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Chadwick, Sir Edwin (1800–1890), *social reformer and civil servant*
by Peter Mandler

Chadwick, Sir Edwin (1800–1890), social reformer and civil servant, was born at Longsight, near Manchester, on 24 January 1800. Surprisingly little is known of his early life, and of his mother nothing, except that she died in the infancy of her only son. His father, James Chadwick, the son of a pioneering Lancashire Wesleyan, was a radical journalist who had spent heady days in Paris with Thomas Paine and is supposed to have taught botany and music to the scientist John Dalton.

A Benthamite education, c.1809–1832

Edwin Chadwick was educated at the village school in Longsight and then boarded briefly at Dr Wordsworth's school in Stockport, before moving with his father to London at about the age of ten. There James edited (and, it was said, rendered more moderate) David Lovell's paper *The Statesman* while its firebrand editor was in gaol for seditious libel. Upon Lovell's release James Chadwick moved to Devon to edit the *Western Times*, leaving Edwin behind clerking in an attorney's office. About 1837 James emigrated to America with his second wife and their children (one of whom, Henry, became a pioneer of baseball). Edwin clerked until 1823, when he shifted his allegiance to the bar, was admitted to the Inner Temple, and took lodgings in Lyon's Inn, supporting himself by writing for newspapers. This combination of the law and the press drew him into an acquaintance with the social problems of prisons, hospitals, and slums, as well as with like-minded explorers of these problems in the circle of Jeremy Bentham. By 1824 he was already intimate with the Benthamite doctors Neil Arnott and (Thomas) Southwood Smith, and with John Stuart Mill, of whose London Debating Society he was a founder member.

Practically from the start Chadwick's passion was for the ‘quick-fix’ technical or administrative solution to deep-seated social problems. His first publications proposed means of extending life expectancy (*Westminster Review*, 9, 1828) and propagandized for the police as a deterrent force against crime (*London Review*, 1, 1829). These brought him to the attention of Bentham himself, who in 1830 engaged him as a private secretary to assist in the completion of the *Constitutional Code*. This work superseded Chadwick's legal career—he was called to the bar in 1830 but attempted only a single brief—and he moved into Bentham's Queen Square home in 1831. Bentham's death in June 1832 therefore left him peculiarly vulnerable, the more so as Chadwick had no sympathy for the populist (as opposed to the problem-solving) side of the Benthamites' cause. His ill-disguised contempt for the democratic ‘agitators’ of the day ultimately lost him a stopgap post as sub-

editor of Albany Fonblanque's *Examiner* in the autumn of 1833.

Poor laws and factories, 1832–1839

Fortunately Chadwick had by then already found an alternative career as a kind of freelance civil servant. The new whig government needed young men with a social conscience, a taste for systematic investigation, and the administrative ability to help frame laws; Chadwick's distaste for democracy made him more acceptable than most Benthamites. Accordingly the political economist Nassau Senior, playing a leading role in the newly appointed royal commission on the poor laws, got Chadwick employment as an assistant in summer 1832. Chadwick's rapid accumulation of relevant evidence in London and Berkshire, his agreement with Senior on the principles of political economy that should guide a reform of the poor laws, and above all his ingenuity at devising administrative mechanisms to put those principles into practice soon won him a place at Senior's right hand. Though not (as he later claimed) the only begetter of the famous principle of the new poor law of 1834—that aid to an able-bodied male should be dispensed in a workhouse to ensure that his standard of living was 'less eligible' than that of a gainfully employed worker—he was undoubtedly responsible for artfully arranging the commission's evidence to point in this direction and for drawing up the administrative proposals sent to ministers that provided the basis of the new law. Senior confirmed his (otherwise undocumented) claim to have been made a full commissioner in April 1833 on the strength of this role.

In the midst of his poor-law work Chadwick was seconded to another inquiry, the royal commission on factories, which the government had hastily set up to sidetrack a humanitarian cry for a fixed ten-hour day in textile factories. On this comparatively ill-understood field Chadwick's influence was more direct and innovative than on the much debated poor laws. In a matter of a few months (April to July 1833) he drew up the terms of inquiry, directed the taking of evidence (in camera, to the disgust of the ten-hours lobby), and drew up a report which ingeniously recommended an eight-hour day for children under thirteen, complemented by three hours' education, appealing to humanitarian concerns for the young while avoiding the restrictions on adult labour that so horrified employers. Government seized on this compromise and rushed a modified version onto the statute books in August. Among its provisions the Factory Act of 1833 established what *The Times* called 'an important class of new officers, called "inspectors"'—as Chadwick saw it, a new field of employment for people like himself.

Meanwhile Chadwick had returned to the poor law, and with Senior set about writing the bulk of the royal commission's final report, published in February 1834. This, too, contained provisions for inspectors, specifically a central board of

commissioners with travelling assistants. Chadwick was shocked not to participate in the drafting of the Poor Law Amendment Bill with ministers—this was directed by Senior—and even more so not to be appointed a central commissioner when the bill became law in the summer of 1834. Ministers considered Chadwick's ‘station in society was not as would have made it fit that he should be made one of the Commissioners’ (Finer, 109), and were concerned to maximize the acceptability of the new law among a jittery landed élite. They appointed more socially elevated and emollient commissioners, chaired by the mediocre tory landowner and politician Thomas Frankland Lewis. Chadwick was offered the full-time secretaryship of the poor-law commission. Indignant at not receiving a commissionership, he initially refused, but was persuaded by Senior and Althorp, possibly given assurances as to the higher status he would enjoy in the commission that neither Senior nor Althorp was in a position to guarantee. Still hurt and suspicious, Chadwick became secretary, a post well suited to his talents for marshalling evidence and framing proposals, without requiring the higher political skills (which he decisively lacked).

Chadwick's time at the poor-law commission was not happy. His strong views on the need to impose the workhouse system immediately and nationally—if anything, first in the northern districts, where it was most unpopular—clashed with Lewis's more pragmatic reading of the political situation. For a time Chadwick became the focus of a storm of anti-poor-law hostility from working-class and localist interests, which saw the new law as inhumane, authoritarian, and over-centralized. This clash of method was exacerbated by a clash of style, between the stolid, snobby Lewis and the perfervid, prickly Chadwick. For both reasons Chadwick was progressively excluded from the policy-making work of the commission, although he continued to supervise the routine office work and to correspond with a network of sympathetic local officials and assistant commissioners, whose innovations he publicized in the annual reports of the commission. He also struck up a friendly relationship with Lord John Russell (home secretary, 1835–8), who proved willing to employ Chadwick's investigative talents in a variety of social inquiries. In October 1836 Russell appointed Chadwick with two others to a royal commission on rural police with a view to extending the experiment in professional policing initiated in London. Chadwick compiled a report (not issued until March 1839) containing horror stories of metropolitan crime migrating into the countryside and requiring a national system of police centrally controlled but locally funded, a formula guaranteed further to antagonize rural interests suspicious of centralization. The Rural Constabulary Act of 1839 bore closer resemblance to the views of Chadwick's fellow commissioners, Charles Rowan and Charles Shaw Lefevre, making the adoption of a rural police voluntary and leaving it almost wholly in the hands of county magistrates.

Though popular mythology also had Chadwick responsible for the new system of civil registration for births, deaths, and marriages—persons registered under this 1836 act were deemed 'Chadwicked'—in fact he had little to do with it; but he did help secure a key register office post for William Farr, and it may have been through Farr that he revived his old interest in preventing avoidable deaths. In any case by 1838 he was turning his attention to what came to be known as sanitary (or, later, public health) matters, and in the spring of that year he persuaded Russell to commission his medical friends Neil Arnott and Southwood Smith (along with a favoured poor-law assistant, James Kay-Shuttleworth) to inquire into the sanitary conditions of the metropolis. Despite this medical input, Chadwick's clear intention from the start was to focus public attention on the need for new administrative structures to address the problems of urban sanitation. This suited his natural inclinations but it also responded to his growing need to find a new sphere of employment. The new poor law required parliamentary reconfirmation in 1839, and a renewed outburst of popular agitation against it again focused on Chadwick, who must then, his biographer Samuel Finer thought, have been 'the most unpopular single individual in the whole kingdom' (Finer, 187). Furthermore, Lord John Russell had by now left the Home Office. Under such pressures Chadwick engineered a parliamentary motion for a wider inquiry into public health matters and in autumn 1839 secured his secondment to this inquiry, leaving even routine matters at the poor-law office to his assistant George Coode.

Private life and public health, c.1839–1854

The year 1839 thus marked the effective end of Chadwick's involvement in the poor-law system and the beginning of fifteen years' engagement with public health matters. It was also the year of his marriage to Rachel Dawson Kennedy, fifth daughter of John Kennedy of Knocknalling, Kirkcudbrightshire, and Ardwick Hall, Manchester, a prominent textile manufacturer. She may have brought a substantial dowry, thus relieving slightly Chadwick's recurrent financial worries, although heavy investments in American securities seem to have been wiped out in a slump of the early 1840s. The couple moved to Stanhope Street, Hyde Park Gardens, London, and within the next few years produced Osbert (1842–1913), a civil engineer, and Marion (1844–1928), active in the women's movement. Apart from the possible financial impact, Chadwick's marriage had little effect on his public or perhaps even his private life; as his daughter noted, he had a high opinion of animals, children, and women (whose enfranchisement he supported), but did not enjoy close relations with any of them.

Instead Chadwick threw all of his considerable physical and mental energies into sanitary questions. Drawing on his now comprehensive network of poor-law, medical, factory, and prison informants, as well as his own extensive touring and reading, Chadwick produced by February 1842 one of the most celebrated (and

best-selling) of all Victorian blue books, the *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain*, published as a House of Lords paper in July and credited to Chadwick. With graphic illustrations of filth and degradation among the lower classes, it connected the prevalence of disease and high mortality to grossly inadequate sanitary provisions, drainage, and water supply. Chadwick may have learned something from his misfortunes with poor law and police, in that he downplayed the centralized administrative solutions to which he still adhered (in private) as firmly as ever, and it was to elaborate on the administrative solutions to the problem that the new Conservative government then appointed (in 1843) a royal commission on the health of towns. Chadwick assisted this royal commission and at the same time completed a supplementary report on metropolitan interments, in this case recommending an ultra-centralized solution: the closure of metropolitan burial-grounds and the establishment of new exurban cemeteries under municipal control. Luckily little attention was paid to the interments report at the time, and in 1844–5, when the health of towns commission's reports appeared, Chadwick's public repute was probably at an all-time high. He gained much of the credit for publicizing the sanitary question and, for once, little of the opprobrium attached by vested interests to the necessary administrative changes.

While waiting for public health legislation that would provide him with a permanent post, Chadwick busied himself with the Towns Improvement Company, an experiment in providing sanitary works to municipalities by private enterprise. At the same time he agitated for closer government control of railway construction, and for a post for himself on a new railway commission. In the summer of 1846 he added further to his public reputation and revenged himself upon the poor-law commissioners by testifying damagingly against their conduct of the commission before the House of Commons select committee on the Andover Union, investigating cruel and corrupt practices in the administration of the law; its report in August endorsed his view of the commissioners' laxness.

In September 1847 Chadwick was appointed to a royal commission on the sanitary condition of the metropolis in order to begin the reform of London's many local sanitary bodies. Within a few months it had secured the supersession of the existing metropolitan sewer commissions and the appointment of a single board more favourable to Chadwick's views on sanitation. In the spring of 1848 government finally established a national public health authority, the General Board of Health, with a single paid commissionership intended for Chadwick. His peak period culminated in appointment as a CB, awarded at the instigation of Prince Albert on 27 April 1848.

In September Chadwick took up his post at the general board, alongside his friendly ministerial chief, Lord Morpeth, and unpaid commissioner Lord Ashley

(later seventh earl of Shaftesbury, the evangelical and social reformer)—with whom, despite earlier disagreement on factory legislation, Chadwick worked amicably—and, later, an additional medical commissioner, Southwood Smith. Almost immediately cholera struck, and the board took emergency action to ensure the regular cleansing of streets and waste removal, cleaving to the then fashionable miasmatic theory of disease. It worked through poor-law boards and the local boards of health, which under the 1848 act could be instigated at ratepayers' initiative. Chadwick pressed upon them, and upon the new unitary commission for London, the replacement of the traditional brick sewers by his favoured comprehensive system of self-flushing, narrow diameter, glazed earthenware pipes, preferably conveying the sewage to farmers for use as manure. This dogma antagonized many engineers, as his earlier administrative dogmas had antagonized doctors. In autumn 1849, after a brief collapse brought on by overwork and possibly over-combativeness, Morpeth had to remove him from the metropolitan sewers commission. Chadwick continued to promote his system with the provincial boards. He also attacked metropolitan interests from a new angle by reopening the interments question, somewhat surprisingly inducing the government to empower the general board (via the Metropolitan Interments Act 1850) to close graveyards and replace them with its own exurban cemeteries. To this grandiose scheme Chadwick added in May 1850 a parallel plan to consolidate the metropolitan water supply under government direction.

By this point Chadwick had long since overreached himself, particularly as (from March 1850) he was deprived of the cabinet support of Lord Morpeth, replaced as the general board's chief by the hostile Lord Seymour. Between them Seymour and the Treasury blocked the general board's plan to buy up the graveyards, and by July 1852 new legislation was on the books giving government only a regulatory role in metropolitan interments and water supply. Now the board's opponents in the provinces began to mass against it as well. An outbreak of typhoid in Croydon in December 1852 led to an inquiry which, though co-authored by Chadwick's old comrade Neil Arnott, damned the Chadwickian pipe system installed there. When the general board came up for parliamentary renewal in July 1854, its enemies included leading engineers and medical men as well as ideological opponents of centralization; Chadwick's paid commissionership was abolished in a general reform and he was retired—permanently, as it turned out—on a £1000 per annum pension.

Retirement, death, and reputation

Chadwick lived out his lengthy retirement first at 5 Montagu Villas, Richmond, Surrey, and then, from 1869 until his death, at Park Cottage (since demolished), near Richmond Park, East Sheen, Surrey, specially designed by him to feature modern heating and ventilation. He retained his massive build and long, dark hair,

set over a dome-like forehead, into extreme old age, adding the straggling white beard characteristic of the Victorian patriarch. He continued to offer advice behind the scenes but it is doubtful whether any of these initiatives made much impact. His rationalizing and centralizing impulses were out of fashion in a period of legislative retrenchment, and became if anything more impetuous as he aged: free-market competition, which he used to regard as a necessary spur to efficiency in most spheres, he came to see more and more as productive of waste. He now advocated state consolidation of gas, tramways, railways, and telegraphs as well as interments and water supply, with the administration of these natural monopolies franchised out to competitive tender ('competition for the field' as opposed to 'within the field', a concept taken up by late twentieth-century economists seeking to dismantle rather than build up state ownership). For these views he was more respected on the continent—in Paris he was known as Le Père Sanitaire—than in England, where he came to be seen as an anachronistic crank. He made several embarrassingly abortive attempts to find a parliamentary seat, two of which came to a poll—Evesham (1859) and Kilmarnock burghs (1868)—with fairly disastrous results. Among like-minded social reformers he was more effective, particularly as vice-president of the Society of Arts (almost continuously from 1872 to 1886), through which he agitated for the teaching of military drill in schools and on topics as diverse as fire prevention, omnibuses and tramways, and new methods of street paving (for which he held patents), as well as his old sanitary causes. His pioneering work in the latter field was recognized towards the end of his life, when in 1883 he was made president of the new Association of Sanitary Inspectors. In 1889, by which date his centralizing views had become harmless and in some quarters almost fashionable again, he was knighted on 4 March for achievements half a century old—just in time, for he died on 5 July 1890. He was buried on 9 July in Mortlake cemetery, Surrey. In his will he left £47,000 to a trust 'for the advancement of sanitary science and the physical training of the population' (Finer, 512).

Chadwick's reputation fluctuated in his own lifetime, and has done so since his death. For some time he remained the private hero of social reformers such as the Fabians. When the welfare state materialized after the Second World War, he was suddenly discovered as one of its forefathers and benefited from two major biographies in the same year, 1952, one of which (Samuel Finer's) remains the most exhaustive and readable treatment, though it takes its subject's heroic self-estimate too much at face value. Finer endorsed John Stuart Mill's description of Chadwick as one of the 'organizing and contriving minds of the age' (Finer, 2) and depicted him as an impetuous but tireless and disinterested public servant, dragged down by snobbery and corruption. Chadwick's reputation has declined *pari passu* with the welfare state, and several major revaluations have deemed him variously inept, ineffective, and authoritarian. Yet his passion for the public good still impresses

and his achievements live on in every home and under every street in Britain.

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Likenesses wood-engraving, pubd 1848, BM, NPG · A. Salomon, marble bust, *c.*1863, NPG · woodcut, pubd 1889 (after photograph by Mayall & Co.), NPG [*see illus.*] · engraving, repro. in *ILN* (22 Jan 1848) · engraving, repro. in *Cassell's Illustrated Family Paper* (24 Nov 1860) · engraving, repro. in *House and Home* (March 1881) · photographs, UCL, Chadwick MSS · wood-engraving, NPG; repro. in *ILN* (22 Jan 1848)

Wealth at death £48,738 8*s*. 3*d*.: resworn probate, May 1892, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales* (1890)

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