

Crime and Horror in Victorian Literature and Culture - Volume I

Edited by Matthew Kaiser

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CRIME AND HORROR IN
VICTORIAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

VOLUME 1

Edited by
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INTRODUCTION

horr•ēō –ēre –ūī *vt* to dread; to shudder at, shrink from; to be amazed at; *vi* to stand on end, stand up straight; to get gooseflesh; to shiver, tremble, quake, shake; to look frightful, be rough.

TO tremble, to get gooseflesh, to feel the hair on one's neck stand on end: these are some of the physical symptoms of the psychological condition called being horrified. From the Latin verb *horrere*, “horror” is more than “fear” or “dread.” Horror is a painful awareness of—and acute sensitivity to—the penetrability and thus fragility of our skin: the realization of just how breachable that thin membrane is between the inside and outside of our bodies. We do not typically think about our pulsing hearts, or the quivering pinkness of our glistening viscera. We repress these images, tuck them away in our minds. We stroll cheerfully through daily life—or plod cluelessly, depending on who we are—forgetting to the best of our ability the fleshy world beneath our skin. Horror shatters this forgetfulness. Whether it comes in the form of a violent film, or the evening news, or a grisly car accident we pass in slow motion on our evening commute, horror reminds us that we are, in the end, *meat*.

Not all horror is so bodily. Even the most abstract or metaphysical experiences of horror, however, communicate a sense of crossed or unstable boundaries, a feeling of disorientation or uncanniness, a sense that what was once far away is now close by, or what was once up is now down, or what was once seemingly dead is now all-too-alive, all-too-present. Horror undermines our ease and complacency. It discombobulates us. We feel tense and defensive. Sometimes we turn and run. So terribly deformed was Joseph Merrick, for instance, the Victorian man who was known commonly as the “Elephant Man,” and so unrecognizable as human was his face, that trained nurses who had seen it all in their long careers dropped their trays, screamed, and fled when they entered his hospital room for the first time. Merrick





was in his mid-twenties when someone, for the first time in his life, smiled at him upon meeting him. So unprepared was he for this smile, for a gesture of kindness that most of us take for granted, that he began sobbing uncontrollably.



That so many Victorian writers and thinkers were fascinated by sensations of spatial and temporal disorientation, by a creeping of the flesh, is due to the fact that the nineteenth century in Great Britain was a time of political, demographic, scientific, cultural, and economic change. Opportunities for horror abounded. Old boundaries blurred and were redrawn. Ancient orders collapsed. Customs died. The world seemed to many to be spinning toward an unfamiliar future. The population of Great Britain, the first industrialized nation on earth, grew at an unprecedented rate; millions of people moved to crowded, unsanitary cities to work in the new manufacturing sector. Extreme poverty, exacerbated by periods of high unemployment and political unrest, existed in proximity to flourishing wealth, to a politically and culturally ascendant middle class, with its disposable income, its moralism and materialism, anxiety and ease. Having fully recovered from the loss of its American colonies in the eighteenth century, Great Britain became, in the wake of its victory over Napoleonic France, the world's foremost military and economic power, transforming itself, by century's end, into the largest and most powerful empire the world had ever seen. By the 1890s, one in every four acres of land on earth was under the British flag; one in every four people on the planet was a British subject. Scientific discoveries and technological innovations—the railroad, photography, telegraphy, for instance, or Darwin's theory of evolution—transformed the country's physical landscape and the geography of the mind, jolting the Victorians into a new world of possibilities and threats. The old narratives—those binding agents that once held society together—seemed to dissolve before their eyes.

The disenchanting and exhilarating sensation of modernity is comparable to feeling out of place. The ground has shifted—and is shifting still—beneath one's feet. Karl Marx described life in the nineteenth century as a queasy state in which “all that is solid melts into air.” Looking around in the mid-1880s at an England he barely recognized, so unlike the “old days,” Victorian cultural critic John Ruskin likened the modern world to a monstrous, unnatural “storm-cloud” on the horizon, a meteorological phenomenon he had never seen before. Writing in the early



twentieth century, E. F. Benson described this storm from the inside. He compares memories of his Victorian childhood to “glimpses seen through the window by night when lightning is about”: “The flash leaps out without visible cause or warning, and the blackness lifts for a second revealing the scene, the criss-cross of the rods of rain, the trees shining with moisture, the colours in the flower-beds, and then darkness like a lid snapped down hides all till the next flash flickers.” The monsters that creep through Victorian literature are metaphors for the deformities wrought on the Victorian psyche by modernity: misfit thoughts, a lost sense of community, insatiable new capitalist appetites. Likewise, the myriad ghosts that haunt Victorian literature suggest a state of cultural and psychological flux, a porous border between past and present, between this world and the next.

If the Victorians mourned the loss of the old, looked with trepidation upon the rapid approach of the unknown, they also found their footing on the undulant surface of modern life. They survived and flourished. Victorian modernity is an unlikely confection of optimism and anxiety. Masters of the seas and the earth, the Victorians set a tone that persists to this day, shaping in important ways our own globalized world. They saw themselves as reformers, as fixers of a broken world. The idea of “fixing” is a particularly Victorian idea. It suggests repair and renovation, a can-do attitude: world-historical confidence in one’s ability to save the world. It also suggests, however, a desire to arrest or control, to regulate or lay down the law, to chase that upstart spirit, chaos, into the shadows. On an increasingly discordant and complex planet, the Victorians sought—with good intentions and with bad—to produce a stabilizing sense of the normal. If they seem to strive a bit too earnestly at times for truth, for epistemological and philosophical certainty, that is because the truths on which they once relied had turned to dust before their eyes, like a corpse in an unsealed tomb.

The Victorians are famous for policing themselves and everyone else, for policing culture and desire, for policing the world. They sought to put everything in its rightful place. They are credited by some with inventing, popularizing, and disseminating—through education, popular culture, political and scientific discourse, and though commonsense—the concept of the normal. Whereas order was once maintained in society through violence or through the unspoken threat of violence, the Victorian middle class attempted to stabilize society, philosopher Michel Foucault suggests, with a far more effective instrument of control: the imperative that one be normal. Socialization became synonymous with normalization. A normalized individual polices herself, measures herself against a norm, conforms. In normalization, we internalize the norm, take it to heart, and make it a cherished part of ourselves.



The criminal, the misfit, the oddball, and the freak: the Victorians did not punish or ostracize these people. They used them to define, refine, and ultimately to codify the normal. These people became the exceptions that proved the rule. Just as a disease teaches doctors the nature of health and the workings of the body, so criminal behavior taught Victorian criminologists how successful socialization works. The normalizing impulse in modern culture, then, can be traced to a political and emotional need on our part to find our footing, to orient ourselves, in a world in which “all that is solid melts into air.” If the normal is a reassuring concept, it is also a paranoid one. At the root of all horror is a hunger for normality, for the reassurance it provides, for the stability it promises.



The two volumes that comprise *Crime and Horror in Victorian Literature and Culture* offer readers a chance to gaze at the Victorian psyche, at that mixture of paranoia and confidence with which English, Scottish, and Irish writers faced the nineteenth century, made sense of the horror they could not fully repress, the normality they could not quite achieve. Together, these volumes contain one novel, two plays, three novellas, nine short stories, twenty-two poems, and numerous contextualizing examples of nineteenth-century journalism, social criticism, criminology, memoirs, excerpts, and government reports. In a project of this scope, one must abandon the fantasy of a comprehensive account of crime and horror in Victorian literature and culture. For every text included, four or five had to be excluded. Instead, I have opted to provide readers with eight “footholds” in the period, entry points into themes or topics that captivated the Victorian imagination, triggered the sensation of horror, an unsettling awareness of porous or transgressed boundaries. These include: the slum, the criminal essence, the heavy hand of the law, prostitution, monstrosity, hauntedness, chaos, and death. *Crime and Horror in Victorian Literature and Culture* contains numerous voices. Some are familiar: Charles Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson, Christina Rossetti, and Arthur Conan Doyle. Other voices, however, have been forgotten or neglected in recent years, and are collected here and annotated for the first time in a long time, in some cases, for the first time ever: Octavia Hill, Stanislaus Eric Stenbock, Bithia Mary Croker, among others. I invite readers to explore the varied landscape of Victorian fear. Plunge into its forgotten valleys; scale its daunting heights. For in the twenty-first



century, a century shaped in so many ways by the nineteenth, *their* fear is now *our* fear.



A project of this size cannot be accomplished alone. I owe a debt of gratitude to many people. First, I'd like to thank my research assistant Kelly Haigh, who collected biographical data on many of the authors included in this anthology, and who wrote some of the author biographies that follow, as well as portions of others. I am grateful to the staff at University Readers for their commitment to this project and for helping me to complete it expeditiously, especially Mieka Hemesath, Monica Hui, Jessica Knott, Jennifer Bowen, and Toni Villalas. At Harvard University, Rebecca Curtin worked with me to organize and digitize an enormous amount of material, and a Faculty Research Assistance Grant provided the necessary funds. I'd also like to express gratitude to Carol Dell'Amico, Jim Engell, Molly Clark Hillard, Elaine Scarry, Carolyn Williams, Sybil Kaiser, and Ken Urban, for their feedback, assistance, and support.



PART 1

THE VICTORIAN SLUM

FROM
THE CONDITIONS OF THE
WORKING CLASS IN ENGLAND

FRIEDRICH ENGELS

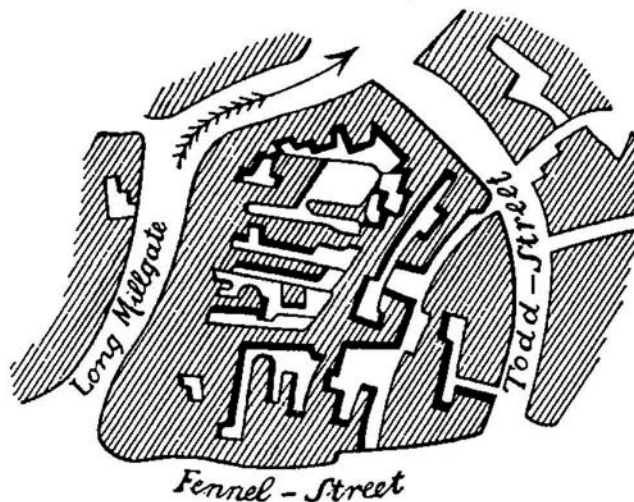
Born near Düsseldorf in western Prussia, the son of a prosperous German businessman, Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) became in his early twenties a passionate critic of capitalism and a tireless advocate for economic justice. He spent his youth writing for radical publications under the pseudonym “Friedrich Oswald” and studying Hegelian philosophy; in 1842, however, he went to work at his father’s textile manufacturing firm in Manchester, England. What he saw in Manchester during his two-year stay shocked him. The result was his first book, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), from which the following excerpt comes, and in which he exposes the ugly realities of working-class life in industrial England. With his friend and lifelong collaborator, Karl Marx (1818–1883), Engels penned *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), published during a period of revolutionary upheaval in Europe. In 1850, Engels returned to England, where he remained for the rest of his life. Though he worked for two decades in the textile business to support his family (and frequently Marx’s family as well), Engels was committed to the communist struggle, producing influential works of political and proto-anthropological thought, including *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884), and editing and publishing, after Marx’s death, the remaining volumes of *Das Kapital* (1885, 1894).





I NOW proceed to describe Manchester's worker districts. First of all, there is the Old Town, which lies between the northern boundary of the commercial district and the Irk. Here the streets, even the better ones, are narrow and winding, as Todd Street, Long Millgate, Withy Grove, and Shude Hill, the houses dirty, old, and tumble-down, and the construction of the side streets utterly horrible. Going from the Old Church to Long Millgate, the stroller has at once a row of old-fashioned houses at the right, of which not one has kept its original level; these are remnants of the old pre-manufacturing Manchester, whose former inhabitants have removed with their descendants into better-built districts, and have left the houses, which were not good enough for them, to a working-class population strongly mixed with Irish blood. Here one is in an almost undisguised workingmen's quarter, for even the shops and beerhouses hardly take the trouble to exhibit a trifling degree of cleanliness. But all this is nothing in comparison with the courts and lanes which lie behind, to which access can be gained only through covered passages, in which no two human beings can pass at the same time. Of the irregular cramming together of dwellings in ways which defy all rational plan, of the tangle in which they are crowded literally one upon the other, it is impossible to convey an idea. And it is not the buildings surviving from the old times of Manchester which are to blame for this; the confusion has only recently reached its height when every scrap of space left by the old way of building has been filled up and patched over until not a foot of land is left to be further occupied.

To confirm my statement I have drawn here a small section of the plan of Manchester—not the worst spot and not one-tenth of the whole Old Town.





This drawing will suffice to characterise the irrational manner in which the entire district was built, particularly, the part near the Irk.

The south bank of the Irk is here very steep and between fifteen and thirty feet high. On this declivitous hillside there are planted three rows of houses, of which the lowest rise directly out of the river, while the front walls of the highest stand on the crest of the hill in Long Millgate. Among them are mills on the river, in short, the method of construction is as crowded and disorderly here as in the lower part of Long Millgate. Right and left a multitude of covered passages lead from the main street into numerous courts, and he who turns in thither gets into a filth, and disgusting grime, the equal of which is not to be found—especially in the courts which lead down to the Irk, and which contain unqualifiedly the most horrible dwellings which I have yet beheld. In one of these courts there stands directly at the entrance, at the end of the covered passage, a privy without a door, so dirty that the inhabitants can pass into and out of the court only by passing through foul pools of stagnant urine and excrement. This is the first court on the Irk above Ducie Bridge—in case any one should care to look into it. Below it on the river there are several tanneries which fill the whole neighborhood with the stench of animal putrefaction. Below Ducie Bridge the only entrance to most of the houses is by means of narrow dirty stairs and over heaps of refuse and filth. The first court below Ducie Bridge, known as Allen's Court, was in such a state at the time of the cholera¹ that the sanitary police ordered it evacuated, swept and disinfected with chloride of lime. Dr. Kay gives a terrible description of the state of this court at that time.² Since then, it seems to have been partially torn away and rebuilt; at least looking down from Ducie Bridge, the passer-by sees several ruined walls and heaps of *débris* with some newer houses. The view from this bridge, mercifully concealed from mortals of small stature by a parapet as high as a man, is characteristic for the whole district. At the bottom flows, or rather stagnates, the Irk, a narrow coal-black, foul-smelling stream, full of *débris* and refuse, which it deposits on the shallower right bank. In dry weather, a long string of the most disgusting blackish-green slime pools are left standing on this bank, from the depths of which bubbles of miasmatic gas constantly arise and give forth a stench unendurable even on the bridge forty or fifty feet above the surface of the stream. But besides this, the stream itself is checked every few paces by high weirs, behind which slime and refuse accumulate and rot in thick masses. Above the

1 1832.

2 "The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working-Class employed in the Cotton Manufacture in Manchester." By James Ph. Kay, M.D. 2nd Ed. 1832. Dr. Kay confuses the working-class in general with the factory workers; otherwise, an excellent pamphlet. [*Engels*]



bridge are tanneries, bonemills, and gasworks, from which all drains and refuse find their way into the Irk, which receives further the contents of all the neighbouring sewers and privies. It may be easily imagined, therefore, what sort of residue the stream deposits. Below the bridge you look upon the piles of *débris*, the refuse, filth, and offal from the courts on the steep left bank; here each house is packed close behind its neighbour and a piece of each is visible, all black, smoky, crumbling, ancient, with broken panes and window-frames. The background is furnished by old barrack-like factory buildings. On the lower right bank stands a long row of houses and mills; the second house being a ruin without a roof, piled with *débris*; the third stands so low that the lowest floor is uninhabitable, and therefore without windows or doors. Here the background embraces the pauper burial-ground, the station of the Liverpool and Leeds railway, and, in the rear of this, the Workhouse, the “Poor-Law Bastille”¹ of Manchester, which, like a citadel, looks threateningly down; from behind its high walls and parapets on the hilltop, upon the working-people’s quarter below.

Above Ducie Bridge, the left bank grows more flat and the right bank steeper, but the condition of the dwellings on both banks grows worse rather than better. He who turns to the left here from the main street, Long Millgate, is lost; he wanders from one court to another, turns countless corners, passes nothing but narrow, filthy nooks and alleys, until after a few minutes he has lost all clue, and knows not whither to turn. Everywhere half or wholly ruined buildings, some of them actually uninhabited, which means a great deal here; rarely a wooden or stone floor to be seen in the houses, almost uniformly broken, ill-fitting windows and doors, and a state of filth! Everywhere heaps of *débris*, refuse, and offal; standing pools for gutters, and a stench which alone would make it impossible for a human being in any degree civilized to live in such a district. The newly-built extension of the Leeds railway, which crosses the Irk here, has swept away some of these courts and lanes, laying others completely open to view. Immediately under the railway bridge there stands a court, the filth and horrors of which surpass all the others by far, just because it was hitherto so shut off, so secluded that the way to it could not be found without a good deal of trouble, I should never have discovered it myself, without the breaks made by the railway, though I thought I knew this whole region thoroughly. Passing along a

1 Famous prison and symbol of political repression, the Bastille was stormed by the people of Paris on July 14, 1789, in one of the early events in the French Revolution. Victorian critics of the government-run workhouses established by the New Poor Law of 1834 lambasted these prison-like institutions as “Bastilles”: places where poverty was punished rather than alleviated. Edwin Chadwick headed the parliamentary commission whose findings led to the passage of the controversial law.



rough bank, among stakes and washing-lines, one penetrates into this chaos of small one-storied, one-roomed huts, in most of which there is no artificial floor; kitchen, living and sleeping-room all in one. In such a hole, scarcely five feet long by six broad, I found two beds—and such bedsteads and beds!—which, with a staircase and chimney-place, exactly filled the room. In several others I found absolutely nothing, while the door stood open, and the inhabitants, leaned against it. Everywhere before the doors refuse and offal; that any sort of pavement lay underneath could not be seen but only felt, here and there, with the feet. This whole collection of cattle-sheds for human beings was surrounded on two sides by houses and a factory, and on the third by the river, and besides the narrow stair up the bank, a narrow doorway alone led out into another, almost equally ill-built, ill-kept labyrinth of dwellings.

Enough! The whole side of the Irk is built in this way, a planless, knotted chaos of houses, more or less on the verge of uninhabitableness, whose unclean interiors fully correspond with their filthy external surroundings. And how could the people be clean with no proper opportunity for satisfying the most natural and ordinary wants? Privies are so rare here that they are either filled up every day, or are too remote for most of the inhabitants to use. How can people wash when they have only the dirty Irk water at hand, while pumps and water pipes can be found in decent parts of the city alone? In truth, it cannot be charged to the account of these helots of modern society if their dwellings are not more clean than the pig sties which are here and there to be seen among them. The landlords are not ashamed to let dwellings like the six or seven cellars on the quay directly below Scotland Bridge, the floors of which stand at least two feet below the low-water level of the Irk that flows not six feet away from them; or like the upper floor of the corner-house on the opposite shore directly above the bridge, where the ground-floor, utterly uninhabitable, stands deprived of all fittings for doors and windows, a case by no means rare in this region, when this open ground-floor is used as a privy by the whole neighbourhood for want of other facilities!

If we leave the Irk and penetrate once more on the opposite side from Long Millgate into the midst of the working-men's dwellings, we shall come into a somewhat newer quarter, which stretches from St. Michael's Church to Withy Grove and Shude Hill. Here there is somewhat better order. In place of the chaos of buildings, we find at least long straight lanes and alleys or courts, built according to a plan and usually square. But if, in the former case, every house was built according to caprice, here each lane and court is so built, without reference to the situation of the adjoining ones. The lanes run now in this direction, now in that, while every two minutes the wanderer gets into a blind alley, or on turning a corner, finds himself



back where he started from; certainly no one who has not lived a considerable time in this labyrinth can find his way through it.

If I may use the word at all in speaking of this district, the ventilation of these streets and courts is, in consequence of this confusion, quite as imperfect as in the Irk region; and if this quarter may, nevertheless, be said to have some advantage over that of the Irk, the houses being newer and the streets occasionally having gutters, nearly every house has, on the other hand, a cellar dwelling, which is rarely found in the Irk district, by reason of the greater age and more careless construction of the houses. As for the rest, the filth, *débris*, and offal heaps, and the pools in the streets are common to both quarters, and in the district now under discussion, another feature most injurious to the cleanliness of the inhabitants, is the multitude of pigs walking about in all the alleys, rooting into the offal heaps, or kept imprisoned in small pens. Here, as in most of the working-men's quarters of Manchester, the pork-raisers rent the courts and build pig-pens in them. In almost every court one or even several such pens may be found, into which the inhabitants of the court throw all refuse and offal, whence the swine grow fat; and the atmosphere, confined on all four sides, is utterly corrupted by putrefying animal and vegetable substances. Through this quarter, a broad and measurably decent street has been cut, Millers Street, and the background has been pretty successfully concealed. But if any one should be led by curiosity to pass through one of the numerous passages which lead into the courts, he will find this piggery repeated at every twenty paces.

Such is the Old Town of Manchester, and on re-reading my description, I am forced to admit that instead of being exaggerated, it is far from black enough to convey a true impression of the filth, ruin, and uninhabitableness, the defiance of all considerations of cleanliness, ventilation, and health which characterise the construction of this single district, containing at least twenty to thirty thousand inhabitants. And such a district exists in the heart of the second city of England, the first manufacturing city of the world. If any one wishes to see in how little space a human being can move, how little air—and *such* air!—he can breathe, how little of civilisation he may share and yet live, it is only necessary to travel hither. True, this is the *Old Town*, and the people of Manchester emphasise the fact whenever any one mentions to them the frightful condition of this Hell upon Earth; but what does that prove? Everything which here arouses horror and indignation is of recent origin, belongs to the *industrial epoch*. The couple of hundred houses, which belong to old Manchester, have been long since abandoned by their original inhabitants; the industrial epoch alone has crammed into them the swarms of workers whom they now shelter; the industrial epoch alone has built up every spot between these



old houses to win a covering for the masses whom it has conjured hither from the agricultural districts and from Ireland, the industrial epoch alone enables the owners of these cattlesheds to rent them for high prices to human beings, to plunder the poverty of the workers, to undermine the health of thousands, in order that they *alone*, the owners, may grow rich. In the industrial epoch alone has it become possible that the worker scarcely freed from feudal servitude could be used as mere material, a mere chattel; that he must let himself be crowded into a dwelling too bad for every other, which he for his hard-earned wages buys the right to let go utterly to ruin. This manufacture has achieved, which, without these workers, this poverty, this slavery could not have lived. True, the original construction of this quarter was bad, little good could have been made out of it; but, have the landowners, has the municipality done anything to improve it when rebuilding? On the contrary, wherever a nook or comer was free, a house has been run up; where a superfluous passage remained, it has been built up; the value of land rose with the blossoming out of manufacture, and the more it rose, the more madly was the work of building up carried on, without reference to the health or comfort of the inhabitants, with sole reference to the highest possible profit on the principle that no *hole is so bad but that some poor creature must take it who can pay for nothing better*. However, it is the Old Town, and with this reflection the bourgeoisie is comforted. Let us see, therefore, how much better it is in the New Town.

The New Town, known also as Irish Town, stretches up a hill of clay, beyond the Old Town, between the Irk and St. George's Road. Here all the features of a city are lost. Single rows of houses or groups of streets stand, here and there, like little villages on the naked, not even grassgrown clay soil; the houses, or rather cottages, are in bad order, never repaired, filthy, with damp, unclean, cellar dwellings; the lanes are neither paved nor supplied with sewers, but harbour numerous colonies of swine penned in small sties or yards, or wandering unrestrained through the neighbourhood. The mud in the streets is so deep that there is never a chance, except in the driest weather, of walking without sinking into it ankle deep at every step. In the vicinity of St. George's Road, the separate groups of buildings approach each other more closely, ending in a continuation of lines, blind alleys, back lanes and courts, which grow more and more crowded and irregular the nearer they approach the heart of the town. True, they are here oftener paved or supplied with paved sidewalks and gutters; but the filth, the bad odor of the houses, and especially of the cellars, remain the same. * * *

FROM
REPORT ON THE SANITARY
CONDITION OF THE LABOURING
POPULATION OF GREAT BRITAIN

EDWIN CHADWICK

The son of a liberal newspaper editor, Edwin Chadwick (1800–1890) spent his boyhood in Manchester and London, steeped in his father’s reformist politics. He described his mother, who died when he was young, as an exceedingly clean woman who made him wash his face twice a day. In 1828, Chadwick began writing regularly for the *Morning Herald* and the *Westminster Review* in order to finance his legal education. His interest in social causes, however, soon superseded his career in law; Chadwick’s early writings on prison reform and law enforcement brought him to the attention of utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who made Chadwick his private secretary. After Bentham’s death in 1832, Chadwick worked for a government commission—at first as assistant commissioner, then in 1833 as chief commissioner—on reforming the nation’s outmoded poor laws. Chadwick was widely credited with the legislation that resulted: the controversial Poor Law of 1834, which created a centralized system of government-run workhouses for the poor, where conditions were deliberately spartan and regimented, in order to ensure that relief was sought only as a last resort. Both Chadwick’s name and his utilitarian approach to social problems began to be associated in the popular imagination with tyranny and heartlessness. He did manage to curry favor with the public, however, when he shifted his reformist energies to sanitation and public health in 1839. He advocated for improved sanitary conditions in Britain’s urban areas, including better regulation of city water supplies, the replacement of London’s brick sewers with a system of earthenware pipes, and





the closure of urban cemeteries. The following selection was published as a parliamentary paper in 1842. It led to the Public Health Act of 1848.

General Condition of the Residences

THE most wretched of the stationary population of which I have been able to obtain any account, or that I have ever seen, was that which I saw in company with *Dr. Arnott*, and others, in the wynds¹ of Edinburgh and Glasgow.

I prefer citing his description of the residences we visited:

“In the survey which I had the opportunity of making in September, 1840, of the state of Edinburgh and Glasgow, all appeared confirmatory of the view of the subject of fevers submitted to the Poor Law Commissioners by those who prepared the Report in London.

“In Glasgow, which I first visited, it was found that the great mass of the fever cases occurred in the low wynds and dirty narrow streets and courts, in which, because lodging was there cheapest, the poorest and most destitute naturally had their abodes. From one such locality, between Argyll-street and the river, 754 of about 5000 cases of fever which occurred in the previous year were carried to the hospitals. In a perambulation on the morning of September 24th, with Mr. Chadwick, Dr. Alison,² Dr. Cowan (since deceased, who had laboured so meritoriously to alleviate the misery of the poor in Glasgow),³ the police magistrate, and others, we examined these wynds, and, to give an idea of the whole vicinity, I may state as follows:—

“We entered a dirty low passage like a house door, which led from the street through the first house to a square court immediately behind, which court, with the exception of a narrow path around it leading to another long passage through a second house, was occupied entirely as a dung receptacle of the most disgusting kind. Beyond this court the second passage led to a second square court, occupied

1 Alleys or narrow lanes.

2 William Pulteney Alison (1790–1859), Professor of Medicine at Edinburgh University 1820–56, author of *Observations on the Management of the Poor in Scotland* (Edinburgh 1840), and of many articles on the causes of destitution and fever in towns. See also introduction, pp. 23, 63–4. [Chadwick]

3 Robert Cowan (d. 1841), Professor of Forensic Medicine at Glasgow University, 1839–41, and author of statistical studies on the incidence of fever in Glasgow. [Chadwick]



in the same way by its dunghill; and from this court there was yet a third passage leading to a third court, and third dungheap. There were no privies or drains there, and the dungheaps received all filth which the swarm of wretched inhabitants could give; and we learned that a considerable part of the rent of the houses was paid by the produce of the dungheaps. Thus, worse off than wild animals, many of which withdraw to a distance and conceal their ordure, the dwellers in these courts had converted their shame into a kind of money by which their lodging was to be paid. The interiors of these houses and their inmates corresponded with the exteriors. We saw half-dressed wretches crowding together to be warm; and in one bed, although in the middle of the day, several women were imprisoned under a blanket, because as many others who had on their backs all the articles of dress that belonged to the party were then out of doors in the streets. This picture is so shocking that, without ocular proof, one would be disposed to doubt the possibility of the facts; and yet there is perhaps no old town in Europe that does not furnish parallel examples." * * *

Street and Road Cleansing: Road Pavements

IN the consideration of the evidence about to be submitted as to the condition of the streets on the external condition of the residences of the labouring classes, it should be borne in mind that the external condition of the dwelling powerfully and immediately affects its internal cleanliness and general economy.

The description of a large proportion of the streets inhabited by the working classes in Manchester by Dr. Baron Howard, and those of Leeds by Mr. Baker, those of Liverpool by Dr. Duncan, might be extended to Glasgow and other places. *Dr. Howard* states:

“That the filthy and disgraceful state of many of the streets in these densely populated and neglected parts of the town where the indigent poor chiefly reside cannot fail to exercise a most baneful influence over their health is an inference which experience has fully proved to be well founded; and no fact is better established than that a large proportion of the causes of fever which occur in Manchester originate in these situations. Of the 182 patients admitted into the temporary fever hospital in Balloon-street, 135 at least came from unpaved or otherwise filthy streets, or from confined and dirty courts and alleys. Many of the streets in which cases of fever are common are so deep in mire, or so full of hollows and heaps of refuse that the vehicle used for conveying the patients to the House of Recovery often



cannot be driven along them, and the patients are obliged to be carried to it from considerable distances. Whole streets in these quarters are unpaved and without drains or main-sewers, are worn into deep ruts and holes, in which water constantly stagnates, and are so covered with refuse and excrementitious matter as to be almost impassable from depth of mud, and intolerable from stench. In the narrow lanes, confined courts and alleys, leading from these, similar nuisances exist, if possible, to a still greater extent; and as ventilation is here more obstructed, their effects are still more pernicious. In many of these places are to be seen privies in the most disgusting state of filth, open cesspools, obstructed drains, ditches full of stagnant water, dunghills, pigsties, &c., from which the most abominable odours are emitted. But dwellings perhaps are still more insalubrious in those cottages situated at the backs of the houses fronting the street, the only entrance to which is through some nameless narrow passage, converted generally, as if by common consent, into a receptacle for ordure and the most offensive kinds of filth. The doors of these hovels very commonly open upon the uncovered cesspool, which receives the contents of the privy belonging to the front house, and all the refuse cast out from it, as if it had been designedly contrived to render them as loathsome and unhealthy as possible. Surrounded on all sides by high walls, no current of air can gain access to disperse or dilute the noxious effluvia, or disturb the reeking atmosphere of these areas. Where there happens to be less crowding, and any ground remains unbuilt upon, it is generally undrained, contains pools of stagnant water, and is made a *dépôt* for dunghills and all kinds of filth.”¹

Of 687 streets, inspected by a voluntary association in that town, 248 were reported as being unpaved, 112 ill ventilated, 352 as containing stagnant pools, heaps of refuse, ordure, &c. * * *

The sewerage of the metropolis, though it is a frequent subject of boast to those who have not examined its operations or effects, will be found to be a vast monument of defective administration, of lavish expenditure, and extremely defective execution. The general defect of these works is, that they are so constructed as to accumulate deposits within them; that the accumulations remain for years, and are at last only removed at a great expense, and in an offensive manner, by hand-labour and cartage. The effect is to generate and retain in large quantities before the houses the gases which it is the object of cleansing to remove. In the course of the present

1 *Local Rep[ort]s. E[n]gland & W[ales]*, pp. 305–6. [Chadwick]



inquiry instances have been frequently presented of fevers and deaths occasioned by the escapes of gas from the sewers into the streets and houses. In the evidence given before the Committee of the House of Commons, which received evidence on the subject in 1834,¹ one medical witness stated, that of all cases of severe typhus that he had seen, eight-tenths were either in houses of which the drains from the sewers were untrapped, or which, being trapped, were situated opposite gully-holes; and he mentioned instances where servants sleeping in the lower rooms of houses were invariably attacked with fever.² It was proposed as a remedy to prevent the escape of the noxious effluvia by trapping them, but this was refused on the ground of the danger to the men, who must enter the sewers to clean them, from the confined gas. In one of the circulars the reason assigned for allowing the escape of the gas into the streets is that if it were confined in the sewers it might impede the flow of the water. It was then proposed to allow the escape of the noxious gases through chimneys constructed at certain distances. But this was decided to be an experiment, and the Committee did not feel themselves authorized to make experiments. Instances were adduced where it had been found necessary either to trap or to remove gully-holes in the vicinity of butchers' shops, to avoid the injurious effects of the effluvia upon the meat. Similarly mischievous effects of the defective construction and management of the sewers are commonly displayed in the medical reports from the provincial towns, and they have been incidentally noticed in the passages already cited. * * *

The Want of Separate Apartments

THE overcrowding of the tenements of the labouring classes is productive of demoralization in a mode pointed out by *Mr. Barnett*, the clerk to the Nottingham Union, who states:

“That the houses are generally too small to afford a comfortable reception to the family, and the consequence is that the junior members are generally in the streets. Girls and youths destitute of adequate house-room, and freed from parental control, are accustomed to gross immoralities.”³

1 Evidence of Peter Fuller before the *Select Committee on Metropolis Sewers*, P.P. 1834, XV, Q. 874. [*Chadwick*]

2 In plumbing, a “trap” is a J- or U-shaped pipe designed to retain a small amount of water, thereby preventing sewer gases from entering buildings through drainpipes.

3 *Local Reps. E. & W.*, p. 155. [*Chadwick*]



Hereafter, when considering the pecuniary means of defraying the expense of sanitary measures, it will be shown how much less of such consequences in most districts than may be supposed is ascribable to absolute poverty or real inability to pay for better accommodation. To obviate even immediate impressions of this description, I might adduce much evidence of the character of the following testimony of *Mr. J. Thomson*, of Clitheroe:¹

“What is the number of persons whom you have in your employment?—Men, women, and children, between 900 and 1000.

“Are you the owner of any of the tenements where they reside?—Very few; not more than 12 or 15.

“What description of tenements are they?—Houses with two rooms above, two rooms below, and a yard; and letting at a rent of from 7*l.* to 8*l.* per annum. These are occupied by foremen in various departments, and the better description of artisans.

“What wages do this description of persons earn?—Various, from 30*s.* to 3*l.* weekly; averaging, perhaps, 2*l.* weekly; out of which they pay 3*s.* per week for rent.

“What is your experience in respect to the habits of the workpeople in these tenements?—The remark which I have to make is on the very low state of feeling prevalent amongst even a high class of workmen as to decency or propriety. The tenements sufficed for them when they were young, but when the female children become young women, and the boys advance to puberty, and decency requires them to have separate rooms, the usual practice of the parents is to take the young women into their own sleeping-rooms. I have one highly respectable foreman who has one daughter aged 20, and another aged 22, sleeping on each side of the bed in which himself and his wife sleep. The next bed-room is filled with the younger children of both sexes, boys and girls, up to 16 years of age. The earnings of this family must have been 50*s.* per week. The rent they paid was 3*s.* weekly, which was little more than the interest on the money invested. I have remonstrated on the indecency of such habits, and on their bad effects, but the expense of the extra shilling a-week for a house with another bed-room was considered a sufficient answer to my remonstrance. In my own tenements I have built the additional room, and notwithstanding the remonstrances, I have required the additional rent. When they have remonstrated, I have told them of the fact, that the cost of the additional room would only be a beneficial deduction from the money spent in liquor.” * * *

1 In Lancashire.



The familiarity with the sickness and death constantly present in the crowded and unwholesome districts, appears to re-act as another concurrent cause in aggravation of the wretchedness and vice in which they are plunged. Seeing the apparent uncertainty of the morrow, the inhabitants really take no heed of it, and abandon themselves with the recklessness and avidity of common soldiers in a war to whatever gross enjoyment comes within their reach. All the districts I visited, where the rate of sickness and mortality was high, presented, as might be expected, a proportionate amount of severe cases of destitute orphanage and widowhood; and the same places were marked by excessive recklessness of the labouring population. In Dumfries, for example, it is estimated, that the cholera, swept away one-eleventh part of the population. Until recently, the town had not recovered the severe effects of the visitation, and the condition of the orphans was most deplorable.¹ Amongst young artisans who were earning from 16s. to 18s. a-week, I was informed that there were very few who made any reserves against the casualties of sickness. I was led to ask the provost what number of bakers' shops there were? "Twelve," was his answer. And what number of whiskey-shops may the town possess? "Seventy-nine" was the reply. If we might rely on the inquiries made of working-men when Dr. Arnott and I went through the wynds of Edinburgh, their consumption of spirits bore almost the like proportion to the consumption of wholesome food. We observed to Captain Stuart, the superintendent of the police at Edinburgh, in our inspection of the wynds, that life appeared to be of little value, and was likely to be held cheap in such spots. He stated, in answer, that a short time ago a man had been executed for the murder of his wife in a fit of passion in the very room we had accidentally entered, and where we were led to make the observation. At a short distance from that spot, and amidst others of this class of habitation, were those which had been the scenes of the murders by Burke and Hare. Yet amidst these were the residences of working men engaged in regular industry. The indiscriminate mixture of workpeople and their children in the immediate vicinity, and often in the same rooms with persons whose character was denoted by the question and answer more than once exchanged, "When were you last washed?" "When I was last in prison," was only one mark of the entire degradation to which they had been brought. The working-classes living in these districts were equally marked by the abandonment of every civil or social regulation. Asking some children in one of the rooms of the wynds in which they swarmed in Glasgow what were their names, they hesitated to answer,

1 An inaccurate statement. The figure of one-eleventh relates to cases, not fatalities. Out of a population of about 10,000, there were 840 cases of cholera, of which half proved fatal. (*Local Reps. Scot[land]*, pp. 208-9.) [*Chadwick*]



when one of the inmates said, they called them —, mentioning some nicknames. “The fact is,” observed Captain Miller, the superintendent of the police, “they really have no names. Within this range of buildings I have no doubt I should be able to find a thousand children who have no names whatever, or only nicknames, like dogs.” There were found amidst the occupants, labourers earning wages undoubtedly sufficient to have paid for comfortable tenements, men and women who were intelligent and so far as could be ascertained, had received the ordinary education which should have given better tastes and led to better habits. My own observations have been confirmed by the statement of Mr. Sheriff Alison, of Glasgow, that in the great manufacturing towns of Scotland, “in the contest with whiskey, in their crowded population, education has been entirely overthrown.”¹ The ministers, it will be seen, make similar reports from the rural districts. On the observation of other districts, and the comparison of the habits of the same workmen in town and country, it will be seen that I consider that the use of the whiskey and the prostration of the education and moral habits for which the Scottish labourers have been distinguished is, to a considerable extent, attributable to the surrounding physical circumstances, including the effects of the bad ventilation. The labourers presented to our notice in the condition described, in the crowded districts, were almost all Scotch. It is common to ascribe the extreme of misery and vice wholly to the Irish portion of the population of the towns in Scotland. A short inspection on the spot would correct this error. Mr. Baird, in his report on the sanitary condition of the poor of Glasgow, observes that “the bad name of the poor Irish had been too long attached to them.”² Dr. Cowan, of Glasgow, stated that “From ample opportunities of observation, they appeared to him to exhibit much less of that squalid misery and addiction to the use of ardent spirits than the Scotch of the same grade.”³ Instances were indeed stated to us, where the Irish were preferred for employment from their superior steadiness and docility; and Mr. Stuart, the Factory Inspector for Scotland, states, that “instances are now occurring of a preference being given to them as workers in the flax factories on account of their regular habits, and that very significant hints have been given by extensive factory owners, that Irish workmen will be selected unless the natives of the place, and other persons employed by them, relinquish the prevailing habits of intemperance.” Dr. Scott Alison, in his report on Tranent,⁴ has described the population in receipt of high wages, but living under

1 Archibald Alison, *The Principles of Population* (Edinburgh 1840), II, 96. [Chadwick]

2 *Local Reps. Scot.*, p. 185. [Chadwick]

3 Robert Cowan, *J.R.S.S.*, III (1840), 275. [Chadwick]

4 Near Edinburgh.



similar influences, as prone to passionate excitement, and as apt instruments for political discontents; their moral perceptions appeared to have been obliterated, and they might be said to be characterised by a “ferocious indocility which makes them prompt to wrong and violence, destroys their social nature, and transforms them into something little better than wild beasts.”¹

It is to be regretted that the coincidence of pestilence and moral disorder is not confined to one part of the island, nor to any one race of the population. The over-crowding and the removal of what may be termed the architectural barriers or protections of decency and propriety, and the causes of physical deterioration in connexion with the moral deterioration, are also fearfully manifest in the districts in England, which, at the time to which the evidence refers, were in a state of prosperity.

Mr. Baker, in his report on the condition of the population, after giving an instance of the contrast presented by the working-people living in better dwellings, situated in better cleansed neighbourhoods (to which I shall advert when submitting the evidence in respect to preventive measures), describes the population living in houses:

“With broken panes in every window-frame, and filth and vermin in every nook. With the walls unwhitewashed for years, black with the smoke of foul chimneys, without water, with corded bed-stocks for beds, and sacking for bed-clothing, with floors unwashed from year to year, without out-offices, * * * while without, there are streets, elevated a foot, sometimes two, above the level of the causeway, by the accumulation of years, and stagnant puddles here and there, with their foetid exhalations, causeways broken and dangerous, ash-places choked up with filth, and excrementitious deposits on all sides as a consequence, undrained, unpaved, unventilated, uncared-for by any authority but the landlord, who weekly collects his miserable rents from his miserable tenants.

“Can we wonder that such places are the hot-beds of disease, or that it obtains, upon constitutions thus liberally predisposed to receive it, and forms the mortality which Leeds exhibits. Adult life, exposed to such miasmata, gives way. How much more than infant life, when ushered into, and attempted to be reared in, such obnoxious atmospheres. On the moral habits similar effects are produced. An inattention on the part of the local authorities to the state of the streets diminishes year by year the respectability of their occupiers. None dwell in such localities but to whom

¹ This view is expressed by Alison, though not in these precise words, in *Local Reps. Scot.*, p. 96. [*Chadwick*]



propinquity to employment is absolutely essential. Those who might advocate a better state of things, depart; and of those who remain, the one-half, by repeated exhibitions of indecency and vulgarity, and indeed by the mere fact of neighbourhood, sink into the moral degradation which is natural to the other, and vicious habits and criminal propensities precede the death which these combinations prepare.”¹ * * *

Recapitulation of Conclusions

AFTER as careful an examination of the evidence collected as I have been enabled to make, I beg leave to recapitulate the chief conclusions which that evidence appears to me to establish.

First, as to the extent and operation of the evils which are the subject of the inquiry:—

That the various forms of epidemic, endemic, and other disease caused, or aggravated, or propagated chiefly amongst the labouring classes by atmospheric impurities produced by decomposing animal and vegetable substances, by damp and filth, and close and overcrowded dwellings prevail amongst the population in every part of the kingdom, whether dwelling in separate houses, in rural villages, in small towns, in the larger towns—as they have been found to prevail in the lowest districts of the metropolis.

That such disease, wherever its attacks are frequent, is always found in connexion with the physical circumstances above specified, and that where those circumstances are removed by drainage, proper cleansing, better ventilation, and other means of diminishing atmospheric impurity, the frequency and intensity of such disease is abated; and where the removal of the noxious agencies appears to be complete, such disease almost entirely disappears.

That high prosperity in respect to employment and wages, and various and abundant food, have afforded to the labouring classes no exemptions from attacks of epidemic disease, which have been as frequent and as fatal in periods of commercial and manufacturing prosperity as in any others.

That the formation of all habits of cleanliness is obstructed by defective supplies of water.

1 *Local Repts. E. & W.*, pp. 361–2. [Chadwick]



That the annual loss of life from filth and bad ventilation are greater than the loss from death or wounds in any wars in which the country has been engaged in modern times.

That of the 43,000 cases of widowhood, and 112,000 cases of destitute orphanage relieved from the poor's rates in England and Wales alone, it appears that the greatest proportion of deaths of the heads of families occurred from the above specified and other removable causes; that their ages were under 45 years; that is to say, 13 years below the natural probabilities of life as shown by the experience of the whole population of Sweden.

That the public loss from the premature deaths of the heads of families is greater than can be represented by any enumeration of the pecuniary burdens consequent upon their sickness and death.

That, measuring the loss of working ability amongst large classes by the instances of gain, even from incomplete arrangements for the removal of noxious influences from places of work or from abodes, that this loss cannot be less than eight or ten years.

That the ravages of epidemics and other diseases do not diminish but tend to increase the pressure of population.

That in the districts where the mortality is the greatest the births are not only sufficient to replace the numbers removed by death, but to add to the population.

That the younger population, bred up under noxious physical agencies, is inferior in physical organization and general health to a population preserved from the presence of such agencies.

That the population so exposed is less susceptible of moral influences, and the effects of education are more transient than with a healthy population.

That these adverse circumstances tend to produce an adult population short-lived, improvident, reckless, and intemperate, and with habitual avidity for sensual gratifications.

That these habits lead to the abandonment of all the conveniences and decencies of life, and especially lead to the overcrowding of their homes, which is destructive to the morality as well as the health of large classes of both sexes.

That defective town cleansing fosters habits of the most abject degradation and tends to the demoralization of large numbers of human beings, who subsist by means of what they find amidst the noxious filth accumulated in neglected streets and bye-places.

That the expenses of local public works are in general unequally and unfairly assessed, oppressively and uneconomically collected, by separate collections, wastefully



expended in separate and inefficient operations by unskilled and practically irresponsible officers.

That the existing law for the protection of the public health and the constitutional machinery for reclaiming its execution, such as the Courts Leet,¹ have fallen into desuetude, and are in the state indicated by the prevalence of the evils they were intended to prevent.

Secondly. As to the means by which the present sanitary condition of the labouring classes may be improved:—

The primary and most important measures, and at the same time the most practicable, and within the recognized province of public administration, are drainage, the removal of all refuse of habitations, streets, and roads, and the improvement of the supplies of water.

That the chief obstacles to the immediate removal of decomposing refuse of towns and habitations have been the expense and annoyance of the hand labour and cartage requisite for the purpose.

That this expense may be reduced to one-twentieth or to one-thirtieth, or rendered inconsiderable, by the use of water and self-acting means of removal by improved and cheaper sewers and drains.

That refuse when thus held in suspension in water may be most cheaply and innocuously conveyed to any distance out of towns, and also in the best form for productive use, and that the loss and injury by the pollution of natural streams may be avoided.

That for all these purposes, as well as for domestic use, better supplies of water are absolutely necessary.

That for successful and economical drainage the adoption of geological areas as the basis of operations is requisite.

That appropriate scientific arrangements for public drainage would afford important facilities for private land-drainage, which is important for the health as well as sustenance of the labouring classes.

That the expense of public drainage, of supplies of water laid on in houses, and of means of improved cleansing would be a pecuniary gain, by diminishing the existing charges attendant on sickness and premature mortality.

That for the protection of the labouring classes and of the ratepayers against inefficiency and waste in all new structural arrangements for the protection of the

¹ An annual or biannual court of record with jurisdiction over minor criminal and civil matters.



public health, and to ensure public confidence that the expenditure will be beneficial, securities should be taken that all new local public works are devised and conducted by responsible officers qualified by the possession of the science and skill of civil engineers.

That the oppressiveness and injustice of levies for the whole immediate outlay on such works upon persons who have only short interests in the benefits may be avoided by care in spreading the expense over periods coincident with the benefits.

That by appropriate arrangements, 10 or 15 per cent, on the ordinary outlay for drainage might be saved, which on an estimate of the expense of the necessary structural alterations of one-third only of the existing tenements would be a saving of one million and a half sterling, besides the reduction of the future expenses of management.

That for the prevention of the disease occasioned by defective ventilation, and other causes of impurity in places of work and other places where large numbers are assembled, and for the general promotion of the means necessary to prevent disease, that it would be good economy to appoint a district medical officer independent of private practice, and with the securities of special qualifications and responsibilities to initiate sanitary measures and reclaim the execution of the law.

That by the combinations of all these arrangements it is probable that the full ensurable period of life indicated by the Swedish tables; that is, an increase of 13 years at least, may be extended to the whole of the labouring classes.

That the attainment of these and the other collateral advantages of reducing existing charges and expenditure are within the power of the legislature, and are dependent mainly on the securities taken for the application of practical science, skill, and economy in the direction of local public works.

And that the removal of noxious physical circumstances, and the promotion of civic, household, and personal cleanliness, are necessary to the improvement of the moral condition of the population; for that sound morality and refinement in manners and health are not long found co-existent with filthy habits amongst any class of the community.

I beg leave further to suggest, that the principles of amendment deduced from the inquiry will be found as applicable to Scotland as to England; and if so, it may be submitted for attention whether it might not be represented that the structural arrangements for drainage would be most conveniently carried out in the same form as in England, that is by commissions, of the nature of commissions of sewers adapted, as regards jurisdiction to natural or geological areas, and including in them



the chief elected officers of municipalities, and other authorities now charged with the care of the streets and roads or connected with local public works.

The advantages of uniformity in legislation and in the executive machinery, and of doing the same things in the same way (choosing the best), and calling the same officers, proceedings, and things by the same names, will only be appreciated by those who have observed the extensive public loss occasioned by the legislation for towns which makes them independent of beneficent, as of what perhaps might have been deemed formerly aggressive legislation. There are various sanitary regulations, and especially those for cleansing, directed to be observed in “every town except Berwick and Carlisle”; a course of legislation which, had it been efficient for England, would have left Berwick and Carlisle distinguished by the oppression of common evils intended to be remedied. It was the subject of public complaint, at Glasgow and in other parts of Scotland, that independence and separation in the form of general legislation separated the people from their share of the greatest amount of legislative attention, or excluded them from common interest and from the common advantages of protective measures. It was, for example, the subject of particular complaint, that whilst the labouring population of England and Ireland had received the advantages of public legislative provision for a general vaccination, the labouring classes in Scotland were still left exposed to the ravages of the small-pox. It was also complained by Dr. Cowan and other members of the medical profession, that Scotland had not been included in the provisions for the registration of the causes of death which they considered might, with improvements, be made highly conducive to the advancement of medical science and the means of protecting the public health.

I have the honour to be,

Gentlemen,

Your obedient servant,

EDWIN CHADWICK.