Chapter Fifty-Six

INFORMATION AND INTERVENTION

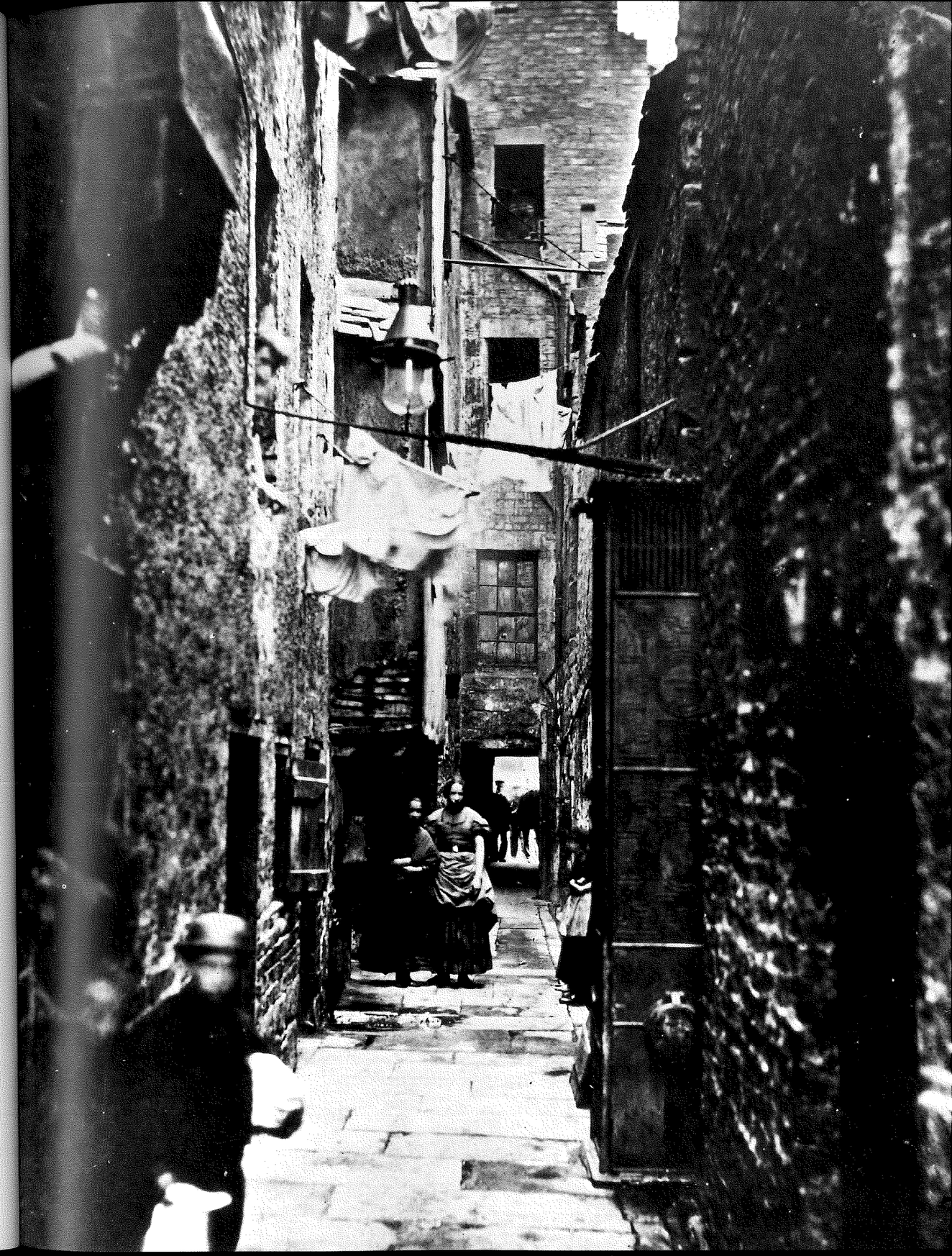
THE Industrial Revolution together with the population explosion unleashed problems unknown to any previous century, ones which forced central government to act, albeit against its instincts. The ethos inherited from previous ages remained vigorous, based on a horror of any form of state intervention or central government. In spite of such misgivings about government action, it continued to rise on an ever-ascending curve upwards from the 1830s. The idea that the state had any role at all to play in solving social problems was in itself novel, and worked only from the negative premise that unless government intervened things would only degenerate into chaos. By such intervention, it was argued, the state was ensuring that private initiative and enterprise would flourish unimpeded. Such a line of argument came from the writings of the political economist, Jeremy Bentham. To him the test for state intervention was utility, and those who subscribed to his beliefs were known as Utilitarians. State intervention also attracted the support of the old aristocratic élite who saw it as a continuance of their paternalistic role in society. Once the door of state intervention had been pushed ajar, however, it continued to be opened wider, until in the next century virtually every aspect of daily life came under its control. In this way the modern cradle-to-grave state was born.

Towards the end of the Victorian age F. W. Maitland, the constitutional historian, wrote: 'We are becoming a much governed nation, governed by all manner of councils and boards and others, central and local, high and low, exercising powers which have been entrusted to them by modern statutes.' All of these were to sprout into existence during the long years of Queen Victoria's reign, most in response to the all-too-visible effects of the Industrial Revolution. They also came into being through another great change, the advent of extensive information based on research and statistics. From the 1830s onwards most great changes came as the result of a new form of investigative body, the Royal Commission of Enquiry. The Royal Commissions produced a mass of on-the-ground evidence which must have seemed

unanswerable. What can be overlooked is that the evidence which enquiries threw up could be carefully edited to take the direction the commissioners, or indeed the government, wanted. Royal Commissions, however, were not the only new organisations producing information. A Census Office was set up, which produced every decade figures on the number, nature and location of the population. In 1837, the year in which Victoria came to the throne, the registration of births, deaths and marriages was introduced, although it was not until 1874 that it was to become compulsory. This evoked another torrent of fact. The Acts of Parliament in response to such enquiries produced yet another source of more information in a new type of official, the inspector. It took some time for the inspector to evolve his role, but one certain task he had from the very beginning was to present a report on his findings. Thus even more information piled up, leading inexorably to more government intervention.

The effect of this is seen in the steady rise in the number of government employees. In 1780 there were some 16,000, in the main collecting customs and excise duties. By 1870 there were 54,000, reflecting a radical change in government's role, for it had assumed that of regulator, co-ordinator, and director of more and more aspects of everyday life, dealing with areas as discrepant as prisons and schools, factories and lunatic asylums. The increase in what became called civil servants was to continue spiralling upwards until the 1950s. These people and the state intervention they embodied had to be paid for, and the figures here also tell the story vividly. By 1830 national taxes totalled £55 million, by 1860 £70 million, and by the early 1900s £200 million. Although initially the burden of cost was borne by the ratepayer, the increased need for money to run these new government services meant that income tax, re-introduced in 1842, rose steadily and, later in the century, death duty, a tax on inheritance was initiated. The rise in local taxation was to be even steeper. In 1850 it stood at £10 million. By 1905 it had rocketed to nearly £108 million. In local government, too, a small army of officials had sprung into being.

The huge growth in the number of civil servants was not at the outset viewed with dismay by the government. These posts were a source of patronage for them, a way to reward friends and relatives with jobs. Those in opposition naturally called for reduction and reform but it was a long time coming. Although a report in 1853 recommended a unified Civil Service and entry to it by competitive examination, it was acted upon only very slowly. Two years later competitive entry was introduced for junior posts but not till 1870 for all grades. Only gradually were the foundations laid for an



Thomas Annan's early photo-reportage of the Glasgow slums in 1868. No attempt is made to render the scene picturesque, only to record its utter squalor. The new art of photography is used here as an agent for reform.

administrative profession of real quality. For most of the century the upper reaches of the Civil Service remained a source of patronage for the government of the day.

The growth of the Civil Service was as much as anything the result of the central government's problem in persuading local government to put into practice its statutes. The 1835 Municipal Corporations Act had created borough councils elected by the ratepayers, and required to submit for Treasury approval any large capital expenditure – a defence against corruption. Ratepayers, however, did not warm to anything which increased local expenditure. To achieve its objectives therefore, government was forced by the middle of the century to offer grants as an inducement. District auditors were appointed to check up on local government expenditure. Gradually, local boards and councils multiplied, exactly as F. W. Maitland described; elected County Councils were set up in 1888, the same year in which the London County Council was created, and Urban and Rural District Councils followed in 1894. These effectively replaced the old way of governing rural areas by means of lord lieutenants and Justices of the Peace. By 1900 central government sat in the middle of a network of authorities which stretched across the entire country in a way that would have evoked consternation in 1800.

This gargantuan multiplication of the organs of government was a long-term consequence of the Industrial Revolution which produced a largely urban society for the first time, giving rise to problems which could only be met by developing Parliament's role, initiated by the Great Reform Bill, as an agent of change. One of the earliest interventions was over child labour in the factories. There was widespread concern that young children were working up to twelve and fourteen hours a day in appalling conditions. In 1833 a Royal Commission recommended action on the usual utilitarian grounds that as children were not free agents the state should intervene to protect them. The Factory Act of that year prohibited children below the age of nine from working, those aged nine to thirteen being restricted to a nine-hour day and those aged fourteen to eighteen to twelve hours. Two hours compulsory schooling was introduced for the under thirteens and, for the first time, inspectors were appointed. A decade later women were likewise categorised as being unfree agents in the workplace, the argument being used to prohibit their working in mines. Acts of Parliament regulating this or that about factory work were never altogether to disappear from the agenda.

The Church of England, which had entered the century unreformed, similarly found itself the subject of government intervention. Another commission confirmed the worst, that only half of the church's ten thousand benefices had a resident cleric and that enormous disparities of income existed between the richest bishop and the

humblest parson. Criticism was fuelled too by the fact that those who did not belong to the church, the large body of Dissenters, were forced to pay church rates for the upkeep of church buildings. In 1835 the Ecclesiastical Duties and Revenues Commission, a mixture of politicians and bishops, was set up and began the long overdue process of reform. This led to the building of some two thousand new churches in response to the huge increase and shift in population. The following year, an Act swept away the historic payment to the church of a tenth of one's produce, the tithe, replacing it by the payment of money. Not since the Commonwealth in the 1650s had the state intervened so heavily in the affairs of the church to radically change it. Such interference was not to go unchallenged. In 1833 a small group of Anglican clerics, headed by John Henry Newman, began a protest which later developed into what was called the Oxford Movement. This revitalised the church but left it sharply divided between the earlier Evangelicals and the new High Church movement which was viewed as drifting Romewards. (Newman in fact became a Roman Catholic and ended a cardinal.) This had no impact, however, on the central issue, the relationship of the church and state, which went back to the sixteenth century and justified such interference in the first place. For government, the church usefully embodied a rock of traditional social values which should remain firmly yoked to it.

Interventions of this kind in the 1830s and 40s were hugely innovative. The government went on to remodel the prison system, to reform provision for the insane (both again with inspectors attached), to bring the new railway system within government regulations, to establish the primacy of the notes of the Bank of England and to introduce an inexpensive postal system, the Penny Post. These were just a handful of the areas into which the arm of the state suddenly extended itself. Three of them, however, were to have by far the greatest long term implications, those dealing with the poor, public health, and the education of the lower classes. Each was to end the century with a complete state bureaucracy around it.

Provision for the poor remained in 1830 as it had in the reign of Elizabeth I. Many viewed that system as only encouraging fecklessness and large families at public expense and the Utilitarians called for the erection of workhouses to ensure that at least the able-bodied were set to work. The rural 'Swing Riots' led firstly to a Royal Commission and then, in 1834, to the Poor Law Amendment Act. That Act was the first instance of the appearance of what was to become a new feature of modern society: the expert. The Commission collected evidence but as its members were Utilitarians its findings were a foregone conclusion and the evidence was massaged in the direction in which they wanted it to go. The country was divided into areas, each of which had a Board of Guardians elected by the ratepayers, under whose auspices

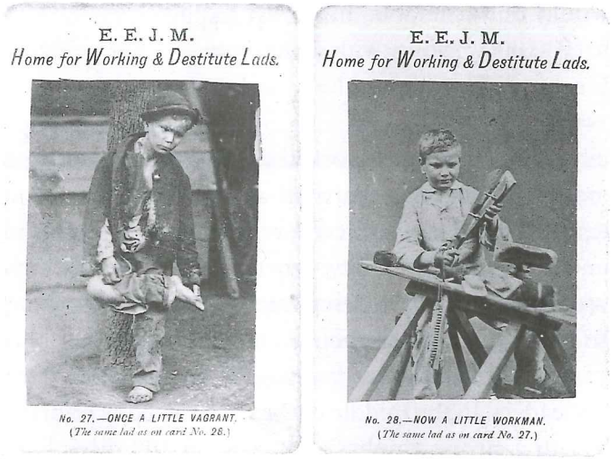
Sir Hubert von Herkomer's *Eventide* (1878) provides the only Victorian picture of the dreaded workhouse. The artist painted it from sketches made in the Westminster workhouse. Painting, like photography, was also used as a vehicle to heighten social awareness.

workhouses were to be built and other forms of relief provided. A central Poor Law Board was set up, signalling the advent of yet another new department of state with a bureaucracy of inspectors attached to it. The response was slow and it was not until the 1850s that workhouses began to arise in any great number. Revelations of what went on in some of them during the 1860s led to improvements, and by 1900 there were even treats and outings for the inmates. The system was cost-effective, and no other state in Europe took such interest in provision for the poor. Within the workhouses the sexes were separated, uniforms were worn, and strict discipline maintained. But the fact remained that they came to symbolise an ultimate degradation, the loss of any status within society.

Poverty often as not went hand-in-hand with dirt and disease. The connection between the latter was already known in the 1830s and 40s but it took decades for the

state to intervene. In 1842 Edwin Chadwick produced his famous Sanitary Report proving that illness and premature death had an environmental base and that this could be changed by government legislation. The statistics he produced were unanswerable. Death from fever, smallpox, consumption, pneumonia and other killer diseases were two or three times higher in the densely populated towns as in the rural areas. No action, however, was taken, so strong was public sentiment against any form of government interference in what was seen as essentially a local affair. In 1848 a Public Health Act set up a General Board of Health, something which was viewed with dismay, and it was wound up ten years later. In 1866 the Sanitary Act laid down that the government could overrule local authorities on matters of health but it was not to be until a Royal Commission on Public Health led to the Local Government and Public Health Acts of 1871 and 1872 that the state accepted that it had a role to play in the prevention of disease. That role was taken on with the usual reluctance and on the customary basis that inactivity would do more harm than intervention. But it had taken thirty years to come about, during which time untold thousands had died through official inertia.

Education was to be a far more complex story. Until the Industrial Revolution the state had played no role in education. Indeed any form of education for the lower orders was considered potentially dangerous, giving them ideas above their station. By the 1830s that view had shifted, in the face of ghettoes of brutalised and irreligious working class hordes in the new industrial towns. Education began to be seen as a means of taming them, ensuring that they understood their place in society and thus



Photography again used as an agent for change. From the outset in 1868 photography was an essential part of Dr Thomas Barnardo's crusade to rescue destitute and deprived children. The archive remains a remarkable testament to the poverty and degradation which made up the other side of Victorian urban life. Before and after shots like these were used as fund-raising material and for publicity.

Another poignant instance of the use of photography to raise public consciousness. In this instance it is the malnourished and deprived condition of the children attending the Ragged School at Ipswich in the 1850s. The picture was taken by the founder of the school, the Quaker Richard Dykes Alexander.

averting any revolutionary potential. The ideal schools whereby to achieve this objective were seen to be church schools, and the church naturally responded to what seemed a means of extending their sway within the new industrial cities. In 1833 government for the first time assigned a grant of £20,000 on a pound-for-pound basis to religious bodies who would build schools. In 1840 the amount was raised to £30,000. Along with these grants, an inspectorate was set up. These were the seeds from which a mighty tree was to spring.

Every decision about education by government worked from the outset on the basis of class division. As state aid for education had arrived as a means of ensuring people kept their place in the scheme of things, it was never seen, as it was to be in the following century, as an instrument of social mobility, whereby the lower classes could ascend. Instead schools were categorised in a descending hierarchy according to social status. At the top came the great public schools such as Winchester and Eton. These too were the subject of a Commission to investigate whether they were capable of producing the country's leaders. In the middle of the century many reforms took place in the public schools with a strong emphasis on religion and discipline.

The study of the classics and muscular athleticism were the basis upon which they operated. Subjects which were pertinent to the era of Industrial Revolution, such as science and technology, were deliberately excluded from institutions whose aim above all was to produce upper class gentlemen and certainly not intellectuals.

The middle classes naturally aped their betters and in response to that aspiration a whole network of new public schools arose, modelled upon the old aristocratic foundations. Not quite, for as the century progressed qualifications actually became important and study and success were emphasised. Pupils from both systems could progress to one of the two old universities, Oxford or Cambridge, which, although not in the scandalous state they had been in during the eighteenth century, nonetheless remained unreformed until the 1880s. Study still remained secondary to their role as a finishing school for gentlemen. Those who wanted to work seriously would have gone to one of the Scottish universities or, by the 1870s, to one of the new regional foundations such as Leeds, Manchester, Durham or London. In 1869 women gained a foothold in Cambridge when Girton College was founded.

Until 1870 the state had only concerned itself with the education of the lower orders and that was bedevilled by the religious divide between Anglicans and Dissenters. Slowly, thanks largely to the mounting evidence and pressure from the school inspectors, the position changed. In the 1850s teacher training colleges emerged and the funding of elementary education rose rapidly. By 1862 it had reached £840,000. School still, however, came second to either helping in the home or casual work, and many children had little more than three or four years' schooling. But literacy was steadily rising. The great watershed came in 1870. Forster's Education Act laid down that the state had a duty to provide schools in enough locations so that no child should be denied an education. It went on to say that in certain circumstances the building and operational costs of a school could fall on the public purse. Out of this arose the Board Schools which gradually outstripped in quality those run by voluntary church organisations. In 1880 school attendance was made compulsory, in 1891 elementary education was to be free, and eight years later the leaving age was laid down as twelve. By then education had become the largest item in the national budget and as the twentieth century beckoned it had already developed into a major department of state.

State intervention had come to stay. By the closing years of the Victorian age the role of Parliament was firmly that of passing legislation facilitating change to cope with a new society. The change in the political scene too was to be as significant.