

Michael Sadler eText - Primary Source

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Excerpt from the Sadler Report

Transcripts of hearings held in 1831 and 1832 published in Parliamentary Papers in 1833

In January 1833 the British Parliament published transcripts of hearings conducted by one of its members, Michael Sadler (1780–1835), a year earlier. Sadler was a well-known author of pamphlets urging better treatment of factory workers, and in 1832 he conducted a parliamentary investigation into the condition of children working in textile mills. As chairman of a parliamentary committee, Sadler had interviewed eighty-nine child workers in an effort to persuade the British Parliament to enact new laws to safeguard the rights of child workers. In Britain at the time, children just eight or nine years old regularly worked for twelve hours a day in textile mills.

The Sadler Report, as the hearings were called, had a major impact at the time of publication and for many decades later. Although Sadler had lost his seat in Parliament in the election of 1832, his report was published and provoked a public outcry against the practice of requiring young children to work for eleven or twelve hours a day. It led to new laws that restricted how many hours young children could work (but did not outlaw the practice of employing children in the first place).

Even into the twentieth century, the Sadler Report was often cited as evidence of how the Industrial Revolution (the process of introducing new machines and factories into the manufacturing of products) caused suffering for workers. The evidence given in the Sadler Report has been offered as a reason for close government regulation of factory owners. On the other hand, some critics accused Sadler of distorting the picture of conditions in English mills, making the situation appear worse than it was by selecting only the most outrageous cases to publicize.

Employing children in factories was not new in 1832; the practice had gone on for years as the Industrial Revolution transformed the textile (the practice of making yarn from cotton or wool and weaving it into fabric) industry, starting in the last quarter of the 1700s. New machines had been introduced that had resulted in spinning and weaving being moved out of family businesses, usually situated in homes, into huge factories. More than any other single industry, textiles represented the changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution.

Things to remember while reading the excerpt from the Sadler Report:

- Although the Sadler Report made a big impact on the British public when it was published in early 1833, it had severe critics. Some accused Sadler of phrasing the questions he asked young workers in a certain way to elicit responses that would support his campaign for new regulations by putting factories in a bad light. These critics asserted that the report was slanted from the beginning against

mill owners, and that the outcome was predetermined. On the other hand, in the twenty-first century the Sadler Report is considered the classic description of the abuse of child laborers during the 1800s.

- For many children, the money they earned was critical to help their families make a living. But as employment of children became more controversial, many mill owners decided not to hire young employees, rather than have to worry about government inspectors and negative publicity. The result was that families lost the income from child workers, and suffered for it.

Excerpt from the Sadler Report

Testimony of Peter Smart

You say you were locked up night and day?

Yes.

Do the children ever attempt to run away?

Very often.

Were they pursued and brought back again?

Yes, the overseer pursued them, and brought them back.

Did you ever attempt to run away?

Yes, I ran away twice.

And you were brought back?

Yes; and I was sent up to the master's loft, and thrashed with a whip for running away.

Were you bound to this man?

Yes, for six years.

By whom were you bound?

My mother got 15 shillings [a unit of British currency] for the six years.

Do you know whether the children were, in point of fact, compelled to [work] during the whole time for which they were engaged?

Yes, they were.

By law?

I cannot say by law; but they were compelled by the master; I never saw any law used there but the law of their own hands.

To what mill did you next go?

To Mr. Webster's, at Battus Den, within eleven miles of Dundee.

In what situation did you act there?

I acted as overseer.

At 17 years of age?

Yes.

Did you inflict the same punishment that you yourself had experienced?

I went as an overseer; not as a slave, but as a slave-driver.

What were the hours of labour in that mill?

My master told me that I had to produce a certain quantity of yarn; the hours were at that time fourteen; I said that I was not able to produce the quantity of yarn that was required; I told him if he took the timepiece out of the mill I would produce that quantity, and after that time I found no difficulty in producing the quantity.

How long have you worked per day in order to produce the quantity your master required?

I have wrought nineteen hours.

Was this a water-mill?

Yes, water and steam both.

To what time have you worked?

I have seen the mill going till it was past 12 o'clock on the Saturday night.

So that the mill was still working on the Sabbath morning?

Yes.

Were the workmen paid by the piece, or by the day?

No, all had stated wages.

Did not that almost compel you to use great severity to the hands then under you?

Yes; I was compelled often to beat them, in order to get them to attend to their work, from their being over-wrought.

Were not the children exceedingly fatigued at that time?

Yes, exceedingly fatigued.

Were the children bound in the same way in that mill?

No; they were bound from one year's end to another, for twelve months.

Did you keep the hands locked up in the same way in that mill?

Yes, we locked up the mill; but we did not lock the bothy.

Did you find that the children were unable to pursue their labour properly to that extent?

Who Was Michael Sadler?

Michael Sadler (1780–1835) was a British member of Parliament when he held hearings, in 1832, into the working conditions of children employed in British textile factories. The stories the children told helped lead to new laws regulating the conditions under which children could be employed.

Sadler was born in Snelston, England, in 1780. When he was twenty, he moved to the growing town of Leeds, England, a center of the textile industry. There, he, his brother, and his father established a company to import linen from Ireland. Sadler became concerned about the issue of children employed on farms and in factories.

He published a number of pamphlets on the subject, starting with *The State and Prospects of the Country* (1829). Others included *The Factory Girl's Last Day* (1830), *On Poor Laws for Ireland* (1830), *On Ministerial Plan of Reform* (1831), and *On the Distress of the Agricultural Labourers* (1831).

In 1829 Sadler was elected to Parliament. Two years later he launched a campaign to improve working conditions for farmworkers, including providing better housing by churches (which were supported by taxpayers in England) and granting workers plots of land for gardens and raising cows for milk.

In March 1832 Sadler proposed laws to improve the lives of children working in British textile factories, including limiting the workday to ten hours. At first he had little support, but in April he began three months of public hearings during which eighty-nine child factory workers were interviewed, bringing to light the horrific conditions endured by young children.

Sadler lost his seat in Parliament at the next general election, also in 1832. But his report on child labor was still published, in January 1833. Its contents shocked the British public, and Sadler's campaign found new champions in Parliament. His report also became a classic source of information about the nature of the Industrial Revolution in the early nineteenth century.

Sadler died two and a half years later, in July 1835, in Belfast, Ireland.

Yes; they have been brought to that condition, that I have gone and fetched up the doctor to them, to see what was the matter with them, and to know whether they were able to rise or not able to rise; they were not at all able to rise; we have had great difficulty in getting them up.

When that was the case, how long have they been in bed, generally speaking?

Perhaps not above four or five hours in their beds.

Testimony of Elizabeth Bentley

What age are you?

Twenty-three.

Where do you live?

At Leeds.

What time did you begin to work at a factory?

When I was six years old.

At whose factory did you work?

Mr. Busk's.

What kind of mill is it?

Flax-mill.

What was your business in that mill?

I was a little doffer.

What were your hours of labour in that mill?

From 5 in the morning till 9 at night, when they were thronged.

For how long a time together have you worked that excessive length of time?

For about half a year.

What were your usual hours when you were not so thronged?

From 6 in the morning till 7 at night.

What time was allowed for your meals?

Forty minutes at noon.

Had you any time to get your breakfast or drinking?

No, we got it as we could.

And when your work was bad, you had hardly any time to eat it at all?

No; we were obliged to leave it or take it home, and when we did not take it, the overlooker took it, and gave it to his pigs.

Do you consider doffing a laborious employment?

Yes.

Explain what it is you had to do?

When the frames are full, they have to stop the frames, and take the flyers off, and take the full bobbins off, and carry them to the roller; and then put empty ones on, and set the frame going again.

Does that keep you constantly on your feet?

Yes, there are so many frames, and they run so quick.

Your labour is very excessive?

Yes; you have not time for any thing.

Suppose you flagged a little, or were too late, what would they do?

Strap us.

Are they in the habit of strapping those who are last in doffing?

Yes.

Constantly?

Yes.

Girls as well as boys?

Yes.

Have you ever been strapped?

Yes.

Severely?

Yes.

Could you eat your food well in that factory?

No, indeed I had not much to eat, and the little I had I could not eat it, my appetite was so poor, and being covered with dust; and it was no use to take it home, I could not eat it, and the overlooker took it, and gave it to the pigs.

You are speaking of the breakfast?

Yes.

How far had you to go for dinner?

We could not go home to dinner.

Where did you dine?

In the mill.

Did you live far from the mill?

Yes, two miles.

Had you a clock?

No, we had not.

Supposing you had not been in time enough in the morning at these mills, what would have been the consequence?

We should have been quartered.

What do you mean by that?

If we were a quarter of an hour too late, they would take off half an hour; we only got a penny an hour, and they would take a halfpenny more.

The fine was much more considerable than the loss of time?

Yes.

Were you also beaten for being too late?

No, I was never beaten myself, I have seen the boys beaten for being too late.

Were you generally there in time?

Yes; my mother had been up at 4 o'clock in the morning, and at 2 o'clock in the morning; the colliers used to go to their work about 3 or 4 o'clock, and when she heard them stirring she has got up out of her warm bed, and gone out and asked them the time; and I have sometimes been at Hunslet Car at 2 o'clock in the morning, when it was streaming down with rain, and we have had to stay until the mill was opened.

What happened next ...

In July 1832 Sadler learned that at least half a dozen of the children interviewed had been fired for talking about the conditions in the factories where they had worked. He decided not to interview any more child workers, but instead to interview doctors who treated people working in textile factories, as a means of indirectly getting information about the plight of workers.

Later in the year, a meeting was held at York, England, at which sixteen thousand people gathered to express appreciation to Michael Sadler for shedding light on the conditions of work in textile mills. But the voters (limited to property owners and usually not including workers) did not appreciate his efforts. In a general election in 1832, Sadler was defeated by John Marshall, a major factory owner. Sadler had lost his seat in Parliament and with it the ability to bring the national spotlight on abuses of the factory system.

However, another British politician, Anthony Ashley Cooper (also known as Lord Ashley; 1801–1885), took up the cause of factory reform. The 1833 Factory Act, passed under Lord Ashley's leadership, made it illegal to employ children under age nine, and set a maximum eight-hour day for children between ages nine and thirteen.

Did you know ...

Friedrich Engels, coauthor of *The Communist Manifesto* (see entry), was hardly a friend of factory owners. But he did not think much of the Sadler Report. In his own book, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1844), Engels denounced Sadler's report this way:

Sadler was led astray by his passionate sympathies into making assertions of a most misleading and erroneous [false] kind. He asked witnesses questions in such a way as to elicit answers which, although correct, nevertheless were stated in such a form as to give a wholly false impression.

For more information

Books

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Ward, J. T. *The Factory Movement, 1830–1855*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1962.

Williams, Mary E., ed. *Child Labor and Sweatshops*. San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1999.

Web Sites

Del Col, Laura. "The Life of the Industrial Worker in Nineteenth-Century England" (includes excerpt from the Sadler Report). *The Victorian Web*. (accessed on April 10, 2003).