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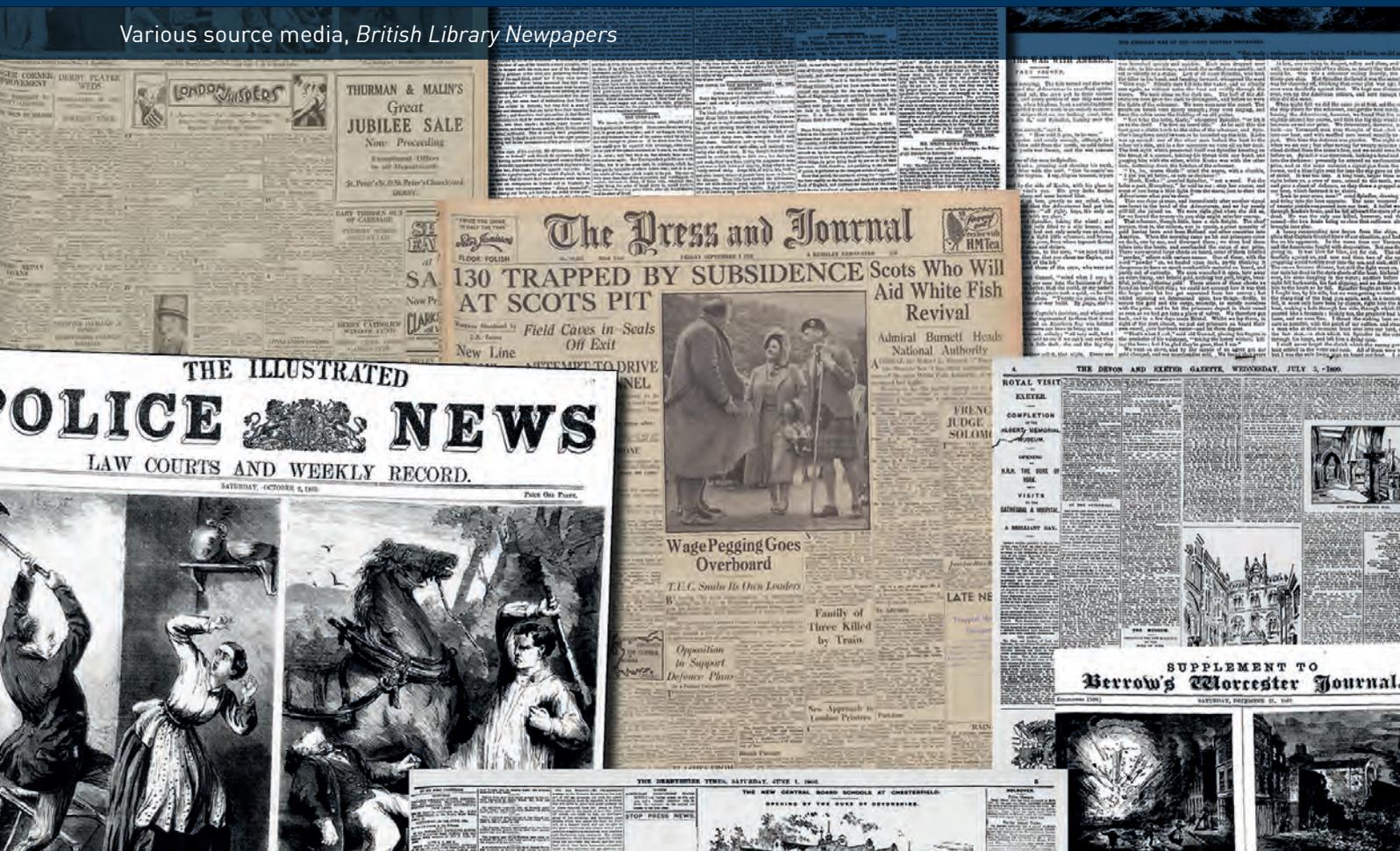
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Urban Growth and Social Reform

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Various source media, British Library Newspapers



The nineteenth century is often characterised as a century of progress as Britain became increasingly urban, industrial, commercial and "modern". However, these developments also posed serious and often unforeseen challenges. How did individuals and governments create, adapt to and struggle to reform the changing and increasingly urban society in which they lived?

In 1801 London was the only British city to have a population of more than 100,000. By 1901 thirty-six cities had grown to be this large. Newspaper publishers and the news stories they printed underwent a similar expansion in numbers. They were also highly concentrated in towns and cities. Although the leading provincial papers boasted of their circulation in rural districts and even over whole counties, reports on town government, events and society marginalised the interests of more rural and distant communities. While change and poverty were also present in the countryside, the innovations of town life were perceived to be of the greatest public interest and the degradations of urban living were considered a particular threat. In this way, the press both represented and amplified the growing importance of towns in British society.

National Government

The most influential ideas about the nineteenth-century state argued that the role of central government should be as limited as possible. The principal duty of the crown, prime minister and elected parliament was to protect the nation from threats from abroad and, secondarily, to oversee prosperity and stability at home.

However, it was believed that any attempts to actively intervene in the way that society and the economy ran would be ultimately unsuccessful and detrimental to the national interest. Instead, the individual was to be encouraged to take responsibility for their own condition. This "laissez-faire" philosophy was influenced by the work of the economists and philosophers Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus, David Ricardo and Jeremy Bentham, but the gospel of individualism was expounded to a wider readership by many newspaper columnists, including most famously Samuel Smiles. Smiles wrote regularly for the *Leeds Mercury*, as well as for the more radical *Leeds Times*, and focused on the importance of "self-help", working-class friendly societies and self-education. This meant that the absence of a system of national state-provided welfare or of standardised public priorities was seen by most to be a benefit rather than a problem.

The Acts passed by the British government in response to social problems were predominantly permissive: they gave local authorities the power to act if they wished, but if a town or district chose not to, the national government had no power to force them to implement these policies. For instance, although Public Health Acts were passed from 1848, the Sanitary Act of 1864 was the first to compel local governments to inspect the health and sanitation of their districts, and even this had a very limited impact in many areas. Similarly, central government provided funding for children's education from 1833, yet it was not until the Education Act of 1880 that local governments were forced to ensure that all children between the ages of five and ten (inclusive) attended school, and only in

1891 was this education made free. Relatively few civil servants and inspectors were employed to ensure that legislation was implemented throughout the country, and many Acts only applied to England and Wales.

Nevertheless, national government did increasingly pass laws to regulate those social problems that were perceived to be the most serious and potentially disruptive. The expertise of professional advisors, most notably doctors, but also a wide range of individuals who gave evidence to royal commissions, was crucial in encouraging the government to take responsibility for the state of the nation. This was particularly the case from the 1870s onwards. However, the two areas of social policy where national government involved itself most consistently were through the New Poor Law and the regulation of employment. The parliamentary debates about the form that these policies should take were reported extensively in the daily London newspapers—sometimes filling as much as two pages of an eight-page daily paper—and to a lesser extent in the provincial newspapers in columns written by their London correspondents.

Although Poor Laws had been established since the sixteenth century to provide relief for the poor, sick and elderly who were unable to support themselves, the New Poor Law was designed to reduce the cost of welfare and to standardise procedures across Britain. The Acts of 1834 for England and Wales, 1838 for Ireland (which introduced the Poor Law for the first time) and 1845 for Scotland (where poor relief continued to be managed by separate authorities) linked parishes into larger, uniform Unions, each of

which would manage its own workhouse through an elected Board of Guardians. Above all, the reform aimed to discourage claimants who were considered to be greedy or lazy, particularly able-bodied men and the mothers of illegitimate children. The Poor Law hoped to force anyone who was capable of working to maintain themselves and their families independently. Similarly, the state regulation of working conditions offered protection only to members of society who were considered to be vulnerable, not to all workers. These Acts were concerned primarily with the hours and conditions of labour of women and children who worked in mines and factories. There were few regulations relating to agricultural labour and none that affected domestic work throughout the century, and many laws continued to be flouted. Nevertheless, from the Factory Act of 1833 onwards and particularly in the final decades of the century, it was increasingly accepted that central government did have some responsibilities to maintain the welfare of vulnerable people.

Local Government

The non-interventionist nature of national government meant that local governments had considerable authority to choose how to respond to the challenges of social and economic change. Provincial newspapers reported the processes by which these decisions were made; most recorded not only when weekly or fortnightly meetings of local boards were held, but also chronicled the matters that were discussed and the perceived success with which officers implemented policies. Many editors also used their newspapers to campaign for specific reforms, hoping to influence the votes of rate-payers and the opinions of local people.

The Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 replaced boroughs in England and Wales with boards of elected councillors in 178 towns. Similar reforms were instituted in Scottish burghs in 1833 and in Ireland in 1840. These local government boards were elected and funded by the rate-payers, a relatively small group of wealthy local residents who owned property and therefore paid taxes to fund local services. Although single or widowed women who owned property paid rates, they were not given voting rights in municipal elections until 1869. Involvement in local government was therefore overwhelmingly the preserve of male middle-class residents (see essay on Rights, Responsibilities and Emancipation). These rate-payers were very influential in deciding the spending priorities in each locality, and many campaigned for expenditure to be kept as low as possible. Local government in London was not reorganised until 1888 and it was the cities of provincial Britain—most notably Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow and Liverpool—that introduced pioneering social reforms.

The diversity of local government responses to social problems is striking. Birmingham represented the most reforming and innovative municipality in late nineteenth-century Britain. From the election of Joseph Chamberlain as a Liberal mayor in 1873, local gas and water companies were taken into the hands of the municipality, reducing the cost of these utilities and extending their supply to more homes and businesses. Further welfare measures were also made possible through the profits from the utility companies. Although Chamberlain left local politics for parliament in 1876, the policies of "municipal socialism" continued, and the Liberal editors of the *Birmingham Daily Post* were

consistent advocates of a culture of civic responsibility and social improvement. However, in the vast majority of towns there was no concerted programme of urban and social reform. The piecemeal and slow changes instituted by most municipal governments, and the wary or explicitly hostile attitudes expressed in the local papers, made towns such as Exeter or Preston perhaps more typical of urban experiences. The needs of isolated rural areas were also increasingly neglected by local as well as national governments, with parishes being subsumed into larger units of government that focused on urban welfare.

Investigative Journalism

Journalists played an important role in highlighting what they believed to be the most serious social questions. Many were motivated by political principles, and aimed to make their readers more socially responsible through their regular columns. Other columns were primarily written for commercial reasons. The shocking conditions that journalists described and their daring adventures in investigating these news stories were very popular (see essay on Fact, Fiction and Fun). Newspaper sales increased and many regular columns were later compiled into a single volume, such as Henry Mayhew's study of London street life first published in *The Morning Chronicle* as 'Labour and the Poor' in 1849-50, or W.T. Stead's investigations into child prostitution for *The Pall Mall Gazette* in the 1880s, known as the 'Maiden tribute of modern Babylon'.

Although these writers' accounts became unusually famous, many other journalists also vividly described

urban life and called for social reform. For instance, the *Liverpool Mercury* campaigned consistently to bring the city's problems to the public's attention, stating on 1 January 1850:

Of all those social questions which relate to the evils that press so heavily on the Poor, this journal will endeavour to take an advanced position. It will call attention to their physical condition and their wants; it will advocate an improvement in their habitations, and those various Sanitary Regulations necessary to purify their dwellings and their persons; for cleanliness is the first step to self-respect, that great safeguard against crime.

The city of Liverpool contained some of the poorest and most unhealthy districts in mid nineteenth-century Britain. In the 1860s mean life expectancy (including very high infant mortality) was only thirty years. In 1851 over one-fifth of the city's population had been born in Ireland, many having migrated to England during the potato famine of 1846-7. They tended to be employed in the lowest paid labouring jobs, lived in the most overcrowded houses and, especially if they were Catholic, faced considerable hostility. Hugh Shimmin wrote a series of articles for the *Liverpool Mercury* in 1855-6 which vividly documented such lives and explained the presence of vice in the city through the moral failings of individuals.

Charity

Charitable responsibilities were taken very seriously in nineteenth-century Britain. Many people believed that it was better to create a personal relationship between the donor and a selected individual through voluntary charity than to provide for unknown recipients' welfare

anonymously through state taxation. "Discrimination" was considered to be central to this, allowing the philanthropist to separate the "deserving" poor from those who were considered to be lazy, drunken, reckless or otherwise immoral.

Philanthropy was also closely linked to social reform. In many instances local voluntary associations offered innovative solutions to social problems, which were later adopted as national policies. For instance, in an article published on 5 January 1900 entitled 'For the children's sake', the *Liverpool Mercury* stated proudly:

Throughout the length and breadth of the land there is probably not a community of members of which can look with more justifiable pride on its charitable organisations than the citizens of this great and busy shipping centre.

The numerous children's orphanages, sheltering homes and the infirmary that the people of Liverpool supported were then listed, including the Liverpool Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which had been established in 1883 to protect 'children in the street'. Two years later the charity was founded on a national scale as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, with branches rapidly established nationwide, but based on the Liverpool model. The NSPCC was also fundamental to the campaigns that led to the Children Act of 1889, which allowed parents to be prosecuted for cruelty or neglect of their children. This is just one example of the ways in which local, voluntary actions could shape central government priorities, creating new perceptions of the state's duty to society.

A plethora of charitable organisations were established as one channel through which social and moral responsibilities could be exercised, with philanthropic work becoming increasingly popular in the 1880s and 1890s. Some of these were national organisations, but the vast majority were established by individuals to meet specific local needs. In rural areas, charity tended to be more informal and paternalistic, and less conspicuous in the local press. Middle-class women were particularly prominent in local philanthropic organisations, as visitors to the poor or sick, as fundraisers and as donors. This was partly because they were less likely to be in paid employment or to be solely responsible for housework, and partly because kindness and Christian selflessness were central to ideals of femininity. Nevertheless, men were also expected to demonstrate their philanthropic responsibilities publicly, by sitting voluntarily on charitable boards, by subscribing to charities or by engaging personally with the poor through settlement houses. In this way, direct involvement in charities in the final decades of the century often provided both men and women with experiences which they later applied to state welfare policies in the early twentieth-century.

Conclusion

British society, economy and landscape were transformed during the nineteenth century, and contemporaries were highly aware that they were living through a period of rapid change. Responses to the problems that society faced were diverse, often inadequate, and deliberately piecemeal, voluntary and gradual. Nevertheless, in the late nineteenth century some municipalities and charities were increasingly

used as models for social reform, and many newspapers played an important part in promoting their initiatives. These models offered new principles of social responsibility and more radical solutions to the challenges of urban living and modern society.

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