

The Sadler Commission:

Report on Child Labor (1832)

In 1832 the British Parliament established a committee, headed by Michael Thomas Sadler, to investigate the situation of children employed in British factories. The following testimonies are drawn from the records of the Sadler Commission.

Committee on Factories Bill: Minutes of Evidence; [April 12,] 1832

Michael Thomas Sadler, Esquire, in the Chair. William Cooper, called in; and Examined.

MTS: What is your age?

WC: I was eight-and-twenty last February.

MTS: When did you first begin to work in mills or factories?

WC: When I was about 10 year of age.

MTS: What were your usual hours of working?

WC: We began at five, and gave over at nine; at five o'clock in the morning.

MTS: And you gave over at nine o'clock?

WC: At nine at night.

MTS: At what distance might you have lived from the mill?

WC: About a mile and a half.

MTS: At what time had you to get up in the morning to attend to your labor?

WC: I had to be up soon after four o'clock.

MTS: Every morning?

WC: Every morning.

MTS: What intermission had you for meals?

WC: When we began at five in the morning, we went on until noon, and then we had 40 minutes for dinner.

MTS: Had you no time for breakfast?

WC: No, we got it as we could, while we were working.

MTS: Had you any time for an afternoon refreshment?

WC: No; when we began at noon, we went on till night; there was only one stoppage, the 40 minutes for dinner.

MTS: Is there not considerable dust in a flax mill?

WC: A flax mill is very dusty indeed.

MTS: Was not your food therefore frequently spoiled?

WC: Yes, at times with the dust; sometimes we could not eat it, when it had a lot of dust on it.

MTS: What were you when you were ten years old?

WC: What is called a bobbin-doffer; when the frames are quite full, we have to doff them.¹

MTS: Then as you lived so far from home, you took your dinner to the mill?

WC: We took all our meals with us, living so far off.

MTS: During the 40 minutes which you were allowed for dinner, had you ever to employ that time in your turn cleaning the machinery?

WC: At times we had to stop to clean the machinery, and then we got our dinner as well as we could; they paid us for that. . . .

MTS: Did you ever work even later than the time you have mentioned?

WC: I cannot say that I worked later there. I had a sister who worked up stairs, and she worked till 11 at night, in what they call the card-room.²

MTS: At what time in the morning did she begin work?

WC: At the same time as myself.

MTS: And they kept her there until 11 at night?

WC: Till 11 at night.

MTS: You say that your sister was in the card-room?

WC: Yes.

MTS: Is not that a very dusty department?

WC: Yes, very dusty indeed.

MTS: She had to be at the mill at five, and was kept at work until 11 at night?

¹ "Frames" are the spinning machines; "doff" mean to lift off the spindles full of yarn; a bobbin-doffer was usually a child, whose job was to remove the spindles (bobbins) when they became filled with thread or yarn.

² In the card-room was a machine for separating cotton or wool fibers from one another, before being spun into yarn.

WC: Yes.

MTS: During the whole time she was there?

WC: During the whole time; there was only 40 minutes allowed at dinner out of that.

MTS: To keep you at your work for such a length of time, and especially towards the termination of such a day's labour as that, what means were taken to keep you awake and attentive?

WC: They strapped [beat] us at times, when we were not quite ready to be doffing the frame when it was full.

MTS: Were you frequently strapped?

WC: At times we were frequently strapped.

MTS: What was it made of?

WC: Of leather.

MTS: Were you occasionally very considerably hurt with the strap?

WC: Sometimes it hurt us very much, and sometimes they did not lay on so hard as they did at others.

MTS: Were the girls strapped in that sort of way?

WC: They did not strap what they called the grown-up women.

MTS: Were any of the female children strapped?

WC: Yes; they were strapped in the same way as the lesser boys.

MTS: What were your wages at 10 years?

WC: I think it was 4 shillings a week.³

[May 18,] 1832

***Michael Thomas Sadler, Esquire, in the Chair.
Mr. Matthew Crabtree, called in; and Examined.***

MTS: What age are you?

MC: Twenty-two.

MTS: Have you ever been employed in a factory?

MC: Yes.

MTS: At what age did you first go to work in a factory?

MC: Eight.

MTS: How long did you continue in that occupation?

MC: Four years.

MTS: Will you state the hours of labour at the period when you first went to the factory, in ordinary times?

MC: From 6 in the morning until 8 at night.

MTS: Fourteen hours?

MC: Yes.

MTS: With what intervals for refreshment and rest?

MC: An hour at noon.

MTS: When trade was brisk what were your hours?

MC: From 5 in the morning until 9 in the evening.

MTS: Sixteen hours?

MC: Yes.

MTS: With what intervals at dinner?

MC: An hour.

MTS: How far did you live from the mill?

MC: About two miles.

MTS: Was there any time allowed for you to get your breakfast in the mill?

MC: No.

MTS: Did you take it before you left home?

MC: Generally.

MTS: During those long hours of labour could you be punctual, how did you awake?

MC: I seldom did awake spontaneously. I was most generally awoke or lifted out of bed, sometimes asleep, by my parents.

MTS: Were you always on time?

MC: No.

MTS: What was the consequence if you had been too late?

MC: I was most commonly beaten.

MTS: Severely?

MC: Very severely, I thought.

MTS: Will you state the effect that those long hours had upon the state of your health, and feelings?

MC: I was, when working those long hours, commonly very much fatigued at night, when I left my work, so much so that I sometimes should have slept as I walked if I had not stumbled and started awake again, and so sick often that I could not eat, and what I did eat I vomited.

MTS: Did the labour destroy your appetite?

MC: It did.

MTS: State the condition of the children towards the latter part of the day, who have thus to keep up with the machinery.

MC: It is as much as they can do when they are not very much fatigued to keep up with their work, and towards the close of the day, when they come to be more fatigued, they cannot keep up with it very well, and the consequence is that they are beaten to spur them on.

MTS: Were you beaten under those circumstances?

MC: Yes.

³ A shilling was 12 pence; there were 20 shillings in a British pound.

MTS: Frequently?

MC: Yes.

MTS: And it is your belief that if you had not been so beaten, you should not have got through the work?

MC: I should not if I had not been kept to it by some means.

MTS: Does beating then principally occur at the latter end of the day, when the children are exceedingly fatigued?

MC: It does at the latter end of the day, and in the morning sometimes, when they are very drowsy, and have not got rid of the fatigue of the day before.

MTS: What were you beaten with principally?

MC: A strap.

MTS: Anything else?

MC: Yes, a stick sometimes; and there is a kind of roller which runs on the top of the machine called a billy, perhaps two or three yards in length, and perhaps an inch and a half, or more, in diameter; the circumference would be four or five inches, I cannot speak exactly.

MTS: Were you beaten with that instrument?

MC: Yes.

MTS: Have you yourself been beaten, and have you seen other children struck severely with the roller?

MC: I have been struck very severely with it myself, so much as to knock me down, and I have seen other children have their heads broken with it.

MTS: You think it is a general practice to beat the children with the roller?

MC: It is.

MTS: You do not think then that you were worse treated than other children in the mill?

MC: No I was not, perhaps not so bad as some were. ...

MTS: Can you speak to the effect of this labour in the mills and factories on the morals of the children, as far as you have observed?

MC: As far as I have observed with regard to morals in the mills, there is every thing about them that is disgusting to every one conscious of correct morality.

MTS: Do you find that the children, the females especially, are very early demoralizing in them?

MC: they are.

MTS: Is their language indecent?

MC: Very indecent; and both sexes take great familiarity with each other in the mills, without at all being ashamed of their conduct.

MTS: Do you connect their immorality of language and conduct with their excessive labour?

MC: It may be somewhat connected with it, for it is to be observed that most of what goes on toward night, when they being to be drowsy; it is a kind of stimulus which they use to keep them awake; they say some pert thing or other to keep themselves from drowsiness, and it generally happens to be some obscene language.

MTS: Have not a considerable number of the females employed in mills illegitimate children very early in life?

MC: I believe there are; I have known some of them to have illegitimate children when they were between 16 and 17 years of age.

MTS: How many grown up females had you in the mill?

MC: I cannot speak to the exact number that were grown up; perhaps there might be thirty-four or so that worked in the mill at that time.

MTS: How many of those had illegitimate children?

MC: A great many of them, eighteen or nineteen of them I think.

MTS: Did they generally marry the men by whom they had the children?

MC: No, it sometimes happens that young women have children by married men, and I have known an instance, a few weeks since, where one of the young women had a child by a married man.

Questions:

Answer these questions *in a separate Word document – that is, do not turn in the sources along with your answers*. As always, your answers to the questions should take the form of well developed paragraphs; the HOTS question should be the longest paragraph, as it requires the most thought. Include the questions with your answers! Refer to specific passages from the source to support your points, but do not quote unless you are offering analysis of the specific words your source uses – paraphrase instead (this is different from how Ms. Westfall has you work with your sources in English – pay attention to the differences). An important part of this exercise, especially for the HOTS question, is to use **Stuff to Know** – terms, concepts, ideas that you have learned previously and are now going to connect to this source. **Boldface** Stuff to Know when you use it.

Part of the purpose of this exercise is to get you used to examining primary sources, so that you can interpret them effectively and thus use them to back up the arguments you make in an essay.

Grading: LOTS = 5 points; MOTS = 10 points; HOTS = 20 points

1. According to the testimonies given to the Sadler Commission, how young were the children employed in the factories? How many hours and at what times of day did they work? How many breaks were they given? [LOTS]
2. What measures were employed in the factories to keep children alert at their tasks? What dangers were associated with working in the mills? [LOTS]
3. How were boys and girls treated differently? [LOTS]
4. From the point of the view of the parents, why would they allow their children to work in the factories? [MOTS]
5. From the point of view of the employers (the factory owners), why would they want to employ children in the factories? [MOTS]
6. Imagine you are a member of parliament elected to represent the city of Manchester. What do you think would be good reforms for child labor, so that employers, parents and children are happy? Who would implement this reform? That is, would the factory owners do it voluntarily? Why or why not? Would the government? Why or why not? Keep in mind that in the capitalist way of thinking, the government should not interfere with business! Also keep in mind that the people who elected you are members of the upper middle class – the employers. [HOTS]