

CHAPTER
25

PRIMARY SOURCE

Testimony on Child Labor in Britain

Section 2

During the 1800s there were few laws in Britain regulating the employment of children. Elizabeth Bentley testified before a parliamentary committee investigating conditions among child laborers in Britain's textile industry. As you read this portion of her testimony, think about the hardships she describes.

COMMITTEE: What age are you?

BENTLEY: Twenty-three.

C: Where do you live?

B: At Leeds.

C: What time did you begin work at the factory?

B: When I was six years old.

C: At whose factory did you work?

B: Mr Burk's.

C: What kind of mill is it?

B: Flax mill.

C: What was your business in that mill?

B: I was a little doffer.

C: What were your hours of labour in that mill?

B: From 5 in the morning till 9 at night, when they were thronged.

C: For how long a time together have you worked that excessive length of time?

B: For about a year.

C: What were the usual hours of labour when you were not so thronged?

B: From six in the morning till 7 at night.

C: What time was allowed for meals?

B: Forty minutes at noon.

C: Had you any time to get your breakfast or drinking?

B: No, we had to get it as we could.

C: Do you consider doffing a laborious employment?

B: Yes.

C: Explain what you had to do.

B: When the frames are full, they have to stop the frames, and take the flyers off, and take the full bobbins off, and carry them to the roller, and then put empty ones on, and set the frame going again.

C: Does that keep you constantly on your feet?

B: Yes, there are so many frames and they run so quick. . . .

C: You are considerably deformed in person as a consequence of this labour?

B: Yes I am.

C: And what time did it come on?

B: I was about 13 years old when it began coming,

and it has got worse since; it is five years since my mother died, and my mother was never able to get me a good pair of stays to hold me up, and when my mother died I had to do for myself, and got me a pair.

C: Were you perfectly straight and healthy before you worked at a mill?

B: Yes, I was as straight a little girl as ever went up and down town.

C: Were you straight till you were 13?

B: Yes, I was.

C: Did your deformity come upon you with much pain and weariness?

B: Yes, I cannot express the pain all the time it was coming.

C: Do you know of anybody that has been similarly injured in their health?

B: Yes, in their health, but not many deformed as I am.

C: It is very common to have weak ankles and crooked knees?

B: Yes, very common indeed.

C: This is brought on by stopping the spindle?

B: Yes.

C: Where are you now?

B: In the poorhouse.

Elizabeth Bentley in *Report of Parliamentary Committee on the Bill to Regulate the Labour of Children in Mills and Factories* (1832). Reprinted in John Carey, ed., *Eyewitness to History* (New York: Avon Books, 1987), 295–298.

Activity Options

- Developing Historical Perspective** Imagine that you are a child who works in a textile mill. Write a diary entry in which you describe your work life and then share it with classmates.
- Writing for a Specific Purpose** Imagine yourself as a member of the parliamentary committee investigating child labor in the textile industry. Write a list of questions that you might want to ask witnesses like Elizabeth Bentley.