

## Depictions of the “ideal child” in nineteenth-century British literature and legislature

Generations of readers are familiar with the child characters who populate the works of Charles Dickens: the innocent (but hungry) Oliver Twist, and happy-go-lucky urchin the Artful Dodger, quietly suffering Little Nell, and poor crippled Tiny Tim. Some may even know that Dickens researched the social veracity of his settings, avidly reading the Parliamentary “Blue Books” which reported debates on the Children’s Employment Commission and the Poor Law, and visiting a mine to see working conditions for himself. He was not the only author to take his subject matter so seriously: the poet Elizabeth Barrett used information given to her by one of the Sub-Commissioners of the Factory Acts to construct her 1843 poem “The Cry of the Children”, and Frances Milton Trollope visited Lancashire to get a first-hand impression of the conditions there before writing *The Life And Adventures of Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy* (1840).<sup>1</sup> Clearly, it was important to these authors that they capture a sense of social reality in their work, however unpalatable that might be. The popularity of some of these works also suggests that readers did not shy away from “difficult” topics; in fact they made for good fiction, at least for adult readers.

Scholars have written much less about how the lives of poor children were depicted in novels written *for children*. This is the stance we take in this article. We have adopted an inter-disciplinary approach to examine the commonalities and disjunctures in the way that the working-class young were described in what can loosely be called “policy” sources – the Parliamentary enquiries into children’s industrial work in the 1830s and 40s – which were aimed at an educated and largely adult audience, compared with fiction published for a

juvenile audience - specifically, works by Hesba Stretton, George MacDonald and Charles Kingsley, published from the 1860s to 1871. Our aims are two-fold: first to reveal an alternative contemporary depiction of the young poor which has been little considered hitherto; and second, to foreground what this tells us about different audiences and the sorts of knowledge which was deemed appropriate for them. We argue that while both types of works were concerned with child poverty and its impact on health and morals in particular, they had quite different purposes. The authors of the Blue Books sought to reveal, sometimes even exaggerate, social ills (albeit often calling on quite literary – even borderline fictional – devices to heighten their impact). Novelists writing for (largely middle-class) children, in contrast, tried to protect their readers from such details, using them principally as a backdrop for moral improvement. In the process, however, we also address certain qualities which were clearly being adopted as part of an ideal for children of all classes: namely, freedom from *overwork*, access to moral guidance, and good health. Our conclusions highlight that the lack of attention to children’s literature has led to an over-simplification of our understanding of children’s bodies and minds in this period; both as workers and as readers.

An important reference point for our analysis has been Betensky’s concept of “knowing”; that is, the ability of novels to make upsetting or distasteful subjects known to readers without them having to see them at first hand.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, the material in the Blue Books was collected in order to increase knowledge, and its publication was designed to further circulate it: more than 10,000 copies of the 1842 Report of the Children’s Employment Commission were circulated to the public and they were also précised in the newspapers.<sup>3</sup> Most of the authors of social realist fiction for adults (such as Dickens, Gaskell and Disraeli) were also concerned to increase awareness of social inequalities; in other words, to create a sense of “knowing” in their readers, or to educate without polluting with first-hand

observation. Readers were protected via the veil of fiction from observing at first hand the crippled and stunted children who were called to testify to the Commissions. But things are a little different when it comes to fiction written for children. Analysis of some of the key novels of the period shows that “knowing” was not an acceptable aim for middle-class child readers. They were encouraged to “see” poverty and inequality, yes, and even to come to their own responses to it (the middle-class child characters in Charlotte Yonge 1856 novel *The Daisy Chain* raise money for a church after seeing the poor homes of some local families; a typical evangelical model which was based on experience from the author’s own childhood). But when it came to the details of infirm or ruined bodies, or long hours of work, the novels stay largely silent. Perhaps this was partly because such conditions were thought to be too far removed from the child-readers’ experiences to be appealing. However, we also argue that it played into ideals of childhood among the reading classes. Such children were ripe for education in moral values and compassion, but not for the grittier details of lives lived in poverty. Details of destitution, hard work and ill health thus became even more thickly veiled via fantasy settings and stories of moral rescue and improvement; fiction served to *neutralize* rather than reveal the details of industrial work. Novels like George MacDonald’s *At the Back of the North Wind*, for example, focused on the edifying impact of innocence and compassion on a boy from a down-at-heel family; while the franker “waif and stray” novels of Hesba Stretton, which do contain working child characters, are set outside the workplace and focus on social ills like poor housing. There is also a strong emphasis in Stretton’s works on the equation between sound morals and innocence, and the potential for rescue and redemption for children challenged by poverty (not for nothing were her novels published by the Evangelical Tracts Society). It was thus a very different type of “knowing” which was promoted in children’s literature, and one which was principally designed to encourage self-reflection and moral growth.

Large-scale enquiry into the state of child labor in Britain's factories began with the Select Committee chaired by Conservative Party MP Michael Sadler in 1832. The resulting report (which did not lead directly to legislation, although it did form part of the reforming move which resulted in the 1833 Factory Act) was received with eager attention by the public. Its key - and highly arresting, finding - was that industrial conditions (specifically heavy work and the demands it made on children's bodies and capacity for moral instruction) was in the process of corrupting the minds and bodies of the young. Thus, repetitive tasks done over the course of long hours, and at young ages, compromised health and vitality, removed the potential for schooling and religious instruction, caused deformities which affected future earning potential and stature, and opened children up to the corrupting influence of mixed adult company. These lessons were clearest in Sadler's Report, which was heavily criticized by contemporaries and historians alike for its pro-reform agenda, the way that it cherry picked witnesses, and asked leading questions. It also had a big impact on several key works of adult fiction of the time – we see it in the toll of the streets on the Artful Dodger's morals, for example, or on Tiny Tim's fragile body. Importantly, it took longer for these themes to appear in works written for children, even in the more muted forms that we have noted: all three authors considered here published their best-known works in the 1860s and 70s. This lag and the potential reasons for it are themes to which we return in our conclusions.

Genre was also, naturally, an important factor in influencing the two types of sources: fiction is written with an eye to what will sell, and so social problems tend to be epitomised by individual characters rather than a whole mass of bodies. The Blue Books, in contrast, aimed to show the extent of overwork for women and children on a larger scale. Their authors called upon statistical evidence from doctors, overseers and local magistrates to judge

stunted growth and ill health among whole work-forces, summing up hours worked, early starts, and the very young ages of some child workers. In fact, “bodies” were a key canvas for conveying their impressions of health and work, both in a mass and as individuals. Yet, at the same time, they actually employed many of the same tropes as the fictional accounts, including personal stories, accounts rich in florid detail, and showman-like displays of deformities. Frankel has actually described the reports of the Children’s Employment Commission as a sort of literary endeavour in their own right, and this is certainly supported in their circulation figures.<sup>4</sup> For some historians this has been a problem, although they have remained a key source of information on working hours, discipline, and employment conditions.<sup>5</sup> Here, it adds weight to our approach, by broadening our perspective on “knowing”, audience and representations of children, and allowing us to reveal an evolving, albeit often as yet unspoken sense, of a model of childhood which could be applied across the social classes. The following sections will analyse the types of poverty and employment conditions depicted in the two source types, and relate them to a set of reference points from the need for education and moral training in childhood, physical health, growth and liberty, the nature of urban life, changing notions of citizenship, and the question of responsibility for children of the “state”. We will see that while there are common preoccupations in the official enquiries and the novels written for children, there were also clear points of divergence which demonstrate the existence of a growing range of perspectives on the minds and bodies of the young.

### The “policy child”: overwork and physical corruption

We begin by considering the evidence of the Blue Books, and in particular those reported by the Sadler Commission in 1832, the Factories Enquiry Commission of 1833, and

the Mines Report of 1842. As already noted, these reports were specifically designed to reveal the unknown; to provide parliament with a sense of the lie of the land with regard to child (and female) work in factories and mines. They certainly did not balk at revealing unappetising details (albeit often with some bias either in favour of, or against reform), and ultimately conveyed a sense of childhood corrupted by overwork in industrial and urban conditions (the rural setting of many mines did not offset the industrial nature of the employment in the minds of contemporaries). Although contemporaries did not speak in such terms, the evidence as a whole gives us an implicit model of the childhood of the poor. This was clearly derived from a more middle-class model which children in industrial work were failing to meet, most commonly in terms of health, physical stature or energy. However, there was also an underlying expectation that children of these classes would be in work in some form. This was partly because their economic productivity was important, even vital, both as child workers and as future adult workers and parents – but this was a balance which was shifting (as far as reformers were concerned at least) in favour of the health and happiness of children. For the first time, however, poor children on a grand scale were starting to be seen both as vital resources for output *and* as objects of more intrinsic social value.<sup>6</sup> As the report of the 1833 Factories Enquiry Commission (appointed partly to overcome the perceived pro-reform biases of the Sadler Report) put it,

The effects of factory labour on children are immediate and remote: the immediate effects are fatigue, sleepiness, and pain; the remote effects, such at least as are usually conceived to result from it, are, deterioration of the physical constitution, deformity, disease, and deficient mental instruction and moral culture.<sup>7</sup>

The “immediate” effects were examined principally via the child’s body and demeanour. Short stature, physical deformity and listlessness were all called on to indicate

overwork, in the worst cases proceeding to “positive disease”; a chain of degeneration to which we will return. All of the commissions spent time gathering evidence on working hours: the 1833 Commission, which was more comprehensive in terms of geographical coverage than the 1832 Sadler Report, reported standard working days of 11 to 13 hours, although some witnesses in 1832 cited instances of children working overnight at busy times, and sometimes the next day as well.<sup>8</sup> The curtailing of hours was not a given among contemporaries at this time because of its repercussions on general productivity and household incomes; some children stated that they would rather have higher wages than shorter hours too. However, it is clear from their questions that the Commissioners felt that these hours were excessive for young workers, and the campaign to limit work at 10 hours per day recurred frequently in both reports (finally achieved for child and women workers in the 1847 Factory Act). Many children were reported to work until they were almost asleep, with a consequent increase in accidents and beatings. A Leicestershire spinner interviewed in 1833 described a common scene at his place of work, speaking here of the child pieceners, who “pieced” together the broken endings of the threads, or cardings, on a machine called a billy frame:

I have seen them fall asleep, and they have been performing their work with their hands while they were asleep, after the billy had stopped, when their work was over. I have stopped and looked at them for two minutes, going through the motions of piecening fast asleep, when there was really no work to do, and they were really doing nothing.<sup>9</sup>

For children working in mines this was magnified by the distances travelled while transporting the heavy excavated material: up to nine miles in one mine where no horses were employed. Other jobs were less physically demanding but brought tedium and loneliness, like

the role of colliery trappers minding the trapdoors which regulated the flow of air. Other witnesses, including the parents of child workers, felt that overwork brought mental fatigue and a lack of spirit, although there are a few bright examples of children stating that they had plenty of energy for play after work (one witness said that they “set off like a parcel of hounds” from work); a response which must have confounded the expectations of the reformers.<sup>10</sup>

Short stature was another recurring theme used to indicate overwork, the carrying of excessive loads (especially in mines) and poor diet. Several witnesses produced tables of heights and weights of child workers to demonstrate the differentials with those working in other sectors; other evidence was anecdotal.<sup>11</sup> For example, flax mill worker William Cooper told the Sadler Committee that his hard employment in childhood had stopped his growth at five feet. At fifteen he was already “very little”, although he was not so as a young child and his father was around five feet seven.<sup>12</sup> Examples like this were elicited in order to show that it was employment rather than heredity which had led to stunting. The sub-commissioner to the Mines Commission for Halifax in Yorkshire, meanwhile, classified child workers according to physical strength, finding that while mine-workers were short, a far greater proportion of them were physically “muscular” or “very muscular” compared with other working children. This was no doubt at least partly the result of selection bias for this heavy sort of work, further enhanced by its physical demands.<sup>13</sup> Others held this developed musculature as a sign of deformity caused by work, alongside the head sores and pigeon-breasts also seen in mine-workers.<sup>14</sup> In factories, meanwhile, shortness was an advantage in child workers as it was only the littlest children who could “scavenge” for waste materials under the machinery in textile mills.

An implication of these findings was that industrial work in childhood curtailed physical potential as adults (the “remote effects” noted by the 1833 Commission). Even worse, however, were physical deformities brought about by work, which could end an individual’s working life altogether. The Sadler Report featured many boys and men with crooked legs and deformed knees, probably because they were such a visually arresting testament to the physical effects of industrial work (girls’ deformities were, of course, hidden under their long skirts). Witness Abraham Wildman, a teacher in a Sunday school in Keighley (West Yorkshire), said that more than one in ten children were deformed in that town, and of the attitude to it, “If [locals] see a deformed person they never ask what he is, but they say, ‘That is a factory lad.’”<sup>15</sup> However it seems likely that this was an area in which the Committee was particularly selective in choosing witnesses and several were specifically asked to describe the worst cases they knew of. Peter Kirby suggests that in fact, deformity was relatively rare, and tended to be the result of previous poor health rather than industrial work *per se*.<sup>16</sup> Reformers, however, were particularly keen to make a link with the conditions of early labor: witnesses were asked repeatedly whether their fathers and brothers were stunted, and the answer was invariably not. Overwork and repetitive and awkward tasks were thus perceived as subverting physical strength and growth; a clear suggestion that the children of the laboring classes should have natural strength and space for physical growth – both for current happiness and future work potential.

Many of the signs of overwork made children appear prematurely aged in either body or mind. However another concern was for indicators of arrested physical maturity, especially among girls. One local witness interviewed in Manchester reported of 62 factory girls at Bennett Street School:

Of these girls about ten were adults. I could only observe four of them whose bosoms appeared at all developed, and they were likewise more fleshy in appearance than the others. I found upon enquiry from each of these four that they had not begun work before twelve years of age: all the rest, both children and adults, were thin and scraggy. Some were very tired, some were much excited, the hands of most of them felt moist or clammy, some hot and dry... Many of them said they had no appetites for their supper: most of them had headaches.<sup>17</sup>

Hard work before the age of twelve, therefore, had a disruptive effect on growth and constitution, creating a predisposition to ill-health which could last through adult life. Medical witnesses also dwelt on specific diseases, some of which were linked to working conditions (like the lung complaints which were common where air was tainted with cotton or coal dust). These links were presented with some certainty, although the modern reader can discern a considerable lack of consensus as far as disease causation and physical infirmity was concerned. This was, no doubt, a reflection of preconceived ideas and lack of full medical understanding of the impact of urban living and work on health. Several medical professionals who dealt with cases at local infirmaries, for example, said that some categories of child workers were actually very fit, while the stress on the advanced muscular development of young miners has already been noted. The larger geographical remit of the 1833 Factories Enquiry Commission also noted the variance in health and conditions across the industrial areas (illustrating the lack of consistent correspondence between industry and the urban environment): child workers in Wiltshire, the West Midlands and the south-west, for example, were generally healthier than those elsewhere, largely because of the lack of large factories in those locations. Similarly, this sort of physical breakdown in the young could be caused by other types of work: framework knitting and lace running were both cited

as being as bad as factories despite the fact that both were frequently carried out in the home, while another witness singled out girls at finishing schools and shop assistants as at greater risk of ill-health because they were worked hard and did not have sufficient recreation time. These latter occupations might not be subject to factory discipline, but the fact that they were being drawn into the same argument indicates that certain factors were being consistently identified as running counter to the experience of childhood across the board.<sup>18</sup> In fact, in his most recent work, Kirby judges that there were few physical conditions in which employment had a greater impact than the urban environment.<sup>19</sup>

Another key issue for the Parliamentary enquiries was the state of moral development and education available for children working in industry; a concern which we can trace back to earlier works by commentators like Locke, More and Wesley. While the girls at Bennett Street School in Manchester were not developed enough for their age, others were depicted as prematurely mature, sexually forward and fond of invidious habits like drinking. There were clear connections between warning flags like these and more evangelical modes of thinking about the state of childhood. The parliamentary reports, for instance, frequently linked them to questions about attendance at Sunday School, which many children said they were prevented from doing by fatigue. This meant that they received no direction in religion or morals, especially since most were unable to attend day schools because of their long hours of work. Nor did girls have time to learn housekeeping skills from their mothers (who might be in full-time employment themselves), which led to anxiety about their ability to raise their own families and run their own homes.

These questions run into two contradictory notions about childhood: first that children should be allowed some time for leisure; but second that not attending church or Sunday school on their only day off imperilled their ability to become morally upstanding and

responsible adults. This undoubtedly had roots in expectations about class, and in particular, anxieties about social disruption, and crime. Working-class children were often depicted as precociously adult-like in cartoons; smoking cigars, for example, or drinking in pubs, and fears about juvenile delinquency also bubbled beneath the surface, erupting periodically into concerns about lack of parental supervision and moral guidance.<sup>20</sup> For girls the repercussions were even more pressing as they brought the risk of premarital sex and illegitimate pregnancy, especially when coupled with mixed working environments. Many witnesses admitted that illegitimacy rates among factory girls were actually low, but this was still linked in their minds to promiscuity since it was thought to show that the girls either knew how to prevent conception, or had been rendered infertile by their behavior – in itself a cause of anxiety about future motherhood. Robson makes a strong case for the preoccupation with working girls' bodies in the 1835 Report, concluding that these images were particularly potent for contemporaries because they were “standing at the intersection of femininity and childhood...the most sensitive site of all.”<sup>21</sup> The contrast with the prevalent middle-class notion of girlhood and domesticity dealt a hard blow to this ideal as a universal concept. In most cases parents seem to have been little considered as potential good examples for their children, although this was at least partly because the children spent so little time at home and awake. Long hours of work and fatigue also compromised mealtimes which was linked to work-power, health and the quality of home life. We can thus draw out a tangle of incipient ideas about stages of child development from these sources; from a concern with basic growth to signs of physical maturation, and the role of future adults as parents and workers. We can also add an implicit concern with their role as *citizens*: the lack of moral and practical instruction also meant that industrial workers would be less well equipped to be responsible contributors to their local communities, and ultimately, as political citizens as well. Full

enfranchisement was some way off in the 1830s and 40s, but the First Reform Act of 1832 meant that it was close to the surface for the politically conscious.

### The “literary child”: poverty and moral development

The “characters” drawn in the reports of the Children’s Employment Commission were an important source of inspiration for many fiction authors, but they dealt with them in different ways. It was the authors of fiction for adults who were most immediately influenced by the subjects covered by the Blue Books, and they often used their findings to reveal and critique social conditions. For instance, Frances Milton Trollope aimed in *The Life And Adventures of Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy* to “drag into the light of day, and place before the eyes of Englishmen, the hideous mass of injustice and suffering to which thousands of infant laborers are subjected, who toil in our monster spinning-mills.”<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, her child character, once grown up, embarked on a campaign to ameliorate the conditions he had endured himself. Sadly, as Trollope’s son noted, the novel was not very successful; largely, he said, because it dealt with matters readers did not find diverting; the author had evidently overstepped the boundary into “knowing too much”.

A more personal account of a working childhood was the *Memoir Of Robert Blincoe*, published in 1832. This story of child labor and deprivation was apparently recounted by Blincoe to the journalist John Brown who was so appalled that he wrote it up and published it in serial form; another case of making social realities “known”. Brown was a political radical and was clearly aiming to raise consciousness and promote change by publishing Blincoe’s story - as well, of course, as making himself a fast buck. The precise veracity of the work has been the subject of some doubt given the time which had elapsed between the events and their recounting to Brown. Nonetheless, it was gripping stuff, and is thought to have been the

inspiration for the character of Oliver Twist as well as Trollope's *Michael Armstrong*. Blincoe's *Memoir* detailed the harsh working conditions he faced from a young age and the punishments he endured (weights screwed to his ears; being hung from a cross beam by the hands; frequent beatings), which left him with weak legs and knees. He described the awkward and crippling position child workers had to adopt, the dusty and overheated environment, the punishments and accidents, and the weariness, which were a taste of what was to come in the Blue Books.

Dickens' most famous pair of child characters, Oliver Twist and the Artful Dodger, meanwhile, also reveal their experiences via their bodies. However, at the same time it is made clear that their impact has been mediated by the children's characters. Thus Oliver, who has spent his childhood as an orphan in the workhouse, is described in terms which readers of the Blue Books would find familiar – and yet with none-too-subtle hints as to his inherent “goodness” of spirit:

Oliver Twist's ninth birthday found him a pale thin child, somewhat diminutive in stature, and decidedly small in circumference. But nature or inheritance had implanted a good sturdy spirit in Oliver's breast...<sup>23</sup>

In comparison, the Artful Dodger, who is the same age as Oliver, is described in quite different terms. His body has also been affected by poor diet, but here, the physical description is allied to a sense that his character is written clearly upon his face and demeanour:

He was a snub-nosed, flat-browed, common-faced boy enough; and as dirty a juvenile as one would wish to see; but he had about him all the airs and manners of a man. He was short of his age: with rather bow-legs, and little, sharp, ugly eyes.<sup>24</sup>

While Oliver displays the fundamental qualities of middle-class childhood (innocence, trustworthiness, and courage) and is uncorrupted by his experience of life in a workhouse and on the streets, the Artful Dodger, is a street-savvy young criminal, at home on the streets and comfortable in his life of petty crime. It is, of course, no coincidence that Oliver was born to a middle-class family, and eventually returned to his allotted social position. The Artful Dodger, meanwhile, was born into the working classes and remained there.

The Dodger, and (for a shorter time) Oliver, both had to work for their living, albeit on the streets rather than in industry. Children's employment was not, however, the main thrust of Dickens' critique. Like other writers of "Condition of England" novels, such as Elizabeth Gaskell and Benjamin Disraeli, his chief topic was the spectrum of deprivation caused by industrialization more generally. This was something which was portrayed as affecting adults at least as much as children, although the way that its lasting physical and constitutional impacts were described was often reminiscent to the vignettes drawn in the reports of the Children's Employment Commission.

In children's literature, meanwhile, there was an even more pronounced tendency to veil the graphic conditions of working conditions, while the primary representation of poverty was even more likely to be poor social conditions more generally rather than employment. As we have already noted, this is largely because the authors of these books had slightly different aims than those writing for adults. Moral education and social consciousness took on greater weight, with a growing sense that children should come to self-knowledge via imagination and fantasy. Children's literature was still in its infancy for much of our period, and we can

trace a change in the treatment of poor child characters across the second half of the nineteenth century. The earlier works, starting with works like Charlotte Yonge's *The Daisy Chain* of 1856, and coming to full fruition with Hesba Stretton in the late 1860s, took a strong moral-religious tone. These books emerged from a longer tradition of moralising and educational nonfiction which emphasized the need for adult direction to internalize a charitable and Christian model of living. A slightly later, though overlapping, cycle of writing comprises fantasy novels like George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* (serialized 1868, published 1871), and Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* (1863).

The earliest children's novels to include depictions of poverty (such as Yonge's *The Daisy Chain*, noted in the Introduction), tended to use such scenes as a tool for the edification of the middle-class focal characters. As in that novel, what was important about child poverty is that it models a compassionate response to the reader; a gentle reveal rather than a challenge to action. This soon grew into a whole genre of "waif" stories, most closely associated with Stretton, whose realist novel *Jessica's First Prayer* became sensationally popular on its publication, first in the journal *Sunday Home* in 1866 and in book form in 1867. As Davin has noted, the children who were the central figures of these waif stories were generally neglected or orphaned (sometimes both) and were ultimately rescued by conversion to Christianity.<sup>25</sup> We certainly see this in Stretton's *Pilgrim Street* (1867) which follows two brothers, Tom and Phil, who live at the start of the story in what is described as a "hole" at the side of a Manchester street. Tom, the elder, is wrongfully accused of theft, but welcomes prison since it will provide him with food and shelter. His younger brother Phil has the by now familiar small stature and ragged appearance of the urban child, "stunted in growth by continual want and neglect", but also the innocence and "open frankness" of the more idealized image of childhood we saw in *Oliver Twist*.<sup>26</sup> Like Oliver and the Dodger, the two brothers take different paths, Phil remaining the innocent child while Tom, the focal

character, goes through a cycle of rescue, education, fall and repentance. Tom ultimately dies in childhood, while, Phil, the idealized child, becomes morally aware and upstanding, despite their shared experience of poverty and urban corruption.<sup>27</sup> Stretton, then, offers the child reader quite a challenging view of poverty, both in the background of deprivation suffered by the two brothers, and in Tom's ultimate death. However, her emphasis, both here and elsewhere, is on the individual child who can be influenced for the better, both in the story and as a reader. Her audience will come away with a little more knowledge, but her intention was not that they be challenged to bring about changes in working and living conditions themselves. Instead, she hoped to set the minds of the future makers of Britain to work by ensuring that they had a true and empathetically sound moral compass.

Child poverty and labor were also prominent in the fantasy genre, but again, with a strong emphasis on personal and spiritual growth rather than revelation and action. The key authors are Charles Kingsley (1819-1875), clergyman and author of *Westward Ho!* (1855) and most famously *The Water-Babies* (1863); and George MacDonald, author of *At the Back of the North Wind* (serialized 1868, published 1870). Like Stretton, who was a keen participant in the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, both men were interested in social reform: Kingsley was a Christian Socialist and was deeply concerned with social conditions and public health matters such as water quality.<sup>28</sup> MacDonald worked with Octavia Hill on housing projects for the poor and felt, as his character Vavasor observed in the 1882 novel *Weighed and Wanting*, that "the condition of our poor in our large towns is the great question of the day."<sup>29</sup>

Both *The Water Babies* and *At the Back of the North Wind* take a working child as their main character. *The Water Babies* deals with chimney sweep's boy Tom, who runs away from his master and becomes a "water baby", where he undergoes an evolutionary and spiritual journey of growth and education. Chimney sweeping would have been familiar to

those interested in social matters: it had received considerable intermittent attention in parliament from the 1770s onwards. Interestingly, Kingsley chose not to dwell on the sweeps' boys' occupational diseases and deformities, but instead used this as a jumping-off point to explain Tom's roughness and lack of self-awareness; even his degenerative animalism as shown when he catches sight of himself in a mirror, covered in soot, and thinks that he is a "little black ape." The atrocities suffered by Tom are more or less passed over, which – for those in a position of "knowing" at least – in a way emphasizes the awfulness of the situation, but for the child reader, places a veil over what might be considered upsetting or inappropriate. Eventually, Tom escapes his poor beginnings and uses the lessons learnt from nature to return to land an accomplished (and middle-class) "Great Man of Science". In his adult novels Kingsley was less optimistic about the possibility of bringing about change in the real world, but in his children's work the opportunities for personal growth and redemption are clear.

Whereas Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* subsumes reality into surreal fantasy, George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* shifts between the two settings. His central character, Diamond, experiences poverty and hard work as the result of his family's downward shift in fortunes – not, importantly for the moralising categories of the nineteenth century, through events of their own making. Like *Oliver Twist*, and unlike Tom the chimney sweep, Diamond is physically fragile and first meets the mystical North Wind while he is convalescing from an illness in the country. However, his innate and moral strength - bolstered by his rural beginnings - allows him to take on the burden of supporting his family as a coachman when his father falls ill, and also to act as a moral guide to a child of a really poor background: the crossing sweeper, Nanny. In fact it is Nanny who experiences the more usual trope of discovery and rescue from poverty by a benefactor; a situation brought about

by Diamond. It is she who lives in poor conditions with an abusive and alcoholic grandmother, but as in the examples of domestic fiction cited above, the realities of her life are not overly dwelt upon. Instead her function in the plot is as a foil to Diamond's ethereality – she is the one who survives childhood while (in a contrast to the fates of the two brothers in *Pilgrim Street*) the innocent, Diamond, dies young. Here, the child who exhibits the most idealized and universal qualities of childhood, inhabits a body which cannot take the strains of urban poverty. This is unusual: child deaths were common in nineteenth century literature as they were in life, but they were typically instructive or offering “just desserts” for unchristian behaviour.<sup>30</sup> Diamond, in contrast, is the epitome of the Romantic and morally ideal child, but he is also described as the God's Baby, one too good for this world. He is, in fact, a symbol for the inability of urban society to attain the ideal conditions for a healthy and morally robust childhood. Interestingly, for both Tom and Diamond, it is nature which provides the child characters with instruction; only corporeal Nanny needs to be taught book-learning in the more conventional way (Diamond can already read as befits his social origins, while Tom receives some topsy-turvy schooling as a water baby). However, after her “rescue”, Nanny is able to take up the reassuring position of a child being cared for and educated, rather than a worker or carer herself.

The novels for children thus combine a view of social problems with an emphasis on the innate goodness of certain poor children, and the potential for rescue and rehabilitation. However, although several of the children in question must work hard for a living, the details of this work and its physical effects are not dwelt upon. Another of Macdonald's popular works, *The Princess and Curdie* (1883), features a character who is a child miner, but again, the details of working life are slight. Moreover, Curdie works in a silver rather than a coal mine, and he enjoys his work. Here is a child figure who is not physically affected by his

work but he instead becomes increasingly morally damaged. The more time he spends underground the more he becomes detached from the beauties and benefits of nature which affect his moral temperament to the point where he makes a bow and arrows and cruelly kills a pigeon for pleasure not sustenance. Like Nanny, Curdie has to be morally rescued and rehabilitated in this fantasy novel.

In the realist novels, both for adults and for children, it seems to be poverty more generally – usually, but not always urban (another of Stretton’s novels, *Fern’s Hollow*, is set in a Welsh mining village) – which is responsible for physical and/or moral decay. However, the overall impression is that children were not the right audience for “knowing”; instead social conditions are present as a background for a preparatory awakening of moral conscience. This relates partly – and importantly - to ideals about the protected state of middle-class children, but it is also because children could do little to affect the causes or manifestations of poverty. They could, however, build up a sense of moral conscience, empathy and duty, which would prepare them to be active citizens working to ameliorate the worst effects of industrial poverty in their adult lives.

### Conclusions

We have shown that a similar range of social concerns were played out both in the Children’s Employment Commission and in the novels of the period; however, they took slightly different paths, and had somewhat different chronologies. While employment was the first real thrust of Parliament’s focus on children, starting from the 1830s, novelists chose to portray *poor* children, rather than specifically *working* children. This remains true in children’s literature, but with a longer time-lag: there were thirty plus years between Sadler’s Report and the publication of *The Water-Babies*, the work of Hesba Stretton and *At The Back*

*Of The North Wind*. Moreover, it was only in adult novels that social conditions were detailed enough to challenge readers into “knowing” and – hopefully - acting.

So how can we explain the different foci of the two types of text? Three reasons can be picked out as a starting point. The first concerns the way that parliamentary concerns were disseminated to, and picked up by, the public. The popularity of the published Blue Books on child labor has already been noted, but if the novels are anything to go by, they did not find as much general interest as the later focus on urban health and living conditions from the 1850s and 60s. It would be wrong to characterize factory conditions as having been normalized by this stage, but the worst of its excesses had been addressed, and they had been joined in the public mind by a range of other social challenges. Moreover, the idea that the State could and should intervene in family matters - including the regulation of a child’s ability to contribute to the household economy - was slow to take off. The ‘toothless’ nature of the early measures to regulate child work indicates that private industry had considerable weight when it came to legislative reform, and attempts to intervene in family decisions about education and welfare were even more controversial. Britain famously had a society to prevent cruelty to animals quite some time before it had one to prevent cruelty to children (the NSPCC was founded in 1884). Elementary education was not made universal until 1870, and measures to empower the removal of children from neglectful or abusive parents were passed later still, in 1889. It is likely, then, that these matters remained too controversial to be appealing to either authors or readers in the earlier part of the period considered here.

Meanwhile, the attention of the public soon shifted away from child work to a range of other social challenges; precisely those seen in vivid detail in fiction, especially for adults. Discoveries like Snow’s isolation of the Broad Street pump in explaining the spread of cholera in London in 1854, works like Mayhew’s study of the London poor (published in

serial form in the 1840s and in three volumes in 1851) and Dr Barnardo's visually arresting "before" and "after" pictures of rescued street children in the 1870s may all have been more compelling for authors seeking to engage readers, both adult and child, than the images of children in mines and factories.<sup>31</sup> It was street children, not factory children, who were the motif of the social reformers of the 1870s and 1880s. It may be no coincidence that they were also more visible for the general public than those working behind the closed doors of factories and mines. Even well-off children might see crossing sweepers (like Nanny), street performers and beggars around them in towns. This shift also fits with a wider, liberal swing in humanitarianism from damaged or flogged bodies, towards a more general sense of deprivation which affected families, societies and social relations more generally.

Second, we need to bear in mind wider questions of genre and trends in publishing. Children's literature as we would recognize it now was only starting to take off by the start of the nineteenth century, boosted by the growth in Sunday and subsequently elementary schooling (the popularity of Hesba Stretton's novels relates partly to their ubiquity as Sunday School prizes<sup>32</sup>). It was perhaps unsurprising that the earliest of these works were based in the model of religious didacticism seen in previous nonfiction for the young. Meanwhile, social realist fiction for adults had a growing tradition of academic enquiry to build on; part of the concern about the "Condition of England", which was played out in enquiries into the poor law and the state of large towns as well as children's work. Those writing for children preferred to reveal conditions in a less confrontational way which conformed better to the highly romanticised view of a protected, non-working childhood; but even so, in more abstract terms they may also have been aware that more and more working-class children could expect to be political citizens when they grew up.

Finally, we should not underestimate the ongoing importance of the evangelical model for the Victorian educated classes, especially in the context of works written for the young. This meant that the most obvious and pressing way to engage with social concerns was to stress their potential for child-saving and moral reform. Children's bodies were less important for this endeavour than their minds and their souls.<sup>33</sup> Parliament, in contrast (and in keeping with the priorities of the time), dealt first and foremost with children's bodies – which also engaged with other important questions of productivity and the strength and status of the nation.

We would therefore like to challenge the assumption that children's novels were based on the imaginative and benign; an assumption that tends to be reinforced by the populist focus on late-nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century fantasy works by Lewis Carroll, J.M. Barrie and A. A. Milne. Authors like Stretton, Kingsley and Macdonald may not have challenged their largely middle-class readers with the details of social inequality, or suggested that it be eradicated, but they did wish to plant the seed that it was present, and that it might be overcome for those with a sound moral compass (and a strong pinch of good luck!).

We end, therefore, by noting that by reading these two quite different source-types together, we can draw out an implicit and growing set of universal qualities of childhood across the class divides - albeit quite heavily gendered ones; a topic we have not had space to discuss here. Both the Children's Employment Commission and the novels stressed the desirability of play and leisure; moral instruction from adults (or sometimes in the novels, nature); and the freedom to grow unencumbered. In legislative terms this was translated into restrictions on working ages and hours, and an increasing provision for education. In the novels it inspired personal works of charity or the growth of the child via inspiration from

religion or nature. In both cases the urban environment was held up as particularly dangerous for children, contrasted with an idealized picture of rural life which was still based on social deference and simplicity. Free to explore more personal tales, and to focus on individuals, authors extended this to explore the innateness of certain childlike qualities in poor children, such as innocence and morality.

However, in other ways, class differences remained in the ways that children were conceptualized. Not only were working-class children expected to work, of course, as a mass, their bodies were also scrutinized for signs of physical frailty or robustness in a way which we do not see in the higher social classes (again, perhaps a product of the time-lag in the two source types). Furthermore, neither they nor their families are depicted as having much agency; caught in between the Scylla of child labor and the Charybdis of family poverty. It is in the novels written for children that class and characteristics of childhood are enmeshed in the most interesting ways, and where middle-class ideals and attributes *are* projected onto poor children. Often, however, these “out of class” children are destined either to rise upward to join the middle ranks, or die young, their ethereality confirmed. The boldest challenges to the acceptability of hard work and poverty in childhood in this period were not to be made until the twenty-first century when a few historical novelists started to take a retrospective view.<sup>34</sup> These texts can only engage in a very limited way with the social and moral politics of the period. Nonetheless, the tenor of literature for children and young adults in the twenty-first century reflects an approach where there is a greater sense of agency available to the coming generations and contemporary readers are increasingly seen as being able to handle “knowing”.

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Robson, *Men in Wonderland: the Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Carolyn Betensky, 'Knowing too much and never enough: knowledge and moral capital in France Trollope's *Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong, The Factory Boy*,' *Novel*, 36:1 (2002): 61-78.

<sup>3</sup> Oz Frankel, *States of Inquiry: Social Investigations and Print Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain and the United States* (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 25. Frankel calls this report "probably the most widely read document of its kind."

<sup>4</sup> Frankel, *States of Inquiry*.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Jane Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Peter Kirby, *Child Labour in Britain, 1750-1870* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Clark Nardinelli, 'Child labor and the factory acts', *Journal of Economic History*, 40 (1980): 739-55.

<sup>6</sup> These imperatives were strengthened by the initiation in 1836 of the General Register's Office, which for the first time collected and published vital statistics on births, deaths and disease, and showed the potential peril of neglecting the nation's youth.

<sup>7</sup> *Factories Inquiry Commission, First Report....as to the Employment of Children in Factories* (1833) (hereafter *Factories Enquiry Commission*), 25.

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that the worst of these experiences were generally presented as taking place in earlier decades, while the early 1830s was recognized to be a slack period of work.

<sup>9</sup> Evidence of Joseph Badder, spinner, *Factories Enquiry Commission* 1833, 19.

<sup>10</sup> Evidence of Thomas Mear, factory operative, *Factories Enquiry Commission* 1833, 16.

<sup>11</sup> For example, see Mr Cowell's Report, *Factories Enquiry Commission*, 87-88. The average weight of 420 boys employed in factories was 75.2 pounds compared with 78.7 pounds for 223 boys not so employed. In terms of heights, the equivalent figures were 55.3 inches and 55.6 inches. For an excellent discussion of this material see Peter Kirby, *Child Workers and Industrial Health in Britain, 1780-1850* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press,

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2013), esp 99-123. See also Peter Kirby, "Causes of Short Stature Among Coalmining Children, 1823-1850," *Economic History Review* 48 (1995): 687-699; also Jane Humphries, "Short Stature Among Coalmining Children: A Comment," *Economic History Review* 50 (1997): 538-542. Kirby's analysis suggests that narrow-seam mines (among other factors) were correlated with shorter heights in child workers.

<sup>12</sup> Sadler Report, 8, 13. Another witness, Gillett Sharpe, assistant overseer of the poor of Keighley, told the Sadler Committee that one of his sons would have been eight inches taller if he had not been made crooked by over work (Sadler Report, 209-10). Another stated that he himself had lost four inches through the same cause (evidence of William Hebden, Sadler Report, 233).

<sup>13</sup> Mines Commission report, 182-4, and Appendix, Part II, report of Samuel Scrivens. See also Kirby, "Causes of Short Stature".

<sup>14</sup> Mines Commission, 173-87.

<sup>15</sup> Sadler Report, 156.

<sup>16</sup> Kirby, *Child Workers*, 99-123.

<sup>17</sup> *Factories Enquiry Commission*, Mr Cowell's Report, 35.

<sup>18</sup> *Factories Enquiry Commission*, Mr Power's Report, 4, 16, 46.

<sup>19</sup> Kirby, *Child Workers*, *passim*.

<sup>20</sup> See Heather Shore, *Artful Dodgers: Youth and Crime in Early Nineteenth-Century London* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> Robson, *Men in Wonderland*, 57.

<sup>22</sup> Frances Milton Trollope, *The Life And Adventures of Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy* (London: Harper and Brothers, 1840).

<sup>23</sup> C. Dickens *Oliver Twist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 57

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<sup>25</sup> A. Davin, "Waif Stories in Late Nineteenth-century England," *History Workshop Journal* 52 (2001): 69.

<sup>26</sup> H. Stretton's *Pilgrim Street* (London: The Religious Tract Society Library, 1886): 5-6.

<sup>27</sup> E. Lomax *The Writings of Hesba Stretton: Reclaiming the Outcast* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 11.

<sup>28</sup> S. Rickard "'Living by the pen': Hesba Stretton's moral earnings," *Women's History Review* 5:2 (1996): 219-238; M. Kaufmann *Charles Kingsley, Socialist and Social Reformer* (London: Methuen and Co, 1892), 201-222.

<sup>29</sup> D. Neuhouser "George MacDonald and Social Issues," in *"A Noble Unrest": Contemporary Essays on the Work of George MacDonald*, ed. Jean Webb (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007); G. MacDonald *Weighed and Wanting* (London: Sampson Low, Martson, Searle and Rivington, 1882), 80.

<sup>30</sup> See L. Lerner *Angels and Absences: Child Deaths in the Nineteenth Century* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1997).

<sup>31</sup> See for example Monica Flegel *Conceptualizing Cruelty to Children in Nineteenth-Century England: Literature, Representation and the NSPCC* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009).

<sup>32</sup> See the editor's introduction to H. Stretton, *Jessica's First Prayer and Froggy's Little Brother* E. Thiel (ed) (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> For more on this see Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, ca. 1795-1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

<sup>34</sup> For instance, B. Doherty *Far From Home: The sisters of Street Child* (London: Harper Collins, 2015); D. Weston *The Haunting of Jessop Rise* (London: Andersen Press, 2016).