepancy between the naivety of the victims and the gravity of the reality they are facing: they have been robbed of their childhood, yet they remain pure at heart and find contentment in re-creating an imaginary blissful world in their dreams.

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis has clearly shown how the Romantic period was characterized by a profound sensitivity to social iniquities, with many prominent figures of the time courageously taking their stance against the darkest aspects of society and the era's massive economic development. In particular, it has disclosed the existence of numerous virtuous men who were directly concerned with the issue of child labour and who showed sympathy and compassion towards the young victims of a flawed system. Both secondary materials and primary sources dating back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have revealed the endeavours of those righteous businessmen and MPs who prioritized human welfare over their economic gains. Industrialist and politician Robert Peel, for instance, established himself as one of the first champions of children's rights when, upon recognizing that the conditions endured by his younger employees were excessively dire, he unreservedly advocated the drafting of the first piece of factory legislation, later enacted in 1802 as the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act. Similarly, entrepreneur Robert Owen sought to ameliorate the circumstances of child labourers through the promotion of legislative reform and the implementation of groundbreaking educational methods within his factories. Sources also highlight the importance of John Cam Hobhouse, Michael Thomas Sadler and Lord Shaftesbury, three distinguished representatives of the British Government who played pivotal roles respectively in the enactment of the 1825 Cotton Mills Regulation Act, the 1833 Factory Act and the 1842 Mines and Collieries Act.

Especially noteworthy in this context is also the involvement of contemporary poets, prose writers and journalists, whose works often conveyed strong humanitarian values. In the third and fourth chapter of this research, an analysis of selected writings by some eminent Romantic authors has evidenced that the predominant sentiment within literary circles towards a society perceived as alienating and indifferent was one of disdain and repudiation. From the inquiry, two contrasting attitudes have been discerned: whereas Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the later Romantics Shelley and Keats express their rejection of the industrialized world through an escape into nature, and celebrate the most innocent and joyful aspects of childhood, Lamb and Blake offer a

more direct portrayal of the contemporary situation, including the hardship experienced by a great part of British children. Albeit different, both perspectives should not be overlooked as they hold considerable significance. The harsh approach adopted by Blake and Lamb had the noble purpose of educating readers and raising awareness about the devastating consequences of employing fragile children in demeaning occupations. On the other hand, the Wordsworthian idea of the child as a unique being, closer to the innate goodness of mankind and requiring nurturing and constant interaction with nature echoes the concept of natural education articulated by French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and foreshadows the modern cultural models developed in the twentieth century and deemed instrumental in the eventual eradication of child exploitation.

While numerous writers of the time engaged with the issue of child labour in their literary works, some also demonstrated their altruism by actively participating in charitable activities and the struggle for labour regulation. The same Blake, while never fully involved with any organized movement, associated with radical political groups. In this respect, significant attention has been drawn to the figure of James Montgomery, a Scottish poet who may be less renowned in comparison to the great protagonists of English Romanticism but who is particularly deserving of consideration for the objectives of this study. An examination of his biography reveals indeed that Montgomery was committed to social activism both as a poet and a philanthropist, the two roles constantly dialoguing with one another. Son of two Moravian missionaries and driven by a strong Christian faith, he soon developed an inclination towards social services and a profound respect for human dignity. In the 1790s, he fervently supported the principles of the French Revolution and, in his capacity as director of the Sheffield newspaper *The Iris*, he emerged as a staunch advocate for liberal ideals and the rights of the unprivileged. In Sheffield, he worked as a teacher in the local Sunday Schools and collaborated with silverware industrialist Samuel Roberts to establish the Society for abolishing the use of Climbing Boys and bettering the conditions of Chimney-Sweepers' Apprentices. The organization, born in 1807, exerted considerable effort in providing solace to young chimney sweeps and garnering the necessary public support for their cause. As a gifted poet, Montgomery wrote extensively not only against child labour, but also in defence of the principles of Christianity and against slavery in the British colonies. Unlike some of his notable colleagues, he maintained a firm belief in

the humanitarian power of literature, as is evidenced by his attempt in 1824 to seek literary subscriptions for *The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing Boy's Album*.

The collection stands as a perfect example of this interconnection between pragmatism and artistic expression that characterized the author's entire life. *The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend* is indeed divided into two sections, with the first comprising more practical contributions such as tracts, petitions and firsthand accounts that document the plight of climbing boys, and the second encompassing poems and prose texts submitted by various contemporary writers, including Montgomery himself. An in-depth analysis of some of these compositions has unveiled the predominant attitude of piety and compassion towards young chimney sweeps, which reflected the authors' hope of evoking a similar response in the readers. Repeatedly and strategically, the portrayal of the harsh realities faced by these unfortunate souls, alongside the descriptions of the noble efforts of charity workers, serve as means to increase public support in the fight for social reform. Finally, of immense significance are the words Montgomery wrote in the preface to the collection: in a display of utmost honesty, the editor admits being uncertain about the potential impact of the work and the subsequent accomplishment of the mission he and his collaborators had undertaken. Yet, he declares his readiness to employ all available means to garner attention for the cause of these "outcast children"[86], including his voice as a poet. He argues that attempting and failing is preferable to not attempting at all, as no effort will prove futile in the ultimate achievement of success.

By and large, while the involvement of eighteenth and nineteenth-century intellectuals in social matters is undeniable, determining the precise impact of their works on the tangible eradication of social ills poses a greater challenge. As virtuous as Montgomery's venture was, we have to wait until 1875, to witness significant legislative changes leading to the prohibition of employing children as chimney sweepers. This is even more astonishing if one considers that the first philanthropic endeavours directed at ameliorating the conditions of chimney sweeps had commenced as early as the eighteenth century, thanks to the intervention of philanthropists like Jonas Hanway and Thomas Bernard. However, for a long time, Parliament was reluctant to pass a Bill that would alter the dynamics of chimney sweeping because of the

[86] Montgomery, J. (1824) *The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing Boy's Album,* preface.

entrenched economic interests associated with the profession. The process of effective removal of children from such occupation and, more broadly, from any kind of workplace was influenced by many different factors of social, economic, legislative and cultural nature, whose individual weight in attaining the desired outcomes remains particularly difficult to quantify. As it has been widely demonstrated, it would be incorrect to assume that the mere enactment of laws for labour regulation could result in a prompt enhancement in the workers' life circumstances. Indeed, research has shown how early legislation aimed at regulating child labour was widely evaded by employers across all sectors who were indifferent to the human element. On the other hand, philanthropic endeavours directed at educating the public to empathy and compassion would not have had sufficient impact if not supported by proper legislation.

Hence, we are talking about a profoundly intricate combination of circumstances that facilitated a substantial societal and ideological transformation. In this context, literature certainly played a fundamental role as an educational tool for spreading a new awareness without which the development of the modern concept of childhood as a life stage worthy of celebration and care would have been unattainable. Today, at least in Western countries, children are viewed as unique beings with their own characteristics, sensitivity, and emotional and cognitive needs. They are recognized the rights to safety, healthcare, education and protection from abuse and exploitation, and the importance for them of growing up in a nurturing familial environment is greatly emphasized. These ideals, which are markedly distant from those prevalent during the industrialization era, are instead perfectly aligned with those advocated by kind-hearted intellectuals such as Montgomery. With the aspiration that such principles may extend to children all over the world, we can say that the expectations of these brave men have gradually evolved into tangible realities.

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