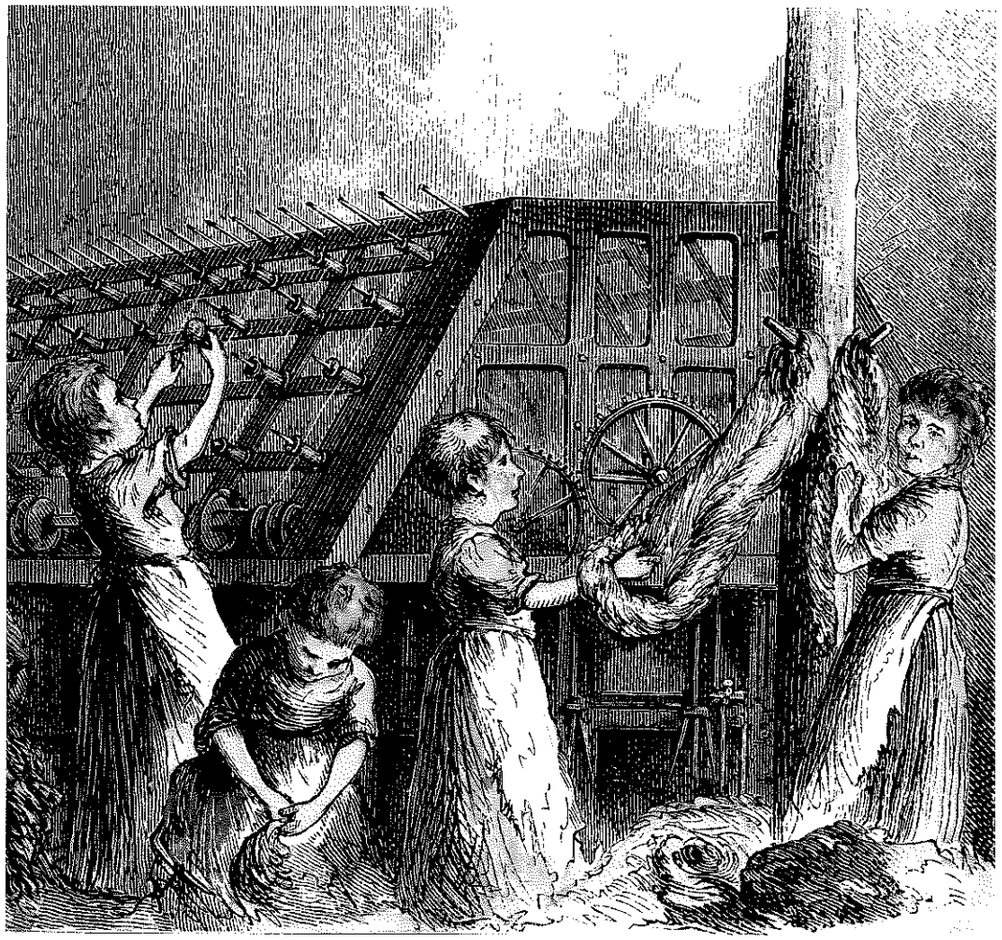
Chapter Four

Child Labor in Industry

Child labor existed in one form or another across the world long before the advent of the Industrial Revolution. But the use of children as full-time workers expanded and became highly organized during the machine age. This happened in part because industrial employers realized that they could pay children far less than adults. Furthermore, children could operate many of the same machines that adults could, especially in textile mills; so companies could increase their profit margins by filling many of their industrial jobs with children. As one modern observer puts it:

> The textile machines themselves played a large part in part in encouraging the use of child labor. [Spinning jennies and other early textile] machines were so easy to operate that unskilled children could easily [do so]. Moreover, centralized manufacturing with machines and children under the watchful eye of an adult overseer provided a very economical method of production.[36]

Most mill owners and other employers during that period did not see anything wrong with hiring children to work long hours in dreary, often dangerous factories. And these bosses typically used various arguments to rationalize this practice. One of the more common ones was that many poor families needed their children to work in order to survive. The owners also claimed they were only meeting this demand by supplying the needed jobs. Another frequently cited rationale was that the children were "free agents."



Children working in a twine factory in New York City in the 1870s. Child labor was a way for factory owners to cut labor costs because they could pay children less.

That is, like their parents, they had the mental capacity to decide what they should do with their lives, including if and where they should work.

British politician and labor reformer Michael T. Sadler (1780–1835) strongly disagreed with this view. "Free agents!" he thundered in a speech delivered to Parliament in 1832.

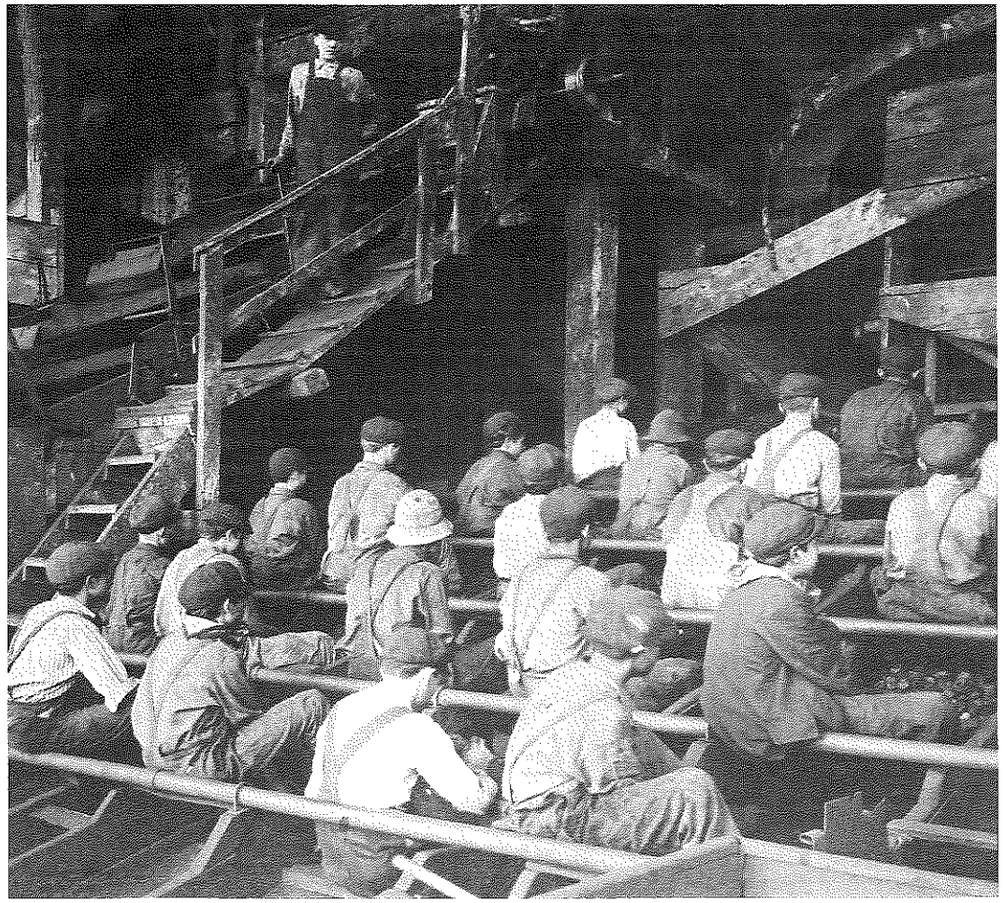
> The idea of treating children, and especially the children of [the] poor imprisoned in factories, as free agents, is too absurd [to take seriously]. The protection of poor children and young persons from these hardships and cruelties . . . has [long] been held [to be] one of the first and most important duties of every Christian legislature.[37]

Sadler felt so strongly that child labor practices should be reformed that he led a government investigation of the problem. He interviewed many former child laborers, factory overseers, and others involved in industry. This material provides modern studies of the Industrial Revolution with a crucial, revealing window into child labor conditions during that era.

Jobs Done by Children

Sadler's investigation and its findings focused on child labor in Britain. However, the same conditions experienced by children in industry there prevailed

Young boys sit in rows in front of a coal breaker, picking out slate in an anthracite mine in Pennsylvania. Children worked in a wide range of industrial jobs in the 1800s.



in France, the United States, and other rapidly industrializing countries. And the jobs performed by children in factories and other industrial workplaces were largely the same in all these nations.

The large proportion of children working in textile mills was universal, for instance. In 1788, when Britain was just beginning to industrialize, an estimated two-thirds of the workers in its mills were younger than eighteen. Later, in 1835, a survey found that the proportion of children in British mills was smaller but was still a hefty 43 percent. The United States followed Britain's lead. Most of the workers in the first American textile mill, in Rhode Island (in 1790), were children between the ages of seven and twelve. By 1830, 55 percent of all mill workers in that state were children.

Children worked in a wide range of other industries as well. Large numbers of young boys labored long hours in coal mines. Workers younger than eighteen were also prominent in shipyards, iron foundries, glassworks, and sweatshops. In addition, some children toiled along the margins of the industrial sector, sifting through its refuse. In Britain they were called mud larks. Often as young as seven or eight, they swarmed over the grounds on the edges of shipyards, coal mines, factories, and even the sewers. Desperately they searched for nails, pieces of scrap metal and rope, lumps of coal and wood, and any other discarded remnants of the manufacturing process that could be sold for a few pennies.

The Sad Lives of Mud Larks

Mud larks were children who scavenged through industrial refuse in hopes of finding discarded items they could sell. Nineteenth-century British journalist Henry Mayhew observed and interviewed some of them. "These poor creatures," he said, "are often the most deplorable in their appearance of any[one] I have met with. . . . They are scarcely covered by the [rags] that serve them for clothing. Their bodies are grimed [filthy] and their torn garments stiffened up like boards with dirt." Mayhew interviewed a single London mother who was too ill to work and had to rely on her nine-year-old son, a mud lark, to support them. Despite their grinding poverty, "he never complained," she said, "and assured me that one day God would see us cared for."

Quoted in Deborah Cadbury, *Dreams of Iron and Steel: Seven Wonders of the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Fourth Estate, 2004, pp. 119–20.