THE INDUSTRIAL CITY
1820-1870

CONTEXT AND COMMENTARY

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THE INDUSTRIAL CITY 1820–1870

Dorothy and Alan Shelston

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A Note on References

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Authors' Preface

To contemporary observers, the towns and cities that grew out of the Industrial Revolution were a dramatically new phenomenon. As such, they evoked a variety of excited comment: there is no shortage of historical or literary documentation to convey to us the nature of this novel experience. In this volume we have attempted to record some of these reactions, and to bring together a selection of the extensive commentary on the experience of life within the cities during the period of their expansion in the early and middle years of the nineteenth century.

The more we have become acquainted with this original material the more has been revealed to us the complexity of our subject. We have taken as our title 'The Industrial City', explicitly excluding those cities – notably, but not only, London – that lie beyond the immediate industrial context, but the relationship between industrialism and urbanisation has proved never to be less than complicated. This is shown, for example, as soon as we try to establish boundaries of period. In demographic terms the first major period of urban expansion was in the second and third decades of the nineteenth century. But the historical process that we call, in so familiarly generalised terms, the 'Industrial Revolution', while notoriously difficult to define in terms of dates, was certainly well under way many years before the concentration of population within the cities that grew out of it. Furthermore, however we were to define our period, there were obvious dangers in talking of the cities as if they were a static entity: what might well be true of one point in time was hardly likely to hold good for another.

Industrialisation itself took very different forms in very different places. Just as not all cities in the nineteenth century were industrial, so not all industries found themselves situated in cities. For obvious symbolic reasons Manchester has come to be seen as archetypal, and as adoptive Mancunians we have

found it difficult to resist its pre-eminence. But, strictly speaking, Manchester at the height of its powers was as much a commercial as an explicitly industrial city, acting as it did as a focal point for all those smaller north western towns – the ‘Coketowns’ of Dickens’s *Hard Times* – in which the cotton industry was based. They, in English terms at least, are not cities at all – how often in this compilation we hankered for that American usage whereby any group of people living in close proximity can be defined as a city – but we could hardly exclude them from our consideration. Across the Pennines, in the case of the woollen industry, the situation was arguably more diverse, Bradford taking over from Leeds at about mid-century the pre-eminence which, where cotton was concerned, Manchester held from the start. Turning to the Midlands, and to Birmingham, we find a more varied pattern of industrial development creating its own kind of urban experience. Further difference is provided by, for example, Sheffield, Nottingham and Leicester (‘towns’, incidentally, or ‘cities’?) with their expansion built upon single specialist industries, not to mention Liverpool, whose status, as compared, for example, with that of Bristol, was determined directly by industrial factors, but which can only awkwardly be defined as an industrial city in its own right.

Our approach to these problems has been, of necessity, pragmatic. The period chosen, 1820-1870, has allowed us to illustrate urban experience in industrial settings at a particularly significant stage in their development. By 1820 the towns and cities we have chosen to concentrate upon were firmly established: by 1870, it is fair to say, in general terms, that the first major phase of their development was complete. Increasingly conscious during the course of our research that our definition of an industrial city needed to be a flexible one, we have gone for the evidence where we could find it, drawing, we hope, the necessary distinctions of time and place, while all the time assuming the existence of common ground. We have concentrated upon the obviously major cities, while going beyond them as and where it seemed appropriate to do so.

We are inevitably conscious of significant omissions. We reasonably assumed that we would not be short of evidence,

and that indeed proved to be the case, to the point where we could only include a fraction of what was available. Above all though, the commitment to interrelate historical and literary sources inevitably pointed our study in certain directions to the exclusion of others. The most obvious area in which history and literature come together is that of cultural history, and this is where we ultimately found ourselves concentrating our attention. On the other hand we offer very little on aspects of urban development which in a different context would come to the fore: on land-use, for example, on transportation, which we came to regard as a separate subject, and on what have come to be called the 'service industries', and specifically shopping, which we have had to neglect altogether.

Finally, we would want to insist upon a truth that has been increasingly borne in on us as we have worked on this project. The appeal to a multiplicity of sources is, on the face of it, an appeal to standards of objectivity. But a source can be read only in context; what it tells us is defined by the circumstances in which it is said. For the literary critic, interpretation of the text will depend upon its reference not only to external realities but to those texts which precede and surround it, as well as upon the formal conventions within which it operates. For the historian the perception of reality which documents convey will depend upon contexts not only of geographical location and historical moment, but of class and of gender. The 'contexts' and the 'commentary' which we offer have to be read with this continually in mind. And finally we should be conscious of all that unrecorded because unuttered history, of all that experience which failed to find its way into literary articulation. That is the most inescapable, and the most significant, omission of all.

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