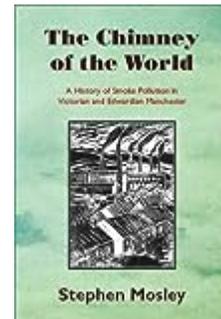


Stephen Mosley. *The Chimney of the World: A History of Smoke Pollution in Victorian and Edwardian Manchester.* Cambridge: White Horse Press, 2001. xii + 288 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-874267-49-2.



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Published on H-Environment (September, 2002)

To a good many of its citizens, late Victorian Manchester, the “workshop of the world,” was one of humanity’s supreme achievements. In a century it had gone from regional market town to draping the world in cotton cloth. To a small minority at the time, and to the retrospective environmentalist, it was an abomination. Except on Sundays and during periods of trade collapse, Manchester was carpeted by black coal smoke. The smoke came from factory chimneys, but also from household hearths, the open coal fire being treasured both as a source of warmth and a central symbol of domestic bliss. Its residents created that smoke, lived in it, tried continuously and vainly to clean up from it, and died from it at a high rate. Smoke, Mosley argues convincingly, shaped their city and their life within it: the prevailing winds that pushed smoke inland determined who lived where; its power to blacken and destroy dictated the designs and materials feasible for architects to use; its pervasiveness affected neighborhood sociability by putting a premium on securely closed windows (which prompted reliance on the high draft of the open coal fire as a means of ventilating, as well as heating, one’s dwelling, and thus in turn exacerbated the smoke problem).

Stephen Mosley examines three aspects of Manchester’s smoke situation: its magnitude and impact on the town, the rhetoric and culture of smoke, and the (unsuccessful)

campaigns to control it.

Mosley rightly challenges the presentism of the question “why wasn’t something done?” But he also challenges the common view of the Victorian public as environmentally unenlightened as well as the depiction of some historians that the period was one of pragmatic, slow problem solving—with regard to water quality or alkali wastes this might have been true; it was not for Manchester’s smoke. The picture, instead, is one of impasse and deterioration. Mancunians acknowledged their situation as problematic, and yet that situation also seemed to them to be out of their control. Notwithstanding their recognition of a problem; their assertion that something should be done; their hand wringing and espousal of automatic stokers and other gadgetry; or even, the occasional spasms of prosecution (usually resulting in minimal fines, frustrating to one side and irritating to the other) there never arose an imperative to change. A problem insufficiently prioritized, was, as Stephen Mosley makes clear, simply a problem left unsolved: Manchester’s smoke problem grew steadily worse during Mosley’s period despite being recognized as an important public problem.

One may well ask why, and what that failure tells us about Mancunian values and beliefs. Mosley reviews the arguments on both sides. The antismoke lobby brought

to bear a substantial body of empirical evidence (though without a clear causal basis) associating heavy smoke with substantially increased mortality from respiratory disease, as well as raising great fears about both individual debility and racial degeneration attributable to smoke. They also equated smoke with waste. Even the *Guardian*, normally the champion of the Manchester philosophy of laissez-faire, saw the black stuff in the air as so much coal wasted, which must surely show up sooner or later on the balance sheet. Finally, they touted at least some of the smoke-consuming devices and other alternative technologies (e.g. manufactured gas) that were regularly coming on to the market. Arrayed on the other side was the well known equation of muck with brass, the fear of falling victim to foreign competition, the argument that sulphurous smoke was actually good for health—it squelched odors and that dreadful processes of organic decay that gave rise to them—and even that the black mask of the northwest was, in its own way, sublime and beautiful.

Do we really learn what was at issue from these arguments? Did participants to controversy truly believe their own rhetoric and expect others to do so? Or are we better advised to see here a mediating discourse of platitudes, claims of moral high ground, appeals to universal imperatives and publicly acceptable principles that covered up a much more basic conflict? For some, whose livelihood was directly tied to industry, the benefits of relatively unrestricted smoke-making far outweighed the nuisance, and for others, with less direct ties, the smoke was mostly a nuisance. Mosley treats the assertions that smoke abatement would drive the cotton business out of Manchester as hyperbolic. But what of the other arguments? Were Mancunians really so ambivalent to smoke-caused deaths as it appears? According to emerging conventions of public health decency, those high mortality rates should have mattered, and yet steady wages and quality of life evidently mattered more than cleanliness, health, and quantity of life. Mosley notes the failure of the smoke issue to become a class issue despite the efforts of a few socialists to make it so. On the other side, did those who touted the disinfecting powers of smoke really believe it to be healthy (if so, why did industrialists flee the heavy-smoke areas), or were they just seizing on an opportune way to claim some of the domain of hygiene from their opponents? Or, acknowledging that brass never came without muck, did some of them also

love industrial smoke for its own sake, independently of the brass, perhaps as an expression of a masculine mastering of the world, just as one may take an antisocial glee in the rumble of great motorcycle, notwithstanding (even partly because of) the great offense it causes to others? Or, what accounts for the persistent insistence by reformers that Manchester manufacturers, the supposed avatars of thoroughgoing economic rationalism, were woefully inefficient and irrational in sending coal up their chimneys and stubbornly rejecting the newest and most efficient combustion technologies? Did such arguments simply reflect a recognition that it would be obscene to criticize a profitable industry without identifying a profitable alternative (which, Mosley suggests, was sometimes the case)? Or did it reflect something deeper—perhaps a faith that Providence would never have left a righteous community in a state in which it had to poison itself to make a living? Finally, the road not taken of regionalism warrants reflection. In other areas of environmental regulation, the river board or the county council approach does seem to have made some difference late in the century, and yet Mancunians (and perhaps their neighbors in surrounding towns), seem to have resisted seeing the smoke issue as a collective regional problem.

If the sources permit, more social history inquiry might clarify some of these issues. Mosley makes clear that the antismoke movement, made up of voluntary organizations with various degrees of commitment to the issue—limping along, constantly underfunded, trying to cajole, teach, or occasionally promote prosecution—was usually a marginal one. But we learn less here than we might about who were its partisans (and opponents), and where they lie on the social maps of Manchester drawn by other scholars, e.g. John Pickstone, Arnold Thackray, or Robert Kargon.

But I quibble; most of the questions I raise above do not have ready empirical answers. I raise them, not in a critical spirit, but only in the sense that it is a mark of a fine book like this one to open for us questions that have a far broader relevance than Victorian and Edwardian Manchester, and which will help to direct our further inquiry. Mosley has given us a beautifully crafted and well-researched book, a pioneering contribution that should certainly be considered required reading for urban environmental historians.

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Citation: Christopher Hamlin. Review of Mosley, Stephen, *The Chimney of the World: A History of Smoke Pollution in Victorian and Edwardian Manchester*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. September, 2002.

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