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To cite this version:

Arnold D. Harvey. Truth n°1 and the Industrial Revolution. Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion, 1991, Programme du CAPES & autres essais, 01, pp.77-82. hal-02337273

HAL Id: hal-02337273

https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02337273

Submitted on 29 Oct 2019

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TRUTHS. No. 1 and the Industrial Revolution: a working-class autobiography from the Industrial Midlands

Arnold. D. Harvey
23 February, 1990.

The earliest working-class autobiography to come out of the social milieu most directly affected by the process of industrialization in the late eighteenth century England is Charles Weststone's *TRUTHS. No. 1, or the Memoirs of Charles Whetstone, or an Exposition of the Oppression and Cruelty Exercised in the Trades and Manufactures of Great Britain* of 1807. It does not appear, indeed, that Whetstone was himself a factory worker. At the age of thirteen he occasionally helped out in the lead mine which his father part-owned in the Derbyshire Peak District: "I undertook the care of the cattle, fields and garden, and sometimes assisted at the mine" (44, and cf 25) and while still at school he had thought of being apprenticed to the engineer — i.e. the mechanic in charge of the steam engine — at one of the principal mines of the neighbourhood (60). Instead he became a shop-keeper's apprentice in Derby. Owing to his many digressions Whetstone does not bring his autobiography down beyond his midteens, and the course of his subsequent career can only be guessed at. His eagerness to list the books which he read in his odd spare moments, and the pedantic, event learned nature of his digressions suggests that he may have made his career as some sort of self-taught intellectual, either a schoolmaster or a surgeon.[1] But since the subject of many of his digressions is the condition

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[1]. Not the least interesting material in this memoir is the account of the sort of reading material available to an ambitious youth of Whetstone's background. The sister of his first employer has a "little library, the godly gift of her ignorant grandmother, [which] consisted, besides the Bible, of

of the industrial workers amongst whom he lived, he seems to have regarded himself as essentially part of the emergent industrial working class: certainly he writes of himself as having been born "without any other birthright than that of being impelled along the common beaten-road of life, by the stern and unrelenting commands of Poverty and Labour." [2]

It is probable that Whetstone emigrated to the United States, though whether *TRUTHS. No 1* was published in America remains unclear. No place of publication is shown on the title page. The only copy known to exist in Britain is in the Local Studies Department of Derby Central Library.[3] There are also copies in the libraries of the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration and of the Library Company of Philadelphia.[4] Whether published originally at Derby or at Philadelphia it does not seem to have been very successfully marketed. As the title indicates, it was meant to be part of a series; perhaps *TRUTHS No. 2* and *TRUTHS. No. 3* would have continued

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Thomas à Kempis, Nelson's Festivals, Hervey's Meditations, The Whole Duty of Man, The Pilgrim's Progress, and the *Rural Christian*" (67-9). Most of these are the standard christian classics of the period — Robert Nelson's *A Companion for the Festivals and Fasts of the Church of England,* first published in 1704, was in its 23rd edition by 1773 — but George Wright's *The Rural Christian* is an odd item to find in this hackneyed collection as it had only been published in 1772, three years or so before the period of which Whetstone writes. His next employer had "a small library of books, to which I had free access. I read them all: but the work that most engrossed my attention, was *Derham's Physico Theology, or a Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God from his works of Creation* a series of sermons by William Derham first published in 1713 (76). Later he becomes friendly with a surgeon's apprentice, and begins to interest himself in medicine and the surgeon's specimen human skeleton. "By means of Cheselden's *Anatomy,* and this skeleton, to which on a Sunday I had access, I acquired a good general idea of the admirable Osteology of the human frame" (84). The reference is to William Cheselden's *The Anatomy of the Human Body,* first published 1713, tenth edition 1773.

[2]. John FOSTER, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution: Early Industrial Capitalism in Three English Towns,* London: Methuen, 1974, p. 22. On page 133-6, he notes the role of shopkeepers as working class leaders in industrial communities during the 1830s.

[3]. This is the copy examined by John Burnett, David Vincent and David Mayall in their compilation *The Autobiography of the Working Class: an Annotated Critical Bibliography, 1790-1900,* vol. 1, Brighton: Harvester Press, 1984, p. 335-6. The present author has a photocopy of the Derby Central Library copy.

[4]. Information from the National Union Catalog.

Whetston's narrative beyond his teens: but if these were ever issued, they have not survived. *TRUTHS No. 1*, a duodecimo pamphlet of 102 pages, has the following dedications:

> *To the Particular attention of the land-owners,*
> *proprietors of mines, and the clergy, of the*
> *High-Peak of Derbyshire:*
> *Of the gentleman merchants, and master-cutlers.*
> *of the town of Sheffield, in Yorkshire:*
> *Of the master-hosiers and silk throwsters, of the*
> *towns of Derby, Nottingham, Leicester, and Congleton,*
> *in England:*
> *And to the intelligent and uncorrupted citizens*
> *of the United States of America,*
> *This first number of*
> *TRUTHS*
> *is most respectfully inscribed,*
> *by the*
> *EDITOR*

There are numerous other references to an American connection: "The fields on the hills and plains are inclosed, not with a skeleton-fence of posts and rails, so common in America..." (14); "We have many such *select*-academies in the U.S. — and teachers of equal merit! E." (26 footnote, ostensibly by the Editor). "The annexed engraving is designed more fully to explain to the American reader of this word [...] what must other wise necessarily appear to him, from description only, a very whimsical phenomenon" (31) "An ange I dare not mention — it would appear to an American incredible. E." (92 footnote). The last reference, in which the "Editor" seems to have confused himself with the writer of the memoir, may suggest that in 1807 Whetstone was established, or was trying to establish himself, as a publicist and journalist somewhere in the United States. The book ends with a kind of dialogue between an archetypal American and a visiting English merchant (96-102).

The possibility that Whetstone may have left the industrial Midlands twenty years or more before he sat down to write his memoirs may partly explain — but only partly — what is the most curious and striking feature of his contribution to the social history of the Industrial Revolution. With one exception — his reference to the introduction of gun powder and steam engines into the Derbyshire lead mining areas, by which "we can carry our mines much deeper than the ancients, and into new and fruitful veins, to them totally inaccessible and unknown" (10) — he never refers to a single aspect of Midlands industrial organization that was distinctively and specifically new or recently established in the 1770s and 1780s.

The memoirs begin with a description of abandoned lead mines in the Peak Districk and of the primitive huts in which "the poor labouring boors and miners" still lived, but the history of the mining industry is traced back to the Emperor Hadrian (4) and an ancient mine known as Odin is attributed to the time of the Saxons and Danes (7). The folk customs of the miners are described in the context of their being "the lineal descendants of the slaves of the Emperor Hadrian" (12). In his account of the textile industry, similarly, Whetstone notes that the towns of Derby, Nottingham and Leicester "have long been noted for the making of stockings" (88). He mentions the establishment of "the great and original *silk-mill*" established by Sir Thomas Lomb at Derby in 1734 (86) and the use made of the existing supply of indigent children (87). Though he condemns the employment of child-labour in the Derby silk mills (92) the list he gives of trades exploiting child labour consists only of traditional employments: "how to forge the blade of a *knife*, to construct a *mousetrap*, to *shoe a horse*, to *sweep a chimney*, or to make a *pin*" (33). While he writes interestingly of folk customs which he had evidently observed with his own eyes, Saint Monday at Sheffield, for example (41-2)[5] or the old practice of country women (including his mother) of giving twenty ounces for a pound when making up butter for the market (59), much of his material seems culled from books and newspapers: and not simply the historical disquisitions. His remarks about child labour in chimney sweeping and pin making are supported by references to court cases in January and February 1803 (33 footnotes). These are probably taken from a newspaper. The award by agricultural societies of prizes to country people who have raised numerous offspring without parish assistance, and of larger prizes to the local farmers for the best wheat and bulls, is noted from "one of your best English Magazines" (98) — possibly the *Gentleman's Magazine*. Perhaps Whetstone needed such printed sources to assist a faulty memory. Some of his details are certainly wrong: on page 42 (as a footnote, but not marked "E" for Editor) he suggests:

> *If instead of crowding from 50 to 100 men and women together into one public work-shop, as is commonly and indecently practiced (to the injury of good manners) the philosophical and Howardian plan, of accommodating each workman with a separate shop, was, as*

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[5]. The best recent account of Saint Monday (a kind of secular Sunday when no work was done) relates to the town of Birmingham, which, however, had much in common with Sheffield: Douglas A. REID "The Decline of Saint Monday 1766-1876", *Past and Present*, n° 71, 1976, 76-101, espec. at 77-81.

far as consistent with the circumstances of the manufacture, adopted at Sheffield...

But in fact large work premises were altogether exceptional in Sheffield, the cutlery and metal-working industry being primarily organized on the basis of artisan proprietors and their apprentices and journeymen, working in small workshops.[6]

Apart from the observation (just then beginning to come into vogue)[7] that people in industrial areas lived on a larger scale of misery than hitherto, Whetstone seems to have missed the new structural features of industrial society. For example:

> *The Indian-tribes of North America, the Caffres, Negroes, and poor Hottentots, of Africa, are, all of them, strainers to that poverty and misery, and that distortion by oppression and disease, which are the hand and unmitigated lot of thousands of English mechanics. Those happy savages are equally strangers to the cruel low of apprenticeship, to public charities, and public hospitals, yet they are never distressed about maintaining their families. If one place should not furnish to them the necessary means of subsistence, they can fly to another: but the poor English mechanic is compelled, by the cruel and invisible restraint of the laws, and the particular manufacture on which he solely depends, to tarry where he is, and to submit to all possible privations, or to perish !(39)*

Even leaving the North American Indians and the poor Hottentots out of the question, this misses the whole point of what was going on in Whetstone's own lifetime. The rapid increase in industrialization must necessarily have been accompanied by a new fluidity in the labour market

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[6]. Whetstone may have had personal experience or knowledge of the insalubrious "public workshop" conditions of which he speaks (a family firm like Marsh & Company, in 1818 employed at least 32 men and presumably numbers of women and in 1819, was operating 11 wheels and 11 hearths). See Sidney POLLARD, *Three Centuries of Sheffield Stell. The Story of a Family Business*, Sheffield: Marsh Bros & Co., 1954, p. 10. But overall, the great majority of operations were controlled by smaller family firms and artisan workshops. Mass one-factory employment on the scale of the great mills of the cotton industry did not occur in the steel industry till the age of electricity. Cf. Sidney POLLARD, *A History of Labour in Sheffield*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1959, pp. 132, 206-7, and Peter MATHIAS, *The First Industrial Nation: An Economic History of Britain 1700-1914*, London: Methuen, 1968, pp. 270-1.

[7]. A. D. HARVEY, "First Public Reactions to the Industrial Revolution", in *Etudes Anglaises*, Vol. 31, 1978, pp. 273-93, reprinted with slight modification in A. D. HARVEY ed. *English Literature and the Great War with France*, London: Nold Jonson, 1981, pp. 137-62.

and by unprecedented levels of labour mobility. The Midlands industrial worker may have been poor, unhealthy and oppressed, but he had better opportunities to change jobs than had been enjoyed by his forefathers, or were enjoyed by the poor of the agricultural south.[8]

Perhaps Whetstone left England while he was still too young to understand fully what was going on around him, though since the American War of Independence was in progress between his fifteenth and twenty-second year of age it is more likely that he was already a mature adult when he left England. Perhaps ha was simply not a very perceptive observer of his environment: it is in any case difficult to observe, let alone interpret, new conditions and new developments if one does not have a ready-made interpretive framework. When *TRUTHS No 1* was published an interpretative model capable of providing an understanding of the Industrial Revolution was still — like the Industrial Revolution itself — in the process of emerging.[9] In spite of the unique vantage point formerly occupied by Whetstone, he cannot be said to have contributed much to contemporary understanding of one of the most vital developments of his age. The Industrial Revolution was a revolution in scholarly retrospect, but as *TRUTHS. No. 1* reminds us, for many of those who experienced it, it must have seemed the same dreary round they had always known.

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[8]. The much greater level of unemployment in agriculture as compared to industrialized countries can be seen in the Poor Law Returns for 1803, published as *Parliamentary Papers*, pp. 1803-4, defy folio 13, Vol. 13 of the supplement to *Parliamentary Reports* First Series.

[9]. It may be as well to acknowledge at this point that it is now the fashion in some scholarly circles to deny there was any such thing as an "Industrial Revolution", either because growth rates were by modern standards so paltry or else because the degree of structural transformation achieved over a defined period was insufficient to justify the term "Revolution". The present author is an unashamed adherent of the view that, though economic change was in progress before 1750, and continued after 1850, there was, nevertheless, by 1850, an awareness that the industrial structure of Britain had radically and fundamentally altered, in an unprecedented manner, during the course of the previous hundred years (See reference footnote 7). Whether or not the concept "Industrial Revolution" has any useful function in the terminology of applied economics, it remains indispensable for students of the history of mentality and of social and political structure.