

WOMEN IN MODERN INDUSTRY

“What is woman but an enemy of friendship, an unavoidable punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable affliction, a constantly flowing source of tears, a wicked work of nature covered with a shining varnish?”—Saint Chrysostom.

“And wo in winter tyme with wakyng a-nyghtes, To rise to the ruel to rock the cradel, Both to kard and to kembe, to clouten and to wasche, To rubbe and to rely, russches to pilie That reuthe is to rede othere in ryme shewe The wo of these women that wonyeth in Cotes.”^[1] Langland: *Piers Ploughman*, x. 77.

“Two justices of the peace, the mayor or other head officer of any city (etc.) and two aldermen ... may appoint any such woman as is of the age of 12 years and under the age of 40 years and unmarried and forth of service ... to be retained or serve by the year, week or day for such wages and in such reasonable sort as they shall think meet; and if any such woman shall refuse so to serve, then it shall be lawful for the said justices (etc.) to commit such woman to ward until she shall be bounden to serve.”—*Statute of Labourers*, 1563.

“Every woman spinner’s wage shall be such as, following her labour duly and painfully, she may make it account to.”—Justices of Wiltshire: *Assessment of Wages*, 1604.

“Sometimes one feels that one dare not contemplate too closely the life of our working women, it is such a grave reproach.”—Miss

Anna Tracey, *Factory Inspector*, 1913.

“The State has trampled on its subjects for ‘ends of State’; it has neglected them; it is beginning to act consciously for them.... The progressive enrichment of human life and the remedy of its ills is not a private affair. It is a public charge. Indeed it is the one and noblest field of corporate action. The perception of that truth gives rise to the new art of social politics.”—B. Kirkman Gray.

WOMEN IN MODERN INDUSTRY

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AND (WITH MRS. SPENCER, D.SC.) “A HISTORY OF FACTORY
LEGISLATION”

WITH A CHAPTER CONTRIBUTED BY J. J. MALLON

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PREFACE.

It may be well to give a brief explanation of the scheme of the present work. Part I. was complete in its present form, save for unimportant corrections, before the summer of 1914. The outbreak of war necessitated some delay in publication, after which it became evident that some modification in the scheme and plan of the book must be made. The question was, whether to revise the work already accomplished so as to bring it more in tune with the tremendous events that are fresh in all our minds. For various reasons I decided not to do this, but to leave the earlier chapters as they stood, save for bringing a few figures up to date, and to treat of the effects of the war in a separate chapter. I was influenced in taking this course by the idea that even if the portions written in happy ignorance of approaching trouble should now appear out of date and out of focus, yet future students of social history might find a special interest in the fact that the passages in question describe the situation of women workers as it appeared almost immediately before the great upheaval. Moreover, [Chapter IVa.](#) contained a section on

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German women in Trade Unions. I had no material to re-write this section; I did not wish to omit it. The course that seemed best was to leave it precisely as it stood, and the same plan has been adopted with all the pre-war chapters.

The main plan of the book is to give a sketch or outline of the position of working women, with special reference to the effects of the industrial revolution on her employment, taking "industrial revolution" in its broader sense, not as an event of the late

eighteenth century, but as a continuous process still actively at work. I have aimed at description rather than theory. Some of the current theories about women's position are of great interest, and I make no pretence to an attitude of detachment in regard to them, but it certainly appears to me that we need more facts and knowledge before theory can be based on a sure foundation. Here and there I have drawn my own conclusions from what I saw and heard, but these conclusions are mostly provisional, and may well be modified in the light of clearer knowledge.

I am fully conscious of an inadequacy of treatment and of certain defects in form. Women's industry is a smaller subject than men's, but it is even more complicated and difficult. There are considerable omissions in my book. I have not, for instance, discussed, save quite incidentally, the subject of the industrial employment of married women or the subject of domestic service, omissions which are partly due to my knowledge that studies of these questions were in process of

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preparation by hands more capable than mine. There are other omissions which are partly due to the lack or unsatisfactory nature of the material. A standard history of the Industrial Revolution does not yet exist (Monsieur Mantoux's valuable book covers only the earlier period), and the necessary information has to be collected from miscellaneous sources. In dealing with the effects of war, my treatment is necessarily most imperfect. The situation throughout the autumn, winter, and spring 1914-15, was a continually shifting one, and to represent it faithfully is a most difficult task. Nor can we for years expect to gauge the changes involved. With all our efforts to see and take stock of the social and economic effects of war, we who watch and try to understand the social meanings of the most terrible convulsion in history probably do not perceive the most significant reactions. That the position of industrial women must be considerably modified we

cannot doubt; but the modifications that strike the imagination most forcibly now, such as the transference of women to new trades, may possibly not appear the most important in twenty or thirty years' time. Even so, perhaps, a contemporary sketch of the needs of working women; of the success or failure of our social machinery to supply and keep pace with those needs at a time of such tremendous stress and tension, may not be altogether without interest.

I have to express my great indebtedness to Mr. Mallon, Secretary of the Anti-Sweating League, who has given me the benefit of his unrivalled knowledge

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and experience in a chapter on women's wages. I have also to thank Miss Mabel Lawrence, who for a short time assisted me in the study of women in Unions, and both then and afterwards contributed many helpful suggestions to the work she shared with me. To the Labour Department I am indebted for kind and much appreciated permission to use its library; to Miss Elspeth Carr for drawing my attention to the "Petition of the Poor Spinners," an interesting document which will be found in the Appendix; and to many Trade Union secretaries and others for their kindness in allowing me to interview them and presenting me with documents. Miss Mary Macarthur generously loaned a whole series of the Trade Union League Reports, which were of the greatest service in tracing the early history of the League. I regret that Mr. Tawney's book on Minimum Rates in the Tailoring Trades; Messrs. Bland, Brown, and Tawney's valuable collection of documents on economic history; and the collection of letters from working women, entitled "Maternity," all came into my hands too late for me to make as much use of them as I should have liked to do.

B. L. H. Hampstead, *September 1915.*

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INTRODUCTORY

Little attention has been given until quite recent times to the position of the woman worker and the special problems concerning her industrial and commercial employment. The historical material relating to the share of women in industry is extremely scanty. Women in mediaeval times must have done a very large share of the total work necessary for carrying on social existence, but the work of men was more specialised, more differentiated, more picturesque. It thus claimed and obtained a larger share of the historian's attention. The introduction of machinery in the eighteenth century effected great changes, and for the first time the reactions of the work on the workers began to be considered. Women and children who had previously been employed in their own homes or in small workshops were now collected in factories, drilled to work in large numbers together. The work was not at first very different, but the environment was enormously altered. The question of the child in industry at first occupied attention almost to the exclusion of women. But the one led naturally to the other. The woman in industry could no longer be ignored: she had become an economic force.

The position of the industrial woman in modern

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times is closely related, one way or another, to the industrial revolution, but the relation cannot be stated in any short or easy formula. The reaction of modern methods on woman's labour is highly complex and assumes many forms. The pressure on the woman worker which causes her to be employed for long hours, low wages, in bad conditions, and with extreme insecurity of employment, is frequently supposed to be due to the development of industry on a larger scale. It is, in my view, due rather to the survival of social conditions of the past in an age when an enormous increase in productive power has transformed the conditions of production. New institutions and new social conditions are needed to suit the change in the conditions of production. It is not the change in the material environment which is to blame, so much as the failure of organised society so far to understand and control the material changes. The capitalist employer organised industry on the basis of a "reserve of labour," and on the principle of employing the cheapest workers he could get, not out of original sin, or because he was so very much worse than other people, but simply because it was the only way he knew of, and no one was there to indicate an alternative course—much less compel him to take it. Much more guilty than the cotton-spinners or dock companies were the wealthy governing classes, who permitted the conditions of work to be made inhuman, and yet trampled on the one flower the people had plucked from their desolation—the joy of union and fellowship; who allowed a system of casual labour to become established, and then prated about the bad habits and irregularity which were the results of their own folly.

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Organised society had hardly begun to understand the needs and implications of the industrial revolution until quite late in the

nineteenth century, and the failure of statesmanlike foresight has been especially disastrous to women, because of their closer relationship to the family. There is no economic necessity under present circumstances for women to work so long, so hard, and for such low wages as they do; on the contrary, we know now that it is bad economy that they should be so employed. But the subordinate position of the girl and the woman in the family, the lack of a tradition of association with her fellows, has reacted unfavourably on her economic capacity in the world of competitive trade. She is preponderantly an immature worker; she expects, quite reasonably, humanly and naturally, to marry. Whether her expectation is or is not destined to be fulfilled, it constitutes an element of impermanence in her occupational career which reacts unfavourably on her earnings and conditions of employment.

The tradition of obedience, docility and isolation in the family make it hard for the young girl-worker to assert her claims effectively; both her ignorance and her tradition of modesty make it difficult for her to voice the requirements of decent living, some of the most essential of which are taboo—not to be spoken of to a social superior or an individual of the opposite sex. The whole circumstances of her life make her employment an uncertain matter, contingent upon all sorts of outside circumstances, which have little or nothing to do with her own industrial capacity. In youth, marriage may at any time take her out of the economic struggle and render wage-earning superfluous and unnecessary. On the other

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hand, the sudden pressure of necessity, bereavement, or sickness or unemployment of husband or bread-winning relative, may throw a woman unexpectedly on the labour market. It is a special feature of women's employment that, unlike the work of men, who for the most part have to labour from early youth to some more or less advanced age, women's work is subject to considerable

interruption, and is contingent on family circumstances, whence it comes about that women may not always need paid work, but when they do they often want it so badly that they are ready to take anything they can get. The woman worker also is more susceptible to class influences than are her male social equals, and charity and philanthropy often tend in some degree to corrupt the loyalty and divert the interest of working women from their own class. These are some of the reasons why associations for mutual protection and assistance have been so slow in making way among women workers.

The protection of the State, though valuable as far as it goes, has been inadequate: how inadequate can be seen in the Reports of the Women Factory Inspectors, who, in spite of their insufficient numbers, take so large a share in the administration of the Factory Act. Their Reports, however, do not reach a large circle. The Insurance Act has been the means of a more startling propaganda. The results following the working of this Act shew that although women are longer lived than men, they have considerably more sickness. The claims of women for sick benefit had been underestimated, and many local insurance societies became nearly insolvent in consequence. A cry of malingering was raised in various quarters, and we were asked to believe that excessive claims could be prevented by

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stricter and more careful administration. This solution of the problem, however, is quite inadequate to explain the facts. There may have been some malingering, but it has occurred chiefly in cases where the earnings of the workers were so low as to be scarcely above the sickness benefit provided by the Act, or even below it. In other cases the excess claims were due to the fact that medical advice and treatment was a luxury the women had previously been unable to afford even when they greatly needed it; or to the fact that they had previously continued to go to work

when unfit for the exertion, and now at last found themselves able to afford a few days' rest and nursing; or, finally, to the unhealthy conditions in which they were compelled to live and work. As Miss Macarthur stated before the Departmental Committee on Sickness Benefit Claims, "Low wages, and all that low wages involve in the way of poor food, poor housing, insufficient warmth, lack of rest and of air, and so forth, necessarily predispose to disease; and although such persons may, at the time of entering into insurance, have been, so far as they knew, in a perfectly normal state of health, their normal state is one with no reserve of health and strength to resist disease." Excessive claims may or may not, the witness went on to show, be associated with extremely low wages. Thus the cotton trade, which is the best paid of any great industry largely employing women, nevertheless shows a high proportion of claims. Miss Macarthur made an urgent recommendation (in which the present writer begs to concur), that when any sweeping accusation of malingering is brought against a class of insured persons, medical enquiry should be made into the conditions under which those women work. If the

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conditions that produce excessive claims were once clearly known and realised, it is the convinced opinion of the present writer that those conditions would be changed by the pressure of public opinion, not so much out of sentiment or pity—though sentiment and pity are badly needed—but out of a clear perception of the senseless folly and loss that are involved in the present state of things. Year by year, and week by week, the capitalist system is allowed to use up the lives of our women and girls, taking toll of their health and strength, of their nerves and energy, of their capacity, their future, and the future of their children after them. And all this, not for any purpose; not as it is with the soldier, who dies that something greater than himself may live; for no purpose whatever, except perhaps saving the trouble of thought. So far as wealth is the object of work, it is practically certain that the

national wealth, or indeed the output of war material, would be much greater if it were produced under more humane and more reasonable conditions, with a scientific disposition of hours of work and the use of appropriate means for keeping up the workers' health and strength. A preliminary and most important step, it should be said, would be a considerable reinforcement of the staff of women factory inspectors.

Nor do conditions of work alone make up the burden of the heavy debt against society for the treatment of women workers. Housing conditions, though no doubt greatly improved, especially in towns, are often extremely bad, and largely responsible for the permanent ill-health suffered by so many married women in the working class, by the non-wage-earning group, perhaps not much less than by the industrial

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woman-worker.[2] Two other questions occur in this connection, both of great importance. First, the question of the relation of the employment of the young girl to her health after marriage—a subject which appears to have received little scientific attention. Only a minority of women are employed at any one time, but a large majority of young girls are employed, and it follows that the majority of older women *must have been employed* in those critical years of girlhood and young womanhood, which have so great an influence on the constitution and character for the future. The conditions and kind of employment from this point of view would afford material for a volume in itself, but the subject needs medical knowledge for its satisfactory handling, and a laywoman can but indicate it and pass on. Second, the need of making medical advice and treatment more accessible. This would involve the removal of restrictions and obstacles which, however necessary under a scheme of Health Insurance, appear in practice to rob that scheme of at least half its right to be considered as a National Provision for the health of women.[3]

It will appear in the following pages that I see little reason to believe in any decline and fall of women from a golden age in which they did only work which was “suitable,” and that in the bosoms of their families. The records of the domestic system that have come down to us are no doubt picturesque enough, but the cases which have been preserved in history or fiction were probably the aristocracy of industry, under which were the very poor, of whom we know little. There

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must also have been a class of single women wage-earners who were probably even more easy to exploit in old times than they are now, the opportunities for domestic service being much more limited and worse paid. The working woman does not appear to me to be sliding downwards into the “chaos of low-class industries,” rather is she painfully, though perhaps for the most part unconsciously, working her way upwards out of a more or less servile condition of poverty and ignorance into a relatively civilised state, existing at present in a merely rudimentary form. She has attained at least to the position of earning her own living and controlling her own earnings, such as they are. She has statutory rights against her employer, and a certain measure of administrative protection in enforcing them. The right to a living wage, fair conditions of work, and a voice in the collective control over industry are not yet fully recognised, but are being claimed more and more articulately, and can less and less be silenced and put aside. The woman wage-earner indeed appears in many ways socially in advance of the middle and upper class woman, who is still so often economically a mere parasite. Woman’s work may still be chaotic, but the chaos, we venture to hope, indicates the throes of a new social birth, not the disintegration of decay.

Among much that is sad, tragic and disgraceful in the industrial exploitation of women, there is emerging this fact, fraught with deepest consolation: the woman herself is beginning to think.

Nothing else at long last can really help her; nothing else can save us all. There are now an increasing number of women workers who do not sink their whole energies in the petty and personal, or restrict their aims to the earning

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and spending what they need for themselves and those more or less dependent on them. They are able to appreciate the newer wants of society, the claim for more leisure and amenity of life, for a share in the heritage of England's thought and achievements, for better social care of children, for the development of a finer and deeper communal consciousness. This is the new spirit that is beginning to dawn in women.

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CHAPTER I.

SKETCH OF THE EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN IN ENGLAND BEFORE THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION.

The traces of women in economic and industrial history are unmistakable, but the record of their work is so scattered, casual, and incoherent that it is difficult to derive a connected story therefrom. We know enough, however, to disprove the old misconception that women's industrial work is a phenomenon beginning with the nineteenth century.

It seems indeed not unlikely that textile industry, perhaps also agriculture and the taming of the smaller domestic animals, were originated by women, their dawning intelligence being stimulated to activity by the needs of children. Professor Karl Pearson in his interesting essay, *Woman as Witch*, shows that many of the folklore ceremonies connected with witchcraft associate the witch with symbols of agriculture, the pitchfork, and the plough, as well as with the broom and spindle, and are probably the fossil survivals, from a remote past, of a culture in which the activities of the women were relatively more prominent than they are now. The witch is a degraded form of the old priestess, cunning in the knowledge of herbs and medicine, and

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preserving in spells and incantations such wisdom as early civilisation possessed. In Thüringen, Holda or Holla is a goddess of spinning and punishes idle persons. Only a century ago the women used to sing songs to Holla as they dressed their flax. In Swabia a broom is carried in procession on Twelfth Night, in honour of the goddess Berchta. The “wild women” or spirits associated with wells or springs are frequently represented in legends as spinning; they come to weddings and spin, and their worship is closely connected with the distaff as a symbol.

Women are also the first architects; the hut in widely different parts of the world—among Kaffirs, Fuegians, Polynesians, Kamtchatdals—is built by women. Women are everywhere the primitive agriculturists, and work in the fields of Europe to-day. Women seem to have originated pottery, while men usually ornamented and improved it. Woman “was at first, and is now, the universal cook, preserving food from decomposition and doubling the longevity of man. Of the bones at last she fabricates her needles and charms.... From the grasses around her cabin she constructs the floor-mat, the mattress and the screen, the wallet, the sail. She is the mother of all spinners, weavers, upholsterers, sail-

makers.”

The evidence of anthropology thus hardly bears out the assertion frequently made (recently, *e.g.*, by Dr. Lionel Tayler in *The Nature of Woman*) that woman does not originate. A much more telling demonstration of the superiority of man in handicraft would be to show that when he takes over a woman’s idea he usually brings it to greater technical perfection than she has done. “Men, liberated more or less from the tasks of hunting and fighting, gradually took up the

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occupations of women, specialised them and developed them in an extraordinary degree.... Maternity favours an undifferentiated condition of the various avocations that are grouped around it; it is possible that habits of war produced a sense of the advantages of specialised and subordinated work. In any case the fact itself is undoubted and it has had immense results on civilisation.”

Man has infinitely surpassed woman in technical skill, scientific adaptation, and fertility of invention; yet the rude beginnings of culture and civilisation, of the crafts that have so largely made us what we are, were probably due to the effort and initiative of primitive woman, engaged in a hand-to-hand struggle with the rude and hostile forces of her environment, to satisfy the needs of her offspring and herself.

I do not propose, however, to enter into a discussion of the position of primitive woman, alluring as such a task might be from some points of view. When we come to times nearer our own and of which written record survives, it is remarkable that the further back we go the more completely women appear to be in possession of textile industry. The materials are disappointing: there is little that can serve to explain fully the industrial position of women or to make us realise the conditions of their employment. But as to the fact there can be no doubt. Nor can it be questioned that women

were largely employed in other industries also. The women of the industrial classes have always worked, and worked hard. It is only in quite modern times, so far as I can discover, that the question, whether some kinds of work were not too hard for women, has been raised at all.

Servants in Husbandry.—It is quite plain that

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women have always done a large share of field work. The Statute of Labourers, 23 Edw. III. 1349, imposed upon women equally with men the obligation of giving service when required, unless they were over sixty, exercised a craft or trade, or were possessed of means or land of their own, or already engaged in service, and also of taking only such wages as had been given previous to the Black Death and the resulting scarcity of labour. In 1388, the statute 12 Richard II. c. 3, 4 and 5, forbids any servant, man or woman, to depart out of the place in which he or she is employed, at the end of the year's service, without a letter patent, and limits a woman labourer's wages to six shillings per annum. It also enacts that "he or she which use to labour at the plough" shall continue at the same work and not be put to a "mystery or handicraft." In 1444 the statute 23 Henry VI. c. 13 fixes the wages of a woman servant in husbandry at ten shillings per annum with clothing worth four shillings and food. In harvest a woman labourer was to have two pence a day and food, "and such as be worthy of less shall take less."

Thorold Rogers says that in the thirteenth century women were employed in outdoor work, and especially as assistants to thatchers. He thinks that, "estimated proportionately, their services were not badly paid," but that, allowing for the different value of money, women got about as much for outdoor work as women employed on farms get now. After the Plague, however, the wages paid women as thatchers' helps were doubled, and before the end

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