

**PRIZE ESSAY ON THE EVILS
WHICH ARE PRODUCED BY LATE
HOURS OF BUSINESS, AND ON
THE BENEFITS WHICH WOULD
ATTEND THEIR ABRIDGEMEN**

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Prize essay on the evils which are produced by late hours of business, and on the benefits which would attend their abridgement by Thomas Davies

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THOMAS DAVIES

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PRIZE ESSAY

ON

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THE EVILS

WHICH ARE PRODUCED BY

LATE HOURS OF BUSINESS,

AND ON THE

BENEFITS WHICH WOULD ATTEND THEIR ABRIDGEMENT.

By THOMAS DAVIES.

With a Preface

BY THE

HON. AND REV. BAPTIST W. NOEL, M.A.

"As ye would that man should do to you, do ye also to them likewise."
LUKE, vi. 31.

LONDON :

JAMES NISBET AND CO., BERNERS STREET.

1843.

ADJUDICATION.

A Prize of Twenty Guinea having been offered by the Metropolitan Drapers' Association for "the best practical Essay on the Evils of the present Protracted Hours of Trade generally, but more especially as they affect the Physical, Moral, and Intellectual Condition of the Drapers of the Metropolis, and the Advantages likely to arise from an Abridgement in reference to the Employed, the Employer, and the Public." We, having undertaken to adjudge the same, hereby award it to the Author of the following Essay.

(Signed)

BAPTIST W. NOEL.
WILLIAM D. OWEN.
FRANCIS ST. CLAIR.

London, July, 1843.

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PREFACE.

THE following essay, which has obtained the prize proposed by the Metropolitan Drapers' Association, will, I trust, be read extensively by persons of all classes. Short, simple, and calm, exaggerating no grievance, and indulging in no invective, it yet unfolds a great amount of human suffering which may easily be removed if those who become acquainted with its existence will only use their influence for that purpose. The writer details what he has experienced, but without that bitterness which such experience might be expected to create: and as one of the judges of his work is himself an extensive employer, well acquainted with the facts of the trade, his approval is a sufficient guarantee that its statements are not exaggerated. That a young man who, until a recent period, had to endure all the disadvantages arising from such an employment, should have produced a work, the general style of which would do credit to an author of liberal education and of some experience in writing, pleads eloquently with every generous mind, that the class to which he once belonged should not be debarred from the opportunities of self-improvement, which mechanics, and even field-labourers, can command.

The facts here detailed are these. Young men, from sixteen years of age to twenty-five or thirty, are engaged in drapers' shops daily about fifteen hours, of which fourteen hours and a half are actually employed in business. During this time they are not permitted to sit down or to look into a book, but are standing or moving about from morning to night, generally in an atmosphere exhausted by respiration and in rooms ill ventilated. When night arrives, gas-lights and closed doors complete the deterioration of the air, till at length it becomes almost pestiferous. Meanwhile their meals must be swallowed hastily, like the mouthful of water

which impatient travellers afford to a smoking post-horse in the middle of a long stage. No exercise is allowed in the open sunshine, their only relaxation being to take a walk in the streets about ten o'clock at night, when the sober and virtuous part of the community have retired to their dwellings, or to smoke and drink away the last hour of their evening at a tavern, or to form pleasure-parties for the Sabbath. From the company of their friends, from all cultivated and virtuous society, they are, by their circumstances, excluded; all scientific institutions are closed against them by the lateness of their hours; they are too tired to read after their work; and when they throw themselves upon their beds, it is, too often, to breathe, in the close bed-rooms, where numbers are packed together, an air more pestilential than that which poisoned them during the day.

The consequences of this system are stated to be what the slightest glance at it might lead any one to anticipate. The healthiest youths often after two or three months of this drudgery fall ill; if they recover, it is to become sallow, thin, and sickly; and thus to drag on their doomed life in cheerless lassitude till they exchange it for an early tomb.

Forbidden all relaxation and amusement, denied all aliment for their minds, and separated from whatever is endeared to their hearts, many sink into a dejection which the knowledge that they may at any moment be discharged, if the sales which they effect do not satisfy their employers, confirms and deepens. Of course in the absence of reading, of intellectual conversation, and of all other instruction, their faculties wither away; while a desperate longing to throw off the eternal yoke of unvarying, unmitigated, profitless, and thankless toil — a passionate thirst for *some* enjoyment — for which no friendships, no good society, no wholesome amusement, no holidays, no change of scene, no affectionate intercourse with any living beings, no prospect of a home (for few shops will employ married men), affords any alleviation, hurry numbers, against interest and against conscience, in the face of ulterior mischiefs which glare upon them like spectres from the obscure future, to plunge into the haunts of vice, and to put on its manacles.

At this moment many thousands of young men who might be the joy of their parents and the ornament of their country are exposed to all these disadvantages and risks in the metropolis of Great Britain. This withering of the limb, this dejection of spirit, this corruption of the heart, and this gloomy descent to an early

and dishonourable grave, are the blessings which at this moment the late-hour system is preparing for many of the Assistant-Drapers of London. Nor are they its only victims. The shops of Druggists and Grocers are kept open as late as those of Drapers: while the slavery under which milliners and dressmakers are pining is more relentless and more fatal still. In that employment healthy young women have been worked till their limbs have swollen, till they have grown crooked, till they have become blind, till they have lost all power of digestion, till they have been incapable of healthy sleep, till they have fainted away upon their chairs, till they have died! Day and night, in "the season," with scarcely any relaxation or repose, as long as the dim eye can see the stitches and the trembling hand direct the needle, they must work on, to gratify the impatience of fashionable customers, or starve! And all these classes are found in other cities as well as London. The relief, therefore, which public humanity and public justice may secure for the Assistant-Drapers of London, would probably extend to myriads of other sufferers from late hours in trade.

If the shops were opened at seven o'clock and closed at six, so as to allow the assistants to leave business at seven o'clock, these mischiefs would be prevented. "Twelve (hours)," says Dr. Hodgkin, "including the necessary intervals for refreshment and rest, are, in ordinary cases, as long a term of human labour as is consistent with the preservation of health."* More, therefore, ought not to be demanded of the assistants. It is neither consistent with humanity, nor with the interests of the community, that men should systematically be required to labour beyond their strength: and many of these have not attained the strength of manhood.

On the other hand, what can be alleged against the proposed alteration?

1. Upon the assistants themselves it would confer blessings beyond price. Short hours would materially tend to secure to them health, cheerfulness, long life, and knowledge. In some cases they would strengthen the habits of religion and morality; in all they would destroy some of the most powerful inducements to vice and to ungodliness. The assertion, that they would be more vicious if they were earlier dismissed from their duties, is equally contrary to theory and to fact. Now a forced ignorance tempts them to vice, and they seek vicious gratifications as the only

* Essay. Appendix.

ones within their reach, but then they would have access to instruction : at present they are impelled to intemperance, because they feel exhausted and depressed ; then they would retain the vigour of mind and body which would lessen the craving for such stimulants. Nor is it a necessary consequence of the improved system, that they should have more idle time for vicious pursuits than they already possess. Employers who at present exercise a control so despotic that they dismiss their assistants for any fault or for none, without warning, at their own discretion, could, with equal facility, demand that they should return home at an earlier hour than is now customary. Before their decision and kindness all difficulties would vanish. Let them give to their assistants wages proportionate to their services ; provide them with well-aired bed-rooms (either apart or at most to be occupied by only two or three) ; allow them, in turns, when there is not a pressure of business in the shop, to seek recreation on the river or in the parks ; encourage them to marry as soon as they can earn enough to support a family ; and call them together every day for religious instruction and for prayer ; and we may be quite sure that they would dread to lose such advantages, would thankfully acquiesce in the proposed regulations, and would generally be much more virtuous and happy than the recklessness of despair permits them to be under the oppressive system of late hours.

Facts, indeed, contradict the opposite assertion. The earliest houses have the best assistants. And one reason is obvious : the best assistants will naturally seek the most considerate employers ; and, therefore, such employers can make their choice among all the best-conducted young men in the trade.

Some employers may naturally fear a change of system at a time when each is obliged to make every exertion to realise any profits, so that the competition among shopkeepers for business is as keen as that of the young men for employment. But no man of just and honourable feeling can wish to prosper at the expense of the health, morals, and happiness of those who labour in his service. "If I thought," said an eminent draper, at a late meeting of the Metropolitan Drapers' Association, "I was living to injure my fellow-creatures, or if I thought oppressions marked my steps in life, I should hope that God would take away all that I obtained."* Every man with a conscience must adopt that sentiment as his

* Speech of Mr. Redmayne. Report, p. 10.

own. Should, therefore, the abridgement of the hours of labour be attended with any loss, upright men would be disposed to risk that inconvenience, in contemplation of the immense addition which short hours would make to the comfort of those in their employ. But, in truth, the generous experiment would scarcely ever fail to bring advantage to those who make it. Each shopkeeper (except the very wealthiest, who already subtract their evenings from the cares of business), in giving the evening to his young men, would save it for himself; and thus, securing the opportunities of mental culture, and of repose in the bosom of his family from the toils of money-making, would be a wiser and a happier man. His assistants, more healthy, cheerful, and zealous, would work better for him during the day; he would save his gas at night, and, to compensate for the loss of a few nocturnal customers, would probably gain some better daylight ones.

On the other hand, the change would be advantageous to the public. Almost all purchases may be made more safely by daylight, when the texture of the goods can be examined and the colours more distinctly seen. Few respectable families would refuse their servants time during the day to purchase what they need. It is better for mothers in the working classes to be at home with their husbands in the evening than to reserve those hours for shopping. And, of all the persons concerned, milliners and dressmakers should most desire the change; because while others work late their destructive labours will go unmitigated; but if all other classes are dismissed at an earlier hour, public feeling will not long suffer them to be worn out in early youth by protracted toil.

But who is to accomplish this improvement? The young men themselves may subscribe to the Association, circulate its papers, and use well whatever relaxation is afforded them. And parents, too, should take pains to select for their children the most considerate employers, and make on their behalf the best terms in their power. But the relief can never come either from the parents or the young men. For as long as there are multitudes of parents who can find no suitable employment for their children, and multitudes of young men who do not know how to obtain a livelihood, these latter will submit to any terms rather than not be employed. If there were a competition among employers to obtain assistants, the assistants might make their terms; but as there is an eager competition among assistants for employment, the employers may make what terms they please.