SOCIAL investigation was one of the useful habits of the Victorians to which the modern historian is most indebted. Probably the foundation of the Social Science Association in 1857 marked a milestone in the development of the custom, but certainly the Lancashire Cotton Famine and its attendant distress helped greatly to stimulate it. The present article deals with a small inquiry into the Famine made in 1863 by two young London lawyers of social conscience, Frederic Harrison and Godfrey Lushington.

The cotton towns of the north, by the spring of 1863, had seen a great deal of trouble over poor relief, even some rioting; and there had been, as a result, considerable controversy in the press. Frederic Harrison and his friend Godfrey Lushington, interested but impartial outsiders, were pressed by more than one person to go north and make an investigation of the situation. W. E. Forster, Liberal M.P. for Bradford, and Tom Hughes, the novelist, both urged it upon them;[1] and so did Dr. J. H. Bridges, Harrison’s old Wadham College friend who was living at that time in Bradford and very much in the thick of the controversy. Bridges’ letters to The Times on the relief situation had raised a storm of comment,[2] and he was anxious to have Harrison and other London friends write on the question also. He wrote to Harrison: “What I saw at Manchester and Preston is enough to drive me wild. You want to know the object of my thoughts and feelings. It is this—that Lancashire is not only threatened, but already plunged in the abyss of pauperism. But you—you don’t know what the word means. I earnestly implore you—come and see”.[3] Harrison and Lushington gave in to the arguments of their friends and went north for a fortnight’s investigation at the beginning of April 1863.

Of the two social investigators, Harrison at least was determined to be the scientific inquirer; he was determined to get at the facts of the controversial situation and to keep emotion out of the matter. He thought that Bridges had gone astray and had stirred up opposition to a good cause because he had gone into it in heat and had drawn his conclusions in haste. After his return to London Harrison wrote of this last point: “It will not do to go into a great national question with the feelings of a philanthropist, I had almost said of a man. One must have nerves like a surgeon’s to watch

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torture patiently, and study all its phases coolly and scientifically”. Doubtless Harrison had endeavoured to practise this counsel when, a few days before writing this letter, he had been making the rounds in the distressed area, getting the story first-hand from those involved. Using Manchester as headquarters and chief centre of their investigations, Harrison and Lushington also went out to visit some of the cotton towns round about—Rochdale, Preston, Blackburn, Burnley, Stockport, Ashton, Stalybridge, Oldham. They went provided with references given them by London radicals, among whom was the well-known secularist, George Jacob Holyoke. Holyoke recommended that they see the men at the co-operative store in Rochdale, two of the aldermen of the same town, and especially J. Rayner Stephens. “Go and see J. Rayner Stephens, the old arch-agitator, a man who once had greater power to stir Lancashire blood than any living man. He is worth seeing in his old days”. 

Judging from the diary which he kept during his tour Harrison appears to have cast a good wide net. In each of the towns he visited he interviewed a variety of people, from merchants, “mill overlookers” and relief committeemen to co-operative secretaries, trade unionists and plain workingmen. He attended meetings of relief committees, watched relief centres in operation, and listened to discussions at meetings of the unemployed, of co-operative committees and poor law guardians. The record he made in his diary indicates a most intensive survey and a concerted effort to see all that was to be seen of the distribution of relief.

On the side of distribution itself, Harrison visited the “Provident Association Central Relief Committee” of Manchester, interviewed the general secretary, Mr. Smith, and its medical member, Dr. Watts; he inspected their sewing school for girls, their clothing store, and their soup kitchen. He also observed the distribution of relief to about three hundred people and inspected the Committee’s books. In Manchester, on the same day, 1 April, he attended a meeting of the Co-operative Committee of fifteen working men, and the following day was present at the meeting of the Manchester poor law guardians. He discussed the Poor Law’s operations with the chairman of the board, Mr. Richards, and with Mr. Harrop, the clerk. He inspected their distribution of relief and their workhouse, and had some conversation with the relieving officer.

(4) Harrison to Mrs. Hadwen, 27 April 1863, Harrison Papers, 8. The Harrison Papers are in the keeping of Major Reginald Harrison of Sherborne, Dorset. They are not foliated, but bundled by year. The figure in this and subsequent footnotes refers to the bundle.

(5) G. J. Holyoke to Harrison, 31 March 1863, Harrison Papers, Misc.

(6) The diary of the tour is in the Harrison Papers and runs to 54 pp. Classes of persons interviewed may be mentioned by way of indicating the scope of the inquiry:—merchants 4; newspaper editors 1; ministers 6; trade unionists 13; cooperative secretaries 10; members of relief committees 6; working men 355 (including both individuals and meetings attended); poor law guardians 2; doctors 1; manufacturers 1; factory inspectors 1; “mill overlookers” 31; schoolmasters 1.
At Rochdale he interviewed Mr. Cooper, the secretary of the local Relief Committee, and at Preston attended a meeting of the Relief Committee. At Ashton he visited three members of the local Committee and also attended one of their meetings, witnessed the distribution of relief and questioned their agents.

Harrison also, of course, sought out opportunities to look at the matter from the other side, that of the recipients. In Manchester he attended five meetings of unemployed working men, some of them including delegates from other industrial towns round about, and took evidence from individuals as well as following their discussions. In other towns he followed much the same procedure. He sought out meetings of the unemployed; he talked to the local union secretary, and to the members of the co-operative committee; he interviewed the secretary of the co-operative store and individual workmen. Both sides, it appears, were fairly reviewed.

Harrison’s conclusions about the administration of relief in the blighted area were set forth in some of his private letters, in two letters written with Lushington and printed in *The Times* of 23 and 27 April, in a memorandum jointly written and presented to Sir George Grey of the Home Office, and in an article of Harrison’s published in the *Westminster Review*, July 1863. The memorandum is not available but we may assume that the views there presented were substantially those put forward in the letters and in the article. Having seen the response which Bridges had had to his letters in *The Times*, Harrison and Lushington were reluctant to expose themselves to the same treatment. “Writing to the Times”, Harrison said to a friend, “on a critical topic of the day is like standing in the pillory to be pelted. An unknown man can’t help being more or less ridiculous no matter how decorously he holds his hands in the holes. . ..” The letters to *The Times* were, therefore, cautious and moderate; they were designed to avoid doubtful points and slender limbs of argument. Much the same tone was adopted by Harrison in the *Westminster Review*. Indeed, the letters and the article are similar in most respects and the impressions of the investigators may be safely gathered from either.

Harrison’s general conclusion about the North was that the situation was not as bad as Bridges had painted it. Certainly it was a “vast and terrible business” but Bridges had, under the stress of intense feeling, gone much too far. The food shortages, of which Bridges had made a good deal, seemed to Harrison merely incidental. In fact, he thought the people on the whole better supplied than in good times when there was no relief available for local destitution resulting, for example, from the closing down of a mill. Bridges was mistaken in his diagnosis, and Stephens, who

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(8) Harrison to Mr. Hadwen, 27 April 1863, Harrison Papers, 8.

had also become involved, wrong in his tactics. Harrison returned to 
London convinced that Rayner Stephens was playing an unwise 
part and was making a bad situation worse. There was, Harrison 
felt sure, no need for further agitation—"the men don't need to be 
told in vague phrases that they are slaves"—and he could not, 
therefore, approve of Stephen's activities though both he and 
Lushington shared fully his sympathies for the poor. (10)

For the unemployed operatives Harrison had nothing less than 
admiration and his praise for their fortitude under distress was un
stinted. He gave expression to these feelings in a letter he wrote to 
a friend shortly after returning home: "How fine, frank and true 
has been the temper of these people: What hearty strength of en
durance and fellowship of good feeling we met. Patient simplicity 
in almost all. They are a race worth an effort to help. If for nothing 
else, I should feel glad to have been refreshed by meeting such gen
uine English pluck and worth." (11) The moral fibre of the working 
classes had so far proved equal to the crisis, Harrison found, and 
the threatening thing in the North was not, therefore, the tensions 
of the moment. The present was not nearly so dark as the future, 
in which lay the danger of mass demoralization and pauperization. 
Idleness, doles and tests were certain in the long run to have their 
baleful effects on morale. The degradation of the independent and 
respectable workers was the real price that would have to be paid 
for the famine. The essential and critical problem of the North 
was not lack of food but "the silent wasting away of civilized and 
manly life . . . the loss of pride and decency . . . the moral starva
tion. . . ." (12) This was the inescapable result of the relief system, 
of any relief system, maintained over a long period of time. Har
rison found that about 300,000 men were without their regular 
means of livelihood and that most of them had been idle and draw
ing relief for well over a year. The spiritual effects of their de
privation and dependence were bound to be serious even if they were 
not as yet visible. All the signs and omens suggested that they would 
become steadily graver. The supply of raw cotton would not im
prove in the near future and the Relief Fund, on the other hand, 
would be exhausted in six to eight months.

Such was the outlook for the future. But even as things stood at 
the moment the conditions of the workmen were serious enough, 
Harrison thought. The very niggardliness of the dole involved them 
in great hardship and destitution even if the death-rate in the famine 
area had not gone up noticeably. Two shillings a week per person 
was a slender sum out of which to provide all the necessities of life. 
It sufficed for a diet of soup and bread. Meat was out of the question 
and there could be but little tea, sugar or cheese. That families 
which had been among the most prosperous in England with 
income so high as £4 a week should have been reduced to this 
standard of living was a catastrophe. Their downfall was made all

(10) Ibid.  (11) Ibid.  (12) Ibid.
the worse by the fact that the Relief Committees meted out their doles on the pauper principles of the Poor Law.

Harrison had nothing but praise for the work of the Relief Committees. There were one hundred and seventy of them in the towns and villages of the blighted area, and, under the Central Executive Committee in Manchester, their work had reached the dimensions and importance of a department of state. They had prevented starvation and insurrection if not destitution and discontent. They had disbursed £1½ million in shillings and sixpences to hundreds of thousands of Lancastrians. But inexorably the administration of the Relief Fund had been reduced to the principles of the Poor Law. Rules devised for vagrants and paupers were applied to thousands whose poverty was no fault of their own and who had lately been among the most respected and respectable workmen in Europe. These men were now forced under threat of losing their relief rights to accept any work that was offered them and at any wage. Indeed, a new Speenhamland System had developed with the Relief Fund, the bounty of the nation, being used to subsidize the wages offered by anyone wishing to hire labour. Then too the unemployed on the dole of the Relief Fund were, like the paupers in the workhouse, required to perform some work in return for the relief they drew. In all cases it was in the nature of crank-work and thoroughly irritating. Even the forced attendance at schools run by the Relief Committees, however noble its motive, was thoroughly resented by the captive scholars. Finally, the Committees, like the Poor Law Guardians, refused to make any allowance for rent in the dole they distributed. The allowance of two shillings to each suppliant each week meant either overcrowding reminiscent of the worst days of the early Industrial Revolution in Manchester, or else the piling up of indebtedness, often to the old employer.

The net result of this system on a semi-permanent basis was bound to be, according to Harrison, the pauperization and demoralization of the victims; and since there was, he felt sure, no relief in sight from an early recovery of the cotton industry, the degradation of the working classes could be prevented only by immediate action to set them at remunerative work. Public works was the answer. Harrison put himself energetically behind recent government legislation which made loans available to all local authorities for public works and local improvements. In this plan he saw a golden opportunity not only to save the North from widespread pauperization, but also to redress the evils of industrialism.

Every one of the towns of Lancashire requires some considerable public improvement. Parks, public walks, town-halls, markets, fountains, aqueducts, reservoirs, new streets, better drainage, are required in almost all. Such towns as Oldham, Ashton and Blackburn could easily obtain such parks as municipal and private munificence has given to Bradford and Halifax. Preston requires a market; Rochdale a river embankment. All of the towns in their water-supply,
sewerage, public places and buildings are far below manufacturing towns in Yorkshire. . . . They are, as we all know, dismal and unclean beyond anything in civilized Europe. The present is an occasion for removing this reproach.\(^{(13)}\)

Compared with public works, emigration could not in Harrison's view offer very much. It involved the loss of skilled men and its cost was such that only an insignificant fraction of the unemployed could be helped in this fashion. In public works alone lay the real promise of better things.

But our interests here are in what Harrison found in Lancashire, not in his prescription for a better future, for the most interesting part of the diary of his investigation in the North is the three or four pages of notes of interviews and observations he set down at the time and on the scene.

Tuesday, 31 March

Charles Hadfield, once factory worker, house painter, traveller for Examiner, late editor of Weekly Wage.

Travels all over Lancs. continually. Poor Law Boards and Relief Committees identical. Both except in Manchester under the influence of manufacturers.

Manchester quite exceptional—so many other trades that cotton crisis is only partially felt. Trades and interests so separated that many are slightly affected by it. Whatever cotton is worked is chiefly American, & mills in Manchester only partially closed 10 per cent. Thus life by aid of Committees, shopkeepers credits, etc.

In the cotton districts where Surat has been introduced very different especially Accrington, Ashton, etc. No man new with Surat can earn more than 5s.; many in very bad cases 2s. 6d.; such men used to earn 15s. or 20s. This is done by compulsion—lists of those who refuse work are sent to Poor Law Boards and Relief Committees, thus a man refusing work loses his relief and is driven in by hunger. Many prefer the 2s. 6d. to the work. Discontent very great, especially in Blackburn, etc.

Favourable to the school system—but is much objected to.

Believes Committees use much violence and insolence and bully applicants treat them as if they were trying to rob.

Rents are being written up against the men—sometimes exacted out of wages.

Wednesday, 1 April

Went to Coop: Store in Ancoats St. Saw manager J. E. Edwards formerly an engineer now a Coop. believer, etc. Excellent specimen of working-man of the higher sort. Very intelligent, frank, cheerful and sensible, an out and out Chartist. Leader of Manchester working men in political and social movements. Has faith in Coop. but admits that it has its weaknesses. Has put all his money into a Coop mill expects to lose it all but will not withdraw. Coop, mills make harder employers than others. If the principle of dividing profits amongst workers not carried out Coop, rather increases than relieves the state of the workers. Shorter hours essential to any further progress. Has no faith in the possibility of an 8 hour bill or anything like it. The present 10 hour bill is inoperative. The act is evaded by masters. No faith in trades unions. Considers them the most tyrannical and unreasonable bodies, has suffered much from them—full of jealousy, could not work at Oldham or elsewhere as being a Manchester man. The engineers of Manchester thoroughly tyrannical, etc., etc.

Believes the existing distress to be permanent—thinks the cotton trade ruined, expects to lose all his own money in it.

Against emigration as it draws off the best men and the country loses them

\(^{(13)}\) Letter in The Times, 23 April 1863.
but has been forced into it from the obvious necessity of lightening the labour market.

Believes the relief system is working well, the committees are doing their duty. The manufacturers are of course trying to put the screw on.

Does not think there is any very serious discontent, no great cause for it, the agitation chiefly confined to the Irish. They meet every evening in Stevenson Squ. Has been amongst them and heard them and heard a great deal of riotous language.

The working classes have no faith in Stephens. He has betrayed them. They never feel that he will not turn round and leave them in the lurch.

Central Provident Relief

Attended this the central relief committee in Manchester. Long conversation with Mr. Smith the secretary, a very sensible humane and businesslike man, a most proper man for the place in every way; quite a gentleman and very thoughtful.

Inspected Stores. Clothing good, new all stamped but not it seemed offensively. Girls-school very good, girls all seemed clean healthy and industrious. Hard at work in classes with monitor directing them—work very good—shown the work of girls who had been in 3 months before they came did not know “the head from the point of a needle”—no cutting out—no stuff, want of material. They had practice in making dresses out of list or ends. Soup kitchen attached where they get their dinner for 1d. The girls took it by turns to cook.

Boys school also good—moderately industrious, writing and arithmetic.

Attended distribution of relief by Mr. Smith and several officials, saw application of some 200–300 poor, inspected the books and examined each case. Not more than 15 per cent factory operatives perhaps 50 per cent at most within the range of cotton distress.

Each case attended to separately occupying 2 or 3–6 or 7 minutes. Name address occupation character children parish relief etc entered in book.

Examination searching sharp and brief—but not offensive—painful but perhaps necessary. Few rejected—those cases of special objectives. The examination not exactly a model of delicacy of manner, but certainly free from rudeness or brutality. Mr. Smith patient and not otherwise than kind. Considerable proportion of these people certainly paupers in the worst sense.

Scale of relief—see list and printed report.

Attended Coop. Committee

Committee of 12–14 of the Coop. store. Business discussed in a very quiet sensible and intelligent way—great business skill—indeed so great and the enthusiasm for the cause of Coop such that it will carry them over the inconveniences arising from business being placed in the hands of a committee. Still great part of their evening taken up in debating why a subcommittee which had been in existence for 9 months and appeared never to have met had done nothing.

Proposed to give gratuities to the servants of the stores who at stocktaking had been at work continuously two days and till 2 in the morning. Gratuity refused in the interest of the shareholders.

Thomas Mawdsley

Meeting of 20 distressed operatives.

Bridges' letters in the main a true statement of their case, except as to brutal usage by the guardians. This was not true. "Had nothing to say about that." Average loss by Surat cotton about 40–50 per cent: much less in some mills and also much more. Cases known of men receiving 5s. 4d., 3s. 6d. for week's work at full time.