



SIR THOMAS OLIVER BY GRAHAM GLEN

DANGEROUS TRADES

THE HISTORICAL, SOCIAL, AND LEGAL
ASPECTS OF INDUSTRIAL OCCUPATIONS
AS AFFECTING HEALTH, BY A NUMBER
OF EXPERTS

EDITED BY THOMAS OLIVER, M.A., M.D.,

MEMBER EXETER ON THE WHITE STAIN, DANGEROUS TRADES, POTTER
LONDON WATER COMMISSIONER OF THE HOME OFFICE; PROFESSOR
OF PHYSIOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF DURHAM; PHYSICIAN TO
THE ROYAL INFIRMARY, NEWCASTLE-UPON-TYNE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS



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CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEGISLATION FOR INJURIOUS AND DANGEROUS INDUSTRIES IN ENGLAND

"Now, since both the Ages of Antiquity and that in which we now live in their Laws . . . calculated for the good Order and Reputation of Tradesmen, 'tis but reasonable that Physick should contribute its quota for the Benefit and Comfort of those of whom the Law has been so tenderly careful, and display itself in a particular manner (that has been hitherto neglected) for the safety of Tradesmen, that they may follow their Trades without injuring their Health."—RAMAZZINI: *Treatise of the Diseases of Tradesmen*. English Edition, 1703. Italian Edition, Modena, 1676.

"Year after year, as far forward as any present judgment would willingly speculate, the same terrible waste of adult life must, with its great mitigation, continue, unless the Legislature are fit to punish by special enactment for more wholesome conditions of labour . . . The causes of industrial diseases gnaw at the very root of our national strength. The sufferers are not few or insignificant. They are the bread-winners for at least a third part of our population . . . That they have causes of disease indifferently felt to blight them amid their toil . . . is surely an intolerable wrong. And to be able to redress that wrong is perhaps among the greatest opportunities for good which human institutions can afford."—*Report of the Medical Officer (Dr. afterwards Sir John Simon) to the Privy Council, 1861*.

From the benevolent and learned Italian physician of the seventeenth century, in touch with every available source of information of his own and preceding ages, searching for mitigation of the diseases of workmen which he believes to be "incurable," to the English State physician of the nineteenth century seeking to persuade men that the diseases must not be allowed even to arise, is indeed a long way. The way is long in all that concerns knowledge of the causes and treatment of disease, no less than in circumstances and organisation of industry. It is doubtful, however, whether the transformation of ideas in either is so great as in the general attitude of civilised society towards protection of labour and promotion of industrial

progress. The causes cannot be accounted for, completely, either by change in the methods and organisation of industry, or by increase of knowledge—medical, economic, or social. Not can the increase of knowledge of causation be attributed solely to that increased industry and quantity of human suffering which inevitably accompanied concentration and growth of industry. In all ages there have been physical, moral, and economic evils which fell to the lot of the labourer, probably differing from time to time on the whole more in degree than in kind, and doubtless felt at each stage by the sufferers, and sometimes by outsiders, with an intensity which relatively was great, and which with adequate discernment of a remedy and the duty or expediency of applying it, would have led to legislative action.

In the great civilisations of antiquity, whether in the East, West, or in Europe generally, there was sufficient concentration of the forces of labour to produce the intensest forms of the maladies classed by Pliny as the "diseases of slaves." Some of the most injurious processes known to us now are extremely ancient. To mention but a few: lead and quicksilver mining, the potter's craft, and the textile processes of preparing and weaving, spinning and flax.

The long history, in another department of social ills, of legislation and organised guild efforts for protection of buyers from dishonest manufacture and dishonest trading in adulterated products, or again, of efforts to regulate supply of labour and to enforce honest service from workers, affords many illustrations of the action that could be taken in Middle Age and Renaissance Europe, where an evil was both recognised and also believed to be remediable. It is to be noted how few the indications are that the struggles after social improvement of handicraftsmen and labourers were in those times inspired by any clear vision of the physical safety and health of individuals as part of the well-being to be sought. Illustrations might indeed be gathered from records of craft guilds and municipal organisations, of provisions and regulations that tended to results similar to those expressly aimed at by modern sanitary regulations. This is especially true of England, where the masses of manual workers came earlier than in other countries of Modern Europe to comparative physical comfort. We must, however, avoid the mistake of reading into past events, however interesting, ideas that are consciously at work in practical affairs only in our own times.