Child victims of the industrial revolution

Orphans of History—The Forgotten Children of the First Fleet by Robert Holden The Text Publishing Company 1999, ISBN 1-8758477 -08-1

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Robert Holden is an art historian and an authority on children's literature. The main focus of his recently published *Orphans of History—The Forgotten Children of the First Fleet*, is nine-year-old John Hudson, one of the child convicts transported from Britain to Australia over two centuries ago. Holden's achievement is that he has been able to transform what had been a government statistic into a clear and sympathetic picture of Hudson, a former London chimney-sweep, and reveal some of the social conditions facing working class children in Britain's industrial revolution.

Happening upon a brief biographical entry on Hudson in the course of researching another book, Holden says the “whole sorry saga got to me because my own son Nicholas was nine at the time... I kept asking myself, Dear God, how could they do this? How can this be?” To his credit, Holden turned his outrage about officialdom's callous treatment of children into a powerful record of “what the law did to young offenders like John Hudson... and how Hudson's childhood was eroded, if not destroyed by desperation and poverty".

The origin of colonial Australia and its early convict history has received little attention in Australian schools and universities, or anywhere else for that matter. One notable exception is Robert Hughes' *The Fatal Shore*, which attempts to redress what Hughes describes as a “textbook silence on convictry".

Starting with the First Fleet in 1788, the British government transported some 160,000 convicts 12,000 miles to Australia on the other side of the world, until the practice ended in 1868. The majority were “convicted felons” whose offences ranged from petty pilfering to murder. Those who did not perish in the lengthy and dangerous sea voyage were put to long years of forced labour in the colony.

The little that has been written on the convict system, however, ignores the fact that some of those transported were children. Fifty of the 1,500 First Fleeters were children, some among them convicts. Holden asks why these children were only “dumb witnesses". “Why is it that any mention of these children in over 200 years of official papers, log books, journals, musters and histories reduces them to mere footnotes?” One reason was that children were regarded as no different to adults. In law, Holden notes, “age by itself gave no right to special treatment and children were tried with the full publicity and formality of the courts".

Drawing together the scant documentation on John Hudson, together with extensive research on the state of prisons, children's diseases and the use of child labour, Holden has produced a vivid insight into the conditions of life for many children. Particularly horrific are his descriptions of the employment of infants as chimney-sweeps, a trade that was not abolished until 1875.

London in the 1780s was a rapidly burgeoning city of almost a million inhabitants, mainly proletarian. Over the previous three decades, England had been radically transformed from a nation of mainly rural dwellers, living and dying in the same hamlet, into an industrial workshop. Traditional family structures were broken up and landless labourers driven into towns and cities, where they were crowded into slums generally unfit for human habitation, entirely dependent for survival on daily wages. Life was precarious and regular work no guarantee of survival. According to one estimate, the average age of death among operatives (unskilled workers) at this time was 19 years.

John Hudson was an orphan, undoubtedly one of tens of thousands of unwanted infants abandoned by the poor and destitute. Most of these babies quickly perished. Others died more slowly from malnourishment, cold, exhaustion, neglect, cruelty or a range of diseases. Infants and children under five, overwhelmingly from the working-class, accounted for almost half of all the deaths in London during the mid-18th century.

Holden cites several contemporary observations about this social crisis. One written by Jonas Hanway in 1772 and entitled *Observations on the Causes of Dissoluteness which Reigns among the Lower Classes of the People...Likewise a Plan for Preventing the Extraordinary Mortality of the Children of the Labouring Poor in London and Westminster* refers to the low cash value of the children of the poor.

“Orphans... or the illegitimate children of the poorest kind of people,” according to Hanway, “are said to be sold; that is, their service for seven years is disposed of for twenty or thirty shillings; being a smaller price than the value of a terrier.”

Holden also cites Jonathan Swift's satirical *Modest Proposal*, written in 1729, to put the children of poor Irish to some use. “A young healthy Child... a year old, [is] a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome Food; whether Stewed, Roasted, or Boiled.” Other “advantages,” Swift writes, was that “men would become as fond of their wives during the Time of their Pregnancy as of their Mares in Foal... and it would prevent those voluntary Abortions, and that horrid Practice of Women murdering their Bastard Children".

Though written in reference to Ireland, Swift's *Modest Proposal*, Holden correctly observes, was “just as relevant 50 years later and for that generation of children who sailed on the First Fleet".

It is not known how Hudson survived for almost nine years before he came to official notice. Like most working class children, he was illiterate and kept no diary or written record of his life.

Holden quotes the *Old Bailey Session Papers* of 1783, where his brief interview with the judge at the time of his trial provide the first documented account of Hudson's existence and some indication of how he lived:

Court to Prisoner: “How old are you?”

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“Going on nine.”
“What business was you bred up in?”
“None, sometimes a chimney sweeper.”
“Have you any father or mother?”
“Dead.”
“How long ago?”
“I do not know.”

Coffins of black

As a chimney-sweep, permanently blackened with layers of soot to provide some protection against the fire and heat of chimneys, Hudson was among the most visible of child labourers. But in many other respects his life was not much more wretched than that of his peers. Most children, less visible in mills, mines and foundries, commonly worked 12-hour days, many from an early age.

Many chimney-sweeps were recruited from the age of four. Small boys were needed with bones soft enough to crawl through the tiny chimney flues or “coffins of black” as the poet William Blake called them. Some chimney openings were as small as 9 x 14 inches (23 x 35 centimetres).

Holden provides a picture of the horrendous conditions facing chimney sweeps and the terrible toll it took on their health. “[E]mployed to scrape the soot from the sides of the flue, [the boys also had to] replace the mortar which had become dislodged and repair cracks in the brickwork. Oven chimneys were particularly unpleasant as deposits of congealed fat and soot made it difficult to get any firm grip. Constant lacerations were a permanent part of life. For some a relatively quick death by asphyxiation or by smoke inhalation may have been preferable to the long-term sufferings which were an occupational habit and which might have included asthma, inflammation of the eyes, burned limbs, malformed spines and legs and tuberculosis. Most horrifyingly, these young children often developed cancer of the scrotum.”

The most profitable aspect of the mastersweep's business was extinguishing flue fires. To do this the mastersweep would force the children to climb up the chimneys and extinguish the fires from the inside. “For this task, the boys entered the mouth of the chimney carrying a candle in their teeth and a scraper in their hands. They climbed by way of their knees and elbows to the top and then worked their way down.”

Indicating how much the children hated this work, Holden refers to a chimney-sweep in 1819, who gladly consented to the amputation of a leg crushed in a fall, after being told that he could not ascend another chimney with only one leg.

Hudson was a “sometimes” chimney-sweep because it was an itinerant occupation and their masters traditionally cast out apprentices during the warmer months, usually from May 1 on. The masters then set up as night-carters, a business that did not require small-limbed apprentices, and the boys left to roam the streets. The boys were also dispensed with as soon as they outgrew the narrow flues and chimneys.

Is it surprising that Hudson took to petty theft? Was there any other way to mitigate the wretched circumstances of his life? As Holden concludes, John Hudson in 1780s England was a “little black slave” with nothing to lose.

Transportation to Australia

In 1783 Hudson was charged with breaking into a London house one October night, and stealing, with an accomplice, “one linen shirt, value 10s., five silk stockings, value 5s., one pistol, value 5s., and two aprons, value 2s.”

Lucky to avoid a death sentence, one of the penalties for burglary, Hudson was convicted of the lesser charge of breaking and entering and sentenced to seven years transportation. He had to endure the labyrinthine stages of the British penal system—first in Newgate prison and then on a number of prison ships—before leaving for Australia three years later.

The vastly overcrowded Newgate, Holden comments, was synonymous with “suffering, despair, viciousness and death". The recent revolt of the American Colonies, which halted the traffic of convicts across the Atlantic, resulted in a 73 percent increase in Britain's domestic prison population.

British prisons were run on a private enterprise basis—the provision of food, clothing and medical care graded according to those who could afford to pay—and the children locked up with hardened adult criminals. That Hudson survived was due, Holden notes, to the fact that the living conditions and experiences in Newgate were not much different than if he had been still at large.

Finally, Hudson, along with almost 50 other children, some convicts, others children of convict women or marines, boarded the First Fleet, arriving in the new Australian colony in 1788. Hudson was by then aged 13.

In Australia Hudson became another government statistic with only one more official reference, made three years later on Norfolk Island. Fear of starvation led to a division of the First Fleeters into two convict settlements. Half remained in Sydney, the others sailed to Norfolk Island, hundreds of miles off Australia's east coast. Hudson was one of those transferred to Norfolk Island, a penal settlement that became notorious over the next hundred years for homosexual rape and child abuse.

The last official government reference to Hudson, a record of punishment meted out to him, provides a clear enough picture that the conditions he endured remained unrelentingly brutal. A single line entry records Hudson's punishment on Norfolk Island as: “50 Lashes for being outside his hutt after nine oClock.”

Hudson's case was not unusual. At least six children aged between nine and 12 at the time of their sentencing were transported to Australia on the Second Fleet in 1789. In 1831 a nine-year-old boy was publicly hanged for arson and in 1837 five children between eight and 11-years-old were sentenced to up to 10 years' transportation. Children under the age of seven were the only ones exempt from the death penalty.

Holden has said that he wants his book to “give voice to those who have not been given a speaking part in our historical drama before". This chilling story about those previously considered to be mere historical “footnotes” is an important contribution to Australia's real history. By exposing what happened to these children, Holden has also provided a powerful argument against all those currently attempting to turn back the clock and abolish the hard-won democratic and legal rights of children.

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