

THE EROSION
OF CHILDHOOD

Child oppression in Britain 1860–1918

Lionel Rose



London and New York

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CONTENTS

<i>Publisher's note</i>	vii
1 Children without childhood: an introduction	1
2 Factories and mines legislation	8
3 Sweatshops, cottage labour and moonlighting up to the First World War	19
4 Children on the land and children at sea	31
5 Young slaves—children in domestic service	36
6 Brickyard and canal boat children and chimney sweeps	51
7 Theatrical, circus and fairground children	59
8 Juvenile street traders	66
9 Waifs and beggars	80
10 Vagrancy	91
11 The blind-alley job problem	101
12 Employers, education and the part-time system	107
13 School curriculum codes and the 'Standards' 1862–1918	116
14 Teaching methods 1860–1918	129
15 Health and schooling	145
16 Schooling and the upper classes	161
17 Pupil society and school discipline	172
18 School attendance	189

CONTENTS

19	The formative results of education	196
20	Education and economic mobility	206
21	Exploitation, discipline and duty in the working-class home	215
22	Upbringing in the upper-class home	222
23	The child protection movement	233
	<i>Conclusion</i>	244
	<i>Notes</i>	245
	<i>Bibliography</i>	271
	<i>Index</i>	283

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Lionel Rose died in August 1990 and sadly did not see the publication of his book. We have endeavoured to check the facts contained in the Bibliography and Notes but must apologize to the reader for a few missing details that we were unable to track down. We apologize, too, for any errors or inconsistencies that may remain in the text.

CHILDREN WITHOUT CHILDHOOD: AN INTRODUCTION

British schoolchildren today enjoy a historically unprecedented degree of economic advantage and legal protection. But if they find such protections restrictive and seek to evade them, they can become very vulnerable to exploitation when fending for themselves illicitly in the labour market.

The National Association of Schoolmasters reported in 1987 that 'many tens of thousands of children' were illegally moonlighting. It admitted that 'Children wanted the money, parents wanted them to work, and employers were too ready to break the law', but could point to low wages and blatant disregard for health and safety regulations by employers; thus, between 1975 and 1986, 172 children under 16 were killed while working on farms.¹

However, it is to the Third World that one must look to see child exploitation at its grossest. A bounding birth rate and dire poverty combine to make children expendable, or valuable only in so far as their appealing qualities are an economic asset, as street sellers, say, beggars and child prostitutes. As urbanization grows apace so the problems of street waifdom, sweatshop slavery and sexual abuse become more widespread.²

All this carries echoes of the world described by Dickens, Mayhew, Sims and many others in Victorian Britain. But while we have emerged from the most shocking forms of child exploitation, the tendencies, the potential, are still there. The hidden problem of sexual abuse within the family has come to greater prominence in recent years; homeless youngsters adrift in the big cities can slide into prostitution; and the government's Youth Opportunities Programme can lend itself to the exploitation of semi-conscripted youngsters by unscrupulous employers.

This book examines the status and condition of British children, at work, at school and at home, from the 1860s, a decade of significant public inquiries into child labour and education, to the end of the First World War.

FAMILY SIZES 1860–1918

In 1861 over 7 million of England and Wales's 20 million population were under 15 years old. The birth rate was then at a peak and began to fall slightly only in the later 1870s, and more markedly thereafter.³ By 1901 the average birth rate was less than half of the 1861 figure, yet the proportion of under-15s in the population had fallen only from just over a third to just under a third during that period.⁴ This was due to the sharp decline in the juvenile death rate; for example, among 10–14-year-old boys it fell from 5.1 per cent in the later 1840s to 2.4 per cent in the 1890s.⁵ Thus the available supply of cheap juvenile labour did not noticeably decrease, though demand for it did decline in many staple industries owing to technological changes.

The average number of children born to a family fell from over 6 in the 1860s to just over 4 in the 1890s and under 2.5 in 1915.⁶ It was the middle classes who took the lead in family limitation from the 1870s, whilst among different occupational groups within the working classes family sizes varied. Lancashire textile workers' families were small, whilst farm labourers were more prolific, though by the Edwardian period there was a noticeable fall in the size of unskilled workers' families.

The extension of child labour laws and the advent of compulsory education are obvious standard accepted motives for the reduction in family size. And one would expect the 'educated' classes to have understood contraceptive techniques earlier. Yet this does not explain why Lancashire mill workers should have kept their families small when there remained opportunities for half-time labour for their children in the mills right up to the end of the period covered by this book.

Despite late Victorian and Edwardian eugenic fears about racial deterioration owing to the faster decline in fertility among the 'quality', a balance in net fertility was in fact maintained by differential death rates. Even as late as 1895 half the children up to 5 would die in the worst slums, compared with 19 per cent in a

healthy district like Dulwich.⁷ The younger the children the more tenuous their hold on life. The Registrar-General's Annual Report for 1888 shows that of the 511,000 deaths at all ages nearly a quarter (120,000) were infants under 1. (There were about 800,000 births a year at this period.) Survival chances progressively improved after the first year. Among 1–2-year-olds there were under 37,000 deaths, among 2–3-year-olds 15,000 deaths; the figure continuing to decline, so that among 10–14-year-olds inclusive there were under 9,000 deaths.⁸ Even at the time of George V's coronation in 1911, in a city with shocking poverty like Glasgow 54.7 per cent of all deaths were of infants and children up to 15. Nearly half of these child deaths were among the under-5s.⁹

A typical Victorian and Edwardian household would have been shifting in composition as little ones died off and new ones were born throughout the fertile period of a marriage, and such was the age span among the brood that at a given time the eldest might already have left home and struck out on their own while the youngest was still a baby.

CHILDREN'S OCCUPATION PATTERNS 1860–1918

Despite the high but falling death rate, and the flow of emigration, the population of England and Wales grew from 20 million in 1861 to 36 million in 1911. We have to visualize streets and tenements, villages and courts, teeming with child life. But how much real childhood youngsters could enjoy, and how soon they were harnessed to the adult treadmill of work and subsistence, may be glimpsed from this brief statistical outline.

Before the industrial revolution children were widely employed in agriculture and domestic production, and the coming of steam power created a great demand for children in textiles in the early nineteenth century.¹⁰ The 1861 census returns would indicate that among boys about a third of the 5–9-year-olds and 55–60 per cent of the 10–14-year-olds were in occupations. For girls, a slightly higher proportion of 5–9-year-olds and just under 50 per cent of the 10–14-year-olds were 'employed'.¹¹ The government statistician Dr William Farr estimated around this period that a seventh of the child population was 'upper' or 'middle' class,¹² and these would be included among the proportion of non-employed. The census describes 810,000 of the 1,173,000 boys of 5–9 and 778,000 of the

1,171,000 girls of the same age as 'scholars'. Among 10–14-year-olds, over 480,000 of the 1,060,000 boys and nearly 549,000 of the 1,045,000 girls were 'scholars'. Among the 0–4-year-olds about 16 per cent of boys and girls were so-called 'scholars'. Thus for the majority of working-class children any schooling experience was most common around 5–9 years and rapidly tailed off thereafter.

The census terminology and classifications, not surprisingly for the period, were rather fuzzy. Young half-timers in the mills were, it seems, classed as 'occupied', though they were legally required to attend part-time schooling. We cannot tell whether girls in the so-called 'straw-plait schools' were 'occupied' or 'scholars'. And the census does not distinguish the common childhood combination of intermittent school attendance and odd-jobbing such as street trading, shoeblacking and errand-running. It also seems a little strange, given the priorities of Victorian society, that the proportion of 10–14-year-old girls who were at school (which had to be paid for) and not 'employed' was slightly higher than that of boys. We know that girls were kept at home to help in domestic chores and baby-minding as unpaid labour; such girls were presumably not classed as 'employed' but as 'scholars', simply because, perhaps, they attended Sunday School or a ragged school once or twice a week.

Another ground for caution about the statistics is the overstatement of ages by children and parents to get jobs. The General Report of the 1881 census observed:¹³ 'we find reason to believe from careful examination of the age tables that a not inconsiderable number of girls who are not yet fifteen return themselves as being of that or a more advanced age, probably with the view of getting more readily taken as servants.' Correspondingly, parents may have been reluctant to admit that they were putting their under-5s to work. The census records no under-5s as 'employed', yet we know from other sources that children as young as 3 were in the strawplaiting schools or assisting (unpaid) in other domestic employment. However, the Victorian censuses, for all their limitations, do provide the most comprehensive picture of the scale of child labour. In 1861 about 140,000 children up to 14 were employed in 'textiles' (cotton, wool, hosiery, lace, etc.). For girls textiles and domestic service were the two largest single employers. Girls aged 10–14 (inclusive) were 40,000; out of the 259,000 female cotton workers, 65,000 out of the 664,000 general servants and 15,300 out of 68,000 'nurses' (i.e. nursemaids etc.). Boys of 10–14

were nearly 81,500 of the 914,000 male farm workers, 31,300 out of 198,000 male cotton workers and nearly 31,000 out of 247,000 (male) coal miners. The census does record over 27,000 boys as errand boys and messengers, but there were untold thousands of urchins who scavenged a living on the streets.

Whilst there was some fall in the proportion of children in the labour force over the next twenty years, it was the period 1881 to 1901 that witnessed a more rapid decline, as compulsory schooling and advancing labour legislation had their effect. The traditional staple employers like agriculture, domestic service and coal mining employed absolutely no—or relatively fewer—under-15s (though the textiles industry was distinguished by the persistence of the ‘half-time’ system). Thus girl domestics under 15 had fallen from nearly 100,000 in 1881 to about 67,000 in 1901, and boy farm workers from over 68,000 to about 38,000 over the same period. Boy coal miners had increased in numbers but declined from over 6 per cent to 5 per cent of the mining labour force.¹⁴ Structural changes in the staple industries, like the drift from the land and technological changes in industry, affected these patterns as much as any advance in education and child labour law, for child labour was now diversifying, though quantitatively these increases were more modest; more girls were working as tailoresses and in footwear, for example, and more boys were recorded as messengers, porters, shop, van and office boys.¹⁵ The ‘blind-alley’ moonlighting jobs of schoolchildren, about which so much concern was being expressed at the time, went unrecorded. In 1901 22 per cent of boys and 12 per cent of girls aged 10–14 were officially ‘occupied’, and by 1911 this had fallen further to 18.3 per cent and 10.4 per cent respectively.¹⁶ However, we cannot quantify the amount of unrecorded labour, particularly among girls engaged in family chores and assisting in domestic sweated trades. Moreover, the average figures conceal wide regional variations. Thus in 1901 whilst non-mill towns like London, Liverpool, Durham and York recorded well below 1 per cent of 10–13 -year-old boys as ‘occupied’, mill towns like Oldham, Blackburn and Halifax could show anything from 10 per cent to nearly 18 per cent of such boys employed as half-timers. Half-time work was also the dominant outlet for ‘occupied’ girls under 14. In 1911 of all such girls over a half were in textiles, and a third of the remainder in domestic service, though the 1911

census reported 'a large decline in the number employed in domestic service'.¹⁷

The early Factory Acts of 1833 and 1844, confined to the textile industry, introduced the principle of part-time schooling for child workers. Following the reports of the Royal Commission on Employment of Children in the 1860s, the Factories Extension Act and the Workshop Regulations Act of 1867 extended this principle to non-textile employment.¹⁸ It was not Parliament's intention to discourage the use of child labour, but to see that child employees received some education. However, while these early statutory responsibilities for employers did not affect child employment in textiles, non-textile employers were finding them too bothersome and began to shed child workers. The 1860 Mines Act (like the 1842 Act) banned boys under 10 from underground work, and it introduced educational conditions for recruitment of boys up to 12 which might oblige mine owners to provide part-time schooling till 12 years old. This too led employers to abandon the employment of boys below 12. A Liverpool factory inspector in the late 1860s noted how parents found their children's half-time factory earnings so meagre 'that on their parts they would rather keep them at home and have no bother with the schooling'.¹⁹ They were left to their own devices while their parents worked, and as one observer commented in 1867: 'They are idling in the streets and wynds; tumbling about in the gutters; selling matches; running errands; working in tobacco shops, cared for by no man.'²⁰ F.Musgrove points out that the educational and other protective legislation from 1870 was intended not so much to rescue children from exploitation, as to corral them in schools owing to the decline of work for them in industry: The economy's diminished scope for juvenile labour was already evident in the sixties; not only was demand decreasing but it was shifting from the important central industries like agriculture to employment more marginal to the economy, like domestic service.'

Thus factory and educational laws were not conceived in a spirit of pure altruism but were interwoven with supply of young hands and the demands of industry. For example, the early motive for the half-time schooling laws was not to broaden children's minds but to 'tame' them as child workers and make them more tractable *in their place of work*. And in the First World War the long-term decline in child labour was reversed by temporary need. Education authorities were then granting exemptions to the 12s and over

more freely. Those leaving school between 12 and 14 rose from 197,000 in 1915 to just under 241,000 in 1917. In country districts boys were released from schooling to do farm work. Factory half-timers over 12 (till then in decline) rose from nearly 70,000 in 1914–15 to nearly 74,000 in 1916–17.²¹ When the war was over and the men returned, the Fisher Education Act of 1918 locked the under-14s firmly back in school again.

FACTORIES AND MINES LEGISLATION

The cotton industry was at the forefront of the new factory system in the early 1800s and became the prime focus in the early exposures of the evils of mass-congregated wage slavery. Textile workers were the first targets of legislation to protect child workers; but the intention was to create sufficiently tolerable conditions for them to prolong their productive lives and to make them more tractable as a massed workforce through rudimentary education. The image of a harsh, callous capitalist profiteering from his child slaves is simplistic. Under the old cottage system of production, where the child was under parental supervision, conditions were at least as bad; children received no wages, and young hand-loom weavers might work in cold, damp cellars. There were, it seems, some indications that factory children were in less bad health than child domestic weavers in the 1830s.¹ The Children's Employment Commission of 1842–3 found that much 'child slavery lay not between the child and the capitalist, but between the child and the adult employee who took him or her on as an assistant and paid the child out of his or her own earnings; it was the latter who was more given to brutality and ill-treatment than the factory owner. It was common in parts of the Midlands in the 1840s for parents to bond their children to an employer for no wages as payment for debts incurred at work. In 1873 Mr Blenkinsopp, a factory sub-inspector in the Black Country iron trade, observed how parents and adult employees could be more exploitative than employers in evading the factory laws; employers might be unaware of the cheating over ages by parents who falsified Bible entries, or produced the birth certificates of older children. Hours of work were exceeded and the child assistants were taught to run and hide when a factory inspector was in the offing.² Nor was it necessarily poverty that

drove adults to behave in this way; it might be pure greed. Mr Blenkinsopp cited the case of a father earning £120 a year—an exceptional wage for a working man then. Two older sons together brought in another £54 a year.

Having discovered that a boy of 12 years was working at night, I went to the house where he lived at 11.30 a.m. and found that he had been working always at night for some time. He had been at work the whole of the previous night, though suffering from a severe burn on the arm. The child worked from six o'clock at night to six in the morning; reached home at 7 a.m.; had to be at school at 2 p.m. [for part-time schooling, then required by law) and back to work at 6 p.m., having only seven hours out of the 24 for meals and rest.

The 1833 Factory Act, as strengthened by Lord Ashley's Act of 1844, set a minimum age for employment in a textile factory (at 8 in 1844), and maximum hours (30 a week) with provision for part-time schooling up to 13 years old for 3 hours each working day, or alternatively full-time on 3 alternate days in the week. No child could start work at all in a textile factory without a health certificate signed by a doctor approved by the factory inspector. Subsequent textile Factory Acts to 1853 regulated the hours of 'young persons' (13–18) at 10 1/2 a day. Of course, cheating and evasion vitiated the law at first but in time the principle of part-time schooling and medical vetting of prospective child employees came to be accepted.³

J.R.Clynes, a Lancashire mill boy who was to become a minister in the first Labour government, has left a vivid memoir of conditions amid the clash and clatter of machinery.⁴ He was born in 1869, and at 10 became a half-time 'little piecer' from 6 a.m. to noon, for 2s 6d a week, and attending school in the afternoon. Small children were valued, as they could run between the machines, just missing the dangerous moving parts:

Often the threads on the spindles broke as they were stretched and twisted and spun. The broken ends had to be instantly repaired; the piecer ran forward and joined them swiftly with a deft touch which is an art of its own. This was my job. I performed it, unresting, in my bare feet, since leather on those oil-soaked floors would have been treacher-

ous. Often I fell, rolling instinctively and in terror from beneath the gliding jennies, well aware that horrible mutilation or death would result if the advancing monsters overtook and gripped me. Sometimes splinters as keen as daggers drove through my naked feet, leaving aching wounds from which dribbles of blood oozed forth to add to the slipperiness of the floor.... Running in and out, straining my eyes in the gas-lit gloom to watch for broken threads, my ten-year-old legs soon felt like lead and my head spun faster than the pitiless machinery. But I had to keep on; the dinner whistle would shrill some time soon; then I could rest my aches and regain my breath, ready to run two miles home to dinner and set off for school.

Even so, he considered himself better off than his father had been before legislation reduced the hours of labour. At 12 Clynes started full-time as a piecer at 10s a week.

A mill boy of nearly a generation later was George Tomlinson, born in Lancashire in 1890.⁵ He too was to rise through the trade union movement to a high rank in the Labour Party. His father had started in the cotton mills at 8, and George began at 12 as a half-timer, earning *2s 3d* for a 30-hour week. For young George, as for so many schoolchildren, the prospect of working in the mill was viewed not with dread but anticipation, as a watershed; now they were earning and were half-way to being grown up. They did not appreciate the long-term physical damage. At 13 George became a full-timer, earning 5s for a 56 1/2-hour week.

One should not think that schooling was necessarily welcomed by the children as a relief from labour. They attended either factory schools set up by the employer, dame schools, or the British or National church schools.⁶ In the 1840s the worst on the whole were the dame schools, according to factory inspectors' reports; factory schools were better; but the church schools were the best. Competent teachers in the factory schools were, however, lacking. The fees were deducted from the children's wages. Employers provided the premises, which at worst might be some odd corner of the factory where the teaching went on against a background of machine clatter. It was not uncommon for maimed ex-manual workers, themselves barely literate, to be employed as teachers; in effect, lowlier versions of Wackford Squeers, readily resorting to the cane to compensate for a lack of natural authority.

Contemporary comment on the value of this schooling was mixed. Some were more impressed by the fatigue of the pupils; others claimed that their attendance was more regular than full-time 'Voluntary' scholars, as it was a legal condition of employment, and that they learned as much as full-timers, since the latter could not digest a full day's mental work. As we shall see, the fatigue issue was to become more insistent later on; it may be that the more favourable comments were coloured by optimism and idealism at this early stage.

The Children's Employment Commission of 1842–3 exposed the horrors of child labour in the mines:⁷ children as young as 5 being sent below ground; multiple shifts creating spells of up to 36 hours at a time underground; boys' and girls' cattle-like use as wagon-pullers in narrow shafts; beatings and whippings by older workmen as regular and habitual; injuries from roof falls or wagons rolling over them; and industrial disease of the lungs and skin. Periodic mining disasters had claimed many tragically young lives among the victims. In 1841 the 46 collieries shipping coal from the Tyne employed 7,261 adults and about 2,000 aged 13–18, and *admitted* only to employing nearly 1,500 children below 13. Employers argued that the cheap and plentiful supply of child labour kept costs down and children were useful to work the narrow seams. The 1842 Mines Act banned all females and boys under 10 from underground work, but it was widely evaded, and even in 1860 boys of 6 were worked underground where seams were awkward or thin. The 1860 Mines Act,⁸ as well as repeating the ban on under-10s below ground, also made their employment between 10 and 12 conditional upon a certificate of literacy from a schoolmaster, or alternatively required employers to provide part-time schooling for 10–12-year-olds for at least 3 hours a day twice weekly. This applied to underground employees only. Thus while by 1860 major areas of child labour had been publicized in official reports, it was only in textile factories and mines that the principle of minimum wages, maximum hours and educational conditions had been applied.

In 1861 Lord Shaftesbury pressed in Parliament for a new comprehensive study of child employment, as many developments had taken place in industry since the early 1840s, and advances had even worsened some conditions for children.⁹ A Royal Commission on Employment of Children was set up and produced six comprehensive Reports between 1863 and 1867, including

domestic sweatshops, brickfields, agriculture and chimney-sweeping, which lie outside this chapter.¹⁰ One major area left unconsidered was domestic service; it has been suggested that this was too embarrassingly close to the needs of upper-class legislators, and that this labour was regarded as a useful training for home-making for a woman when she married.¹¹

The Reports were a catalogue of long hours, low wages, appalling working conditions, industrial diseases and accidents from dust, heat, fumes, fatigue and poor lighting; and also of widespread ignorance and illiteracy. For example, in the metal trade forges of Staffordshire and Worcestershire children worked night shifts and the same hours as adults—anything from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m.; little girls were working 14 hours a day.¹² Schooling opportunities were very limited; a sample survey of Staffordshire schools showed that only 25 per cent were 10 or over. The investigators were shocked by working children's total ignorance of religion—religious knowledge was then regarded as the criterion of a civilized education. Children's replies to Scripture questions included: 'The devil is a good person; I don't know where he lives', and 'Christ was a wicked man.' One inspector found that of 80 7–16-year-olds at one metalworks 72.5 per cent could not read at all, 13.75 per cent were almost illiterate, and 12.5 per cent could read a little. At a firebricks works a 19-year-old girl moulder responded to questions: 'Have not heard of Scotland. Don't know which way it is from here.... Don't know what a whale is.' And from a 12-year-old at the same works: 'Have not heard of France or London. The Queen's name is Mary.'¹³

Accidents were common in the metal trade, where youngsters of 8 worked with pieces of red-hot iron flying about. A nail-maker, William Tetler, told the commission:¹⁴

Four years ago my boy, then betwixt 10 and 11, and not having begun long, got two pieces of iron in at the top of his trousers, and before they could be got out they dropped and caught his leg, burning two wounds, each as big as the face of my hammer...and the scars are there now and always will be. [This kept him off work for 9 weeks.] He got a dreadful wound on his hand now, from a burn done three weeks ago. If it had been his hammer hand he could not have worked at all.

The grinding trades in the Sheffield cutlery industry were lethal. Boys started at 9–12 years old, and grinders rarely lived into their forties. The boys worked in very high temperatures and were expected to do overtime. A boy of 9 years old, George Allinsworth, told the commission:¹⁵

Came here as a cellar boy last Friday. Next morning we had to begin at 3, so I stopped here all night. Live five miles off. Slept on the floor of the furnace overhead, with an apron under me and a bit of a jacket over me. The two other days I have been here at 6 a.m. Aye! it *is* hot here.

The commission reported the sight of a 14-year-old boy wielding a 2 2-pound hammer.

In the pottery trade youngsters could work in temperatures of 120–148°F. They served as ‘mould-runners’, carrying the article fresh out of the mould to the stove room, where the atmosphere was charged with particles of fine clay. This contaminated and overheated atmosphere brought about chest ailments, stunted growth and premature death.¹⁶ In the wallpaper-staining trade children worked from 6 a.m. to 9 or 10 p.m. and were in danger from arsenic poisoning from the green dyes used in colouring. Also, the French chalk or china clay, used to help smooth the brushing of colours over the paper, hung in the air causing respiratory problems. In the match trade youngsters were afflicted with ‘phossy jaw’ caused by inhaling white phosphorus fumes, though Bryant & May was switching to safer red phosphorus. Hours were long; a 12-year-old girl worked from 7 a.m. sometimes to 9 p.m. for 4s a week. Many witnesses had bad teeth; they felt sick and dizzy at the end of the day, and advanced cases of ‘phossy jaw’ had to be treated with excision of part of the jawbone in hospital.

Two positive points were, however, brought out in the Reports. The original hostility among textile workers to part-time work had now abated as they saw the benefits to children’s health, efficiency and improved output in the time they were working.¹⁷ And compared with the 1840s it was now rare to see children below 6 employed in trades;¹⁸ the lace and straw-plait schools with little girls of 3 or 4 were exceptional. The commission also *claimed* that there was less cruelty and harshness than 20 years before.

The Reports led to the 1867 Factories Extension Act¹⁹ (the Workshops Act passed soon after will be examined in Chapter 3).

Broadly this applied the principles of the textile Factories Acts in regard to minimum ages, health certification, maximum hours and part-time schooling to other types of factory, such as blast furnaces, metalworks, rubber, glass, paper, tobacco, etc. It was hoped to improve the lot of non-textile work-children, but not to remove them from the world of factory labour; however, unlike the textile industry, where part-timers had been increasing in the 1860s, other industries were finding the new obligations uneconomic and began dispensing with child labour, which, as we saw in Chapter 1, was to become progressively marginalized in sweatshop and servicing activities and petty trading, and further constricted by the extension of public schooling from 1870. In the metal trades, for example, the proportion of under-15s employed fell sharply from 7.9 per cent to 3.1 per cent between 1861 and 1881.²⁰

The legal protections in the textile trades were being undermined by the early 1870s through new technology and faster rates of production, coupled with incentive schemes which prompted foremen to slave-drive their subordinates.²¹ This led to a new (textile) Factory Act of 1874, which raised the minimum age of employment from 8 to 10, and made the part-time ages now run from 10 to the fourteenth birthday. However, a new departure was the opportunity to start full-time at 13 upon production of a certificate of minimum educational attainment. This was the beginning of the 'exemption' system. By this time the 1870 Education Act had empowered local boards of education to make education compulsory in their districts up to 13, and thenceforth there was to be an interrelationship between employment and education law.

The 1874 Act led to demands for its extension to other types of factories and a Royal Commission on Factories and Workshops Acts was appointed in 1876 to consider this. It reported favourably on the effects of earlier legislation:

The improvement in the sanitary arrangements and ventilation of factories has been most marked in recent years, and the cases in which young children are employed in labour unfitted for their years, or in which young persons and women suffer physically from overwork, are now, we believe, as uncommon as formerly they were common.

Such a statement was relative to its time, and too sanguine. A sample survey of 12-year-olds in 1873 showed an average weight

among factory children of 70.57 pounds compared with nearly 79 pounds for middle-class children.²² Of course we cannot be too certain about Victorian sampling techniques, but the contrast in health and physique between the social classes were to be confirmed by later anthropometric studies. By themselves such figures would not prove unequivocally the ill-effects of early labour; it was agreed justifiably that the working class's poor physique was due at least as much to slum living conditions, and defenders of child labour argued that 'beneficial employment' actually sustained children's health by keeping them away from their disease-ridden habitations and increasing family earnings; this, of course, ignored the multiplicity of occupational diseases children were prey to.

The Royal Commission recommended extension of the 1874 Act and assimilation of workshop and factory law. The 1878 Factories and Workshops Act was a comprehensive and consolidating measure.²³ To some extent the 1876 Education Act had helped towards assimilation by forbidding child employment below 10 and making the employment of 10–13-year-olds conditional upon a certificate of attainment in the three Rs, unless they were to work part-time and continue part-time schooling to 13. Textile factories retained shorter hours under the Act, and though workshop hours were technically assimilated to those of non-textile factories, their physical standards and inspection arrangements were less stringent.

Child labour had by 1890 become a general European concern and an International Labour Conference at Berlin that year recommended a universal minimum working age of 12 (for northern Europe) and even then only if minimum academic standards had been reached; other proposals included a ban on night work under 14, a maximum 6-hour working day for youngsters and stricter safeguards for health and safety.²⁴ However, the Conservative government did not implement these proposals owing to opposition from its industrialist supporters. In 1891 the minimum working age was raised to 11, and it was not until 1901 that the Berlin recommendations were roughly attained when employment below 12 was prohibited, and this might be extended to 14 in the absence of exemption or labour certificates for full or part-time withdrawal from school. This was supplemented by the Employment of Children Act 1903²⁵ which empowered local authorities to raise the minimum age for any occupation in their area above 12 and prescribe maximum hours for any child (i.e. up

to 14). The Act also barred children outright from any occupation likely to be injurious to health, such as those involving the lifting or carrying of heavy objects. The legislation brings us into the Edwardian era and its energetic concerns for the stamina of the 'race' against the economic challenge to Britain's former industrial primacy, especially from Germany and the USA. The country's future strength was seen increasingly to be in the welfare of children at school and their protection in the workplace. However, the 1903 Act was not energetically enforced. Few local authorities had framed by-laws by 1907 and there was a general reluctance to grapple with the conditions in domestic workshops.²⁶ Local councillors, drawn mostly from the governing and employing classes, were accused of indifference.²⁷

Even the mandatory provisions regarding hazardous occupations seem to have been widely ignored. Industrial accidents were far more common among children than adults; a factory part-timer in 1909 was still twice as likely to be injured at work as a full-time adult colleague.²⁸ Historically factory children had experienced scalping from machinery, crushed bones, injury and even death from overseers' blows.²⁹ Many accidents happened on their first day when over-eager in their new job and inadequately supervised. The death of a 13-year-old piecer, Lewis Timmins, on his first day at a mill in Atherton in 1909 prompted Sir Charles Dilke to raise the matter in Parliament.³⁰ He complained that employers and older workmen alike did not take their responsibilities to young novices seriously and that the 1903 Act was not being enforced properly by the factory inspectors. Timmins had crawled under a mule with a brush and wiper, believing it to be at rest, but it had just paused before the carriage returned, killing the boy.

Parallel with the trends in factory law, mines legislation was tending towards the further restrictions on labour below ground of boys under 12, and limiting the hours of 12–16-year-olds. In 1872 enactments prescribed longer hours of part-time schooling for the under-12s in coal mines and totally banned underground working in metalliferous mines by the under-12s; a similar ban did not apply to coal mines until 1887.³¹ However, youngsters of 13 or over could be worked 54 hours a week. Even in the early 1900s boys in some pits continued to work over 10 hours a day though elsewhere the unions had secured reductions to 6 or 7.³² In the mines, as in the factories, protective legislation was accompanied by a progressive

abandonment of child labour; in 1861 11.9 per cent of the male workforce was under 15, but only 5 per cent in 1901.

Key statutory figures in protective legislation, apart from the factory inspectors, were the certifying factory surgeons. They originated under the 1833 Factory Act to certify the probable age of children whose parents wished them to start work in the textile mills, before the era of civil birth registration. The 1844 Factory Act extended this duty to certifying the physical fitness of children for such work, as a compulsory pre-condition of employment. This was extended to all types of factory in 1867, but workshops had not yet entered the ambit of regulation, and it was claimed that the effect of certification was to drive unfit children into the workshops, where conditions were generally worse.³³ The Factories and Workshops Acts of 1878 and 1901 made it optional only for workshop proprietors to require a factory surgeon's certificate of fitness.³⁴ The result was that certification for workshops remained a dead letter. In 1901, whilst 376,278 children and young persons were screened for factory jobs, only 413 were examined for workshops.³⁵ Where factory part-timers were concerned, it seems that some employers were more casual about the legal requirement of health certification, and just accepted the teachers' certificates of eligibility.³⁶

How 'effective' were the certifying factory surgeons? We must remember that any disqualification of a child from factory employment doubtless doomed the boy or girl to some casual or workshop labour, and it may be that the good work of the doctors was illusory. Surgeons were under great pressure from employers and parents, especially in their earlier history, and they were prey to various dodges by parents to mislead about the child's age; even when birth registration had become general by the 1870s, parents might produce the birth certificate of an older child and falsify the applicant's identity. None the less, when there were calls by employers in 1891 to abolish certifying surgeons as 'superfluous' now that birth certification was universal, their supporters successfully upheld their continuing worth. Each surgeon might examine up to 200 children a week and, claimed the NSPCC in 1891, they uncovered many potentially dangerous defects:

Six cases of syphilitic sores of the mouth have been detected in glass-blowers. Men and boys alternately use the same blowpipe.... A girl who had previously lost one eye has been

prevented working among dust.... A girl in the early stages of consumption has been prevented working in a dusty flax mill. Two epileptics have been prevented working among machinery, in spite of the urgent solicitations of the parents and a foreman.³⁷

We can see how dangers and tragedies were averted in individual cases in individual factories; but we do not know the fate of, for example, the aforementioned one-eyed girl and the epileptics. The overall consequence of factory surgeons' service needs a fuller study.

SWEATSHOPS, COTTAGE LABOUR AND MOONLIGHTING UP TO THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Whilst it was the ‘dark satanic mills’ and their impersonal regime of massed labour under a capitalistic boss that received most of the early publicity for child exploitation, in fact, as was said in the last chapter, much of the worst exploitation was inflicted in small workshops often at the hands of the children’s own parents. Small workshops were more hidden; their abuses long pre-dated the industrial revolution¹ and it is most unlikely that children’s overall lot was worsened by steam technology. One must remember that the homeless city waifs were usually orphans and runaways from the workhouse or grinding ‘apprenticeships’, so-called, to *small* tradesmen like chimney sweeps and undertakers as exemplified in *Oliver Twist*. And it was the spotlight cast on factory and mines employment by the 1842–3 Children’s Employment Commission and the 1863–1 Royal Commission on Employment of Children that also illuminated the conditions in rural domestic industries, such as lace-, glove- and button-making. In the 1860s little girls of 4 to 6 years old were already ruining their eyesight in straw-plaiting and lace-making. In the hosiery trade toddlers under 5 were kept working till past midnight, and mothers were said to pin the children to their knee to keep them working, and slap them to keep them awake.² Other small-scale rural crafts employing children included brush- and besom-making, knitting, chair- and hurdle-making and (in fishing areas) net-braiding.³ In the cities; the situation was similar. In the 1860s the Scottish philanthropist Annie Macpherson exposed the plight of child matchbox-makers in London’s East End receiving 3s 4d for a gross of boxes.⁴

At this time, too, in the same district 7-year-olds in cheap tailoring shops were working 12 hours a day for 6d a day, and in

Bethnal Green's White Street there was a twice-weekly 'slave market' where children would present themselves to be hired.⁵ Children employed by parents were generally the worse off for pay. They 'earned' either whatever parents were ready to pay them, or nothing at all as 'helpers'.

Those working in the garment and millinery sweatshops were virtually all girls. The workrooms were overcrowded, overheated and stuffy from the gas fires for heating the irons; condensation ran down the walls, and TB and other respiratory disorders were common. Girls often lived on the premises as 'apprentices', sleeping in crowded, damp rooms, up to three in a bed. During the London 'high society' season youngsters could be up till midnight from 6.30 a.m. completing rush orders.⁶ But again it was children employed at home who could be worst off. The crowded slum rooms they ate and slept in were crammed with the raw materials of their trade, and they had to suffer 24 hours a day, for example, the noxious glues, the steam of washerwomen's tubs and the damp of clothes hanging to dry, and nasal and adenoidal reactions to feather-sorting and fur-pulling.⁷

The Workshops Act of 1867⁸ forbade the employment of children under 8 in workshops (defined as premises employing fewer than 50 people), and restricted the employment of 8–13-year-olds to 6 1/2 hours a day, with a statutory part-time schooling of 10 hours a week. However, permitted shift arrangements were more flexible than for factories; children did not have to be certified as fit by a doctor; and provisions regarding ventilation, fencing of machinery and prohibition from dangerous trades were less stringent. Inspection arrangements were also looser; these were left to local authority sanitary inspectors, and were not transferred to the factory inspectorate till 1871. The discovery, let alone the inspection, of backstreet workshops, was a hopeless task and the act was largely a dead letter.⁹

As we saw in Chapter 2, the 1878 Factories and Workshops Act was intended to assimilate factory and workshop law in regard to minimum ages, academic attainments and part-time schooling, but improved conditions and restricted hours in factories were in practice not matched in workshops. The declining demand for child factory labour was pushing children, when not at school, into marginal and sweatshop trades, where the forces of supply and demand continued to operate adversely on children, notwithstanding safeguards on paper. Even under the law, in

regard to ventilation, cleanliness, holidays and mealtimes, workshop children were still worse off, and inspectors' powers were crippled by the requirement of a magistrate's warrant before they could enter home workshops suspected of breaking the law; this concession to an Englishman's right to privacy now made it impossible to catch offenders red-handed, and ensured that workshop law was not worth the paper it was printed on.

Workshop conditions again started coming to the fore in the late 1880s. Awareness of the ineffectiveness of the 1878 Act, coupled with the current influx of Jews from Russia, who were then identified with clothing sweatshops, and whose competition would, it was feared, drive down wage rates, led to the appointment of a House of Lords Select Committee on the Sweated Trades in 1888.¹⁰ The general conditions were substantially the same as twenty years before; for example, in one boot and shoe workshop, a husband, wife and six children slept in the same room where ten men were employed, a not uncommon arrangement in the capital's increasingly crowded tenements. Wages were too low for children to sustain themselves, and the half-time provisions for the under-13s were widely evaded in the Midlands metal workshops. The one improvement since the 1860s was that the starting age in the metal trade was now around 11 or 12 instead of 7 or 8. But in the surviving scattered and uninspectable rural crafts like straw-plaiting, conditions in the 1890s had not changed much since the 1860s.¹¹

Nationwide schooling provision from 1870 had made inroads on full-time labour, but parents were illegally keeping their children from school; the 1891 Factory Act raised the minimum age of employment in factories and workshops to 11, but without inspectors' rights to instant entry into domestic workshops, it was of little value on its own. Visits from the school boards' 'truancy men' and an application of the 1889 Children's Act provisions against the wilful ill-treatment or neglect of children by persons having custody of them were important supplements. But the squeeze on full-time labour was to draw closer attention to the problem of 'moonlighting'—child employment out of school hours—in the 1890s. Prior to the late 1890s the government had paid little heed to this problem, except for entertainers and street traders,¹² but in 1897 an article by Mrs Edith Hogg in the *Nineteenth Century*¹³ on 'Schoolchildren as wage earners', followed by *Daily Mail* exposés, brought the issue out into the open. A philanthropic lobby, the

Joint Committee on Wage Earning Children, was then formed. Traditionally the Education Department had no interest in children beyond the purely pedagogic; it was solely concerned with the three Rs until a Joint Committee deputation convinced the department of the economic wastefulness of teaching exhausted children.¹⁴

There was to be a spate of books dealing with 'moonlighting', such as Frank Hird's *The Cry of the Children* (2nd edn, 1898), Robert Sherard's *The Child Slaves of Britain* (1905) and works by Mrs Archibald Mackirdy and Clementina Black in 1907. The issue was also part of a wider concern about adult 'sweating'; in 1906 the *Daily News* ran a 'Sweated Industries' Exhibition, visited by 30,000 people;¹⁵ and in 1907 a Select Committee on Home Work was appointed. The economic argument then put forward against cheap sweated labour was that it reduced the incentive for technological innovation. Modern machinery coupled with high wage rates (for adults), so dispensing with the need for children's earnings, was the best way to benefit the greatest number. None the less, official circles were at first slow to respond. It was back-bench parliamentary initiative which prompted a survey in 1899 of the numbers of moonlighting schoolchildren. Its incomplete returns from questionnaires sent to schools yielded an understated figure of 145,000 'moonlighters' out of 5 million schoolchildren.¹⁶ The 1889 Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act addressed itself to the *moral* dangers inherent in the employment of children as street and pub entertainers, and as street sellers and beggars, but neither this nor the 1894 Cruelty Act dealt with indoor moonlighting beyond general provisions against wilful mistreatment or neglect of children. The 1876 and 1880 Education Acts were only indirectly concerned with child labour in so far as it led to absenteeism and truancy. It is true that Scottish Education Acts of 1878 and 1901 expressly prohibited schoolchild employment after dusk, but they were dead letters.¹⁷ This was the extent of legislation when outside lobbying finally pushed the Home Office and the Education Department into a comprehensive interdepartmental inquiry into the Employment of Schoolchildren, in 1901.¹⁸

Edith Hogg's article had described striking cases of out-of-school odd-jobbing. For example, one boy worked for a greengrocer from 8 to 9.30 a.m.; then he went to school and worked in his lunchtime from noon to 1 p.m., and again after school from 5 to 7 p.m., and did a further 12 hours on Saturdays, all for 3s a week. A 9-year-old