

16. INDUSTRIAL MANCHESTER, 1844

Friedrich Engels

From Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1892), 45, 4853.

. . . Manchester lies at the foot of the southern slope of a range of hills, which stretch hither from Oldham, their last peak, Kersall moor, being at once the racecourse and the Mons Sacer of Manchester. Manchester proper lies on the left bank of the Irwell, between that stream and the two smaller ones, the Irk and the Medlock, which here empty into the Irwell. On the left bank of the Irwell, bounded by a sharp curve of the river, lies Salford, and farther westward Pendleton; northward from the Irwell lie Upper and Lower Broughton; northward of the Irk, Cheetham Hill; south of the Medlock lies Hulme; farther east Chorlton on Medlock; still farther, pretty well to the east of Manchester, Ardwick. The whole assemblage of buildings is commonly called Manchester, and contains about four hundred thousand inhabitants, rather more than less. The town itself is peculiarly built, so that a person may live in it for years, and go in and out daily without coming into contact with a working-people's quarter or even with workers, that is, so long as he confines himself to his business or to pleasure walks. This arises chiefly from the fact, that by unconscious tacit agreement, as well as with outspoken conscious determination, the working-people's quarters are sharply separated from the sections of the city reserved for the middle-class; . . .

I may mention just here that the mills almost all adjoin the rivers or the different canals that ramify throughout the city, before I proceed at once to describe the labouring quarters. First of all, there is the old town of Manchester, 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 population strongly mixed with Irish blood. Here one is in an almost undisguised working-men's quarter, for even the shops and beer houses 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.

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 neighbourhood 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 cholera 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. 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 debris 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 debris 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 bridge are tanneries, bone mills, 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 debris, 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 debris; 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" 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

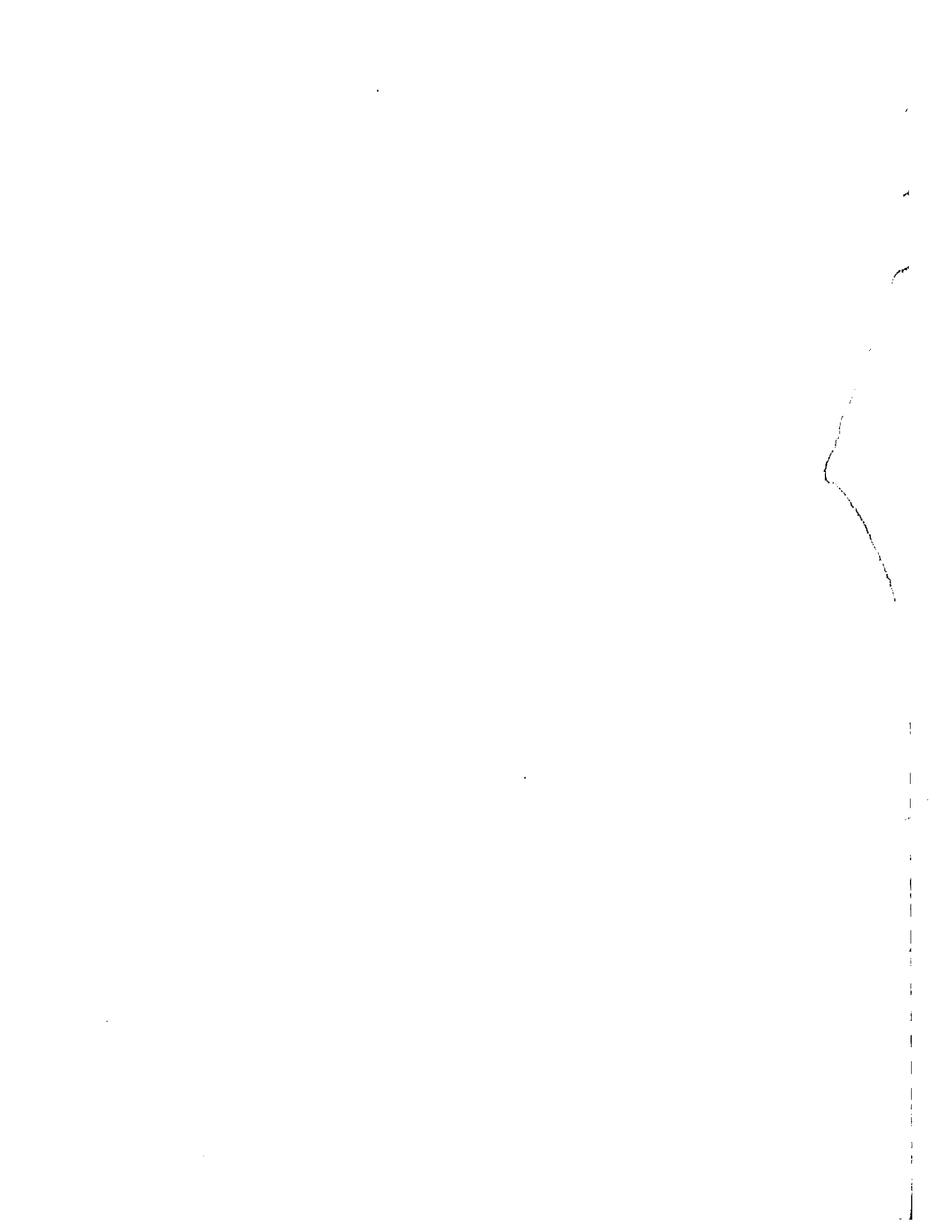
turns to the left here from the main street, Long Millgate, is lost; he wanders from one court to another, turns countless corners, passes nothing but narrow, filthy nooks and alleys, until after a few minutes he has lost all clue, and knows not whither to turn. Everywhere half or wholly ruined buildings, 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 debris, refuse, and offal; standing pools for gutters, and a stench which alone would make it impossible for a human being in any degree civilised 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 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. . . .

. . . 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. . . .

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.

Historians refer to the period beginning with the French Revolution in 1789 and concluding with the end of the First World War in 1918 as the **Long Nineteenth Century**. During this period, the world experienced unprecedented growth in connections and exchanges between people and cultures around the world. The three triumphant forces of the modern age—nationalism, industrialism, and capitalism—defined people by nation, ethnicity, and class. While most European states developed similar industrial and capitalist societies, enormous friction grew between states from competitive national identities and interests. Thus, as the nineteenth century came to an end, the world grew closer together economically and technologically even as it fragmented nationally. Friction in colonial and industrial competition was so intense that by 1910, a major war seemed unavoidable. Patriots of nations were confident of their own nation's moral mandate to lead the world into a new age, and many believed in a Darwinian "survival of the fittest" of nations. Thus, Germans, English, French, Italians, and others believed war was not only inevitable, it was desirable. War could prove the worth of the fittest and weed out the weak. The intersection of all these factors finally led in 1914 to a nationalist war on a massive scale, the First World War. And that war was followed by a second, deadlier war of nationalism in 1939.

In the summer of 1914, patriots of many nations marched to war singing songs and dreaming of glory. Rare was the observer who did not believe his own nation would quickly seize victory, and win the day through glory and divine right. Before a few months had passed, however, the fantasy of easy victory had turned into a nightmare. The First World War deteriorated into a defensive war of attrition, glory was dashed, and enthusiasm turned to bitterness. On the battlefields of France, Russia, and Germany, warfare bogged down into defensive networks of trenches that stretched for thousands of miles, filled with rotting corpses both human and animal alongside troops armed with superior defensive weapons and inferior offensive weapons. When officers shouted "over the top" for troops to charge across no-man's land, it was usually a call to a human slaughter, with the attack of infantry or cavalry on horseback no match for machine guns, barbed wire, mustard gas, and heavy cannons firing from the opposite side. Single battles took hundreds of thousands of lives with no change in strategic positions. Alistair Horne reports in *The Price of Glory* that more than 700,000 men lost their lives on a fifteen-mile stretch at the Battle of Verdun alone. Even the United States, which only entered combat in the final eighteen months of the war, suffered around 350,000 casualties. Populations of all belligerent nations became disillusioned, then angry.



As war raged on, citizens, soldiers, and eventually military leaders began to realize the new technological warfare allowed little opportunity for glorious victory. The generation nicknamed *The Lost Generation* because the war deprived them of full, meaningful lives later described the grotesque experiences of the defensive “war to end all wars” in pessimistic poetry, novels, and films. Central to much of the war literature was a picture of lost hope and a wanton destruction of life. Social despair spread across the nations, and a kind of collective depression set in after 1918. Probably the most famous literature of the era is the German novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* by the war veteran Erich Maria Remarque, but many literary works followed similar narratives. The poem “He Went for a Soldier” by Ruth Comfort Mitchell contains many of the most common themes of the literature of the First World War.

He Went for a Soldier

He marched away with a blithe young score of him
With the first volunteers,
Clear-eyes and clean and sound to the core of him,
Blushing under the cheers.
They were fine, new flags that swung a-flying there,—
Oh, the pretty girls he glimpsed a-crying there,
Pelting him with pinks and with roses—
Billy, the Soldier boy!

Not very clear in the kind young heart of him
What the fuss was about,
But the flowers and the flags seemed part of him—
The music drowned his doubt.
It's fine, brave sight they were a-coming there
To the gay, bold tune they kept a-drumming there,
While the boasting fifes shrilled jauntily—
Billy, the Soldier Boy!

Soon he is one with the blinding smoke of it—
and curse and groan:
Then he has done with the knightly joke of it—
It's rending flesh and bone.
There are pain-crazed animals a-shrieking there;
And a warm blood stench that is a-reeking there;
He fights like a rat in a corner—
Billy, the Soldier Boy!

There he lies now, like a ghoulish score of him,
Left on the field for dead:
The ground all round is smeared with the gore of him—
Even the leaves are red.
The thing that was Billy lies a-dying there;
Writhing and a-twisting and a-crying there;
A sickening sun grins down on him—
Billy, the Soldier Boy!

Still not clear in the poor wrung heart of him
What the fuss was about,
See where he lies—or a ghastly part of him—
While life is oozing out:
There are loathsome things he sees a-crawling there;
There are hoarse voiced crows he hears a-calling there,
Eager for the foul feast spread for them—
Billy, the Soldier Boy!

How much longer, oh Lord, shall we bear it all?
How many more red years?
Story it and glory it and share it all,
In seas of blood and tears?
They are braggart attitudes we've worn so long;
They are tinsel platitudes we've sworn so long—
We who have turned the Devil's Grindstone,
Borne with the hell called War!

—Ruth Comfort Mitchell⁵

5. Ruth Comfort Mitchell, *The Night Court and Other Verses* (New York: The Century Co., 1916), 21.