

Sybil Campbell Library Monograph Number 1

Charles Booth, Life and Labour of the People of London

Summary of a talk by Margaret Roake, 24th June 2004

Charles Booth's **Life and Labour of the People of London** was first published in full by Macmillan in 1902. The eighteen volumes were a gift to this library from Mrs Sidney Webb, who as Beatrice Potter, before her marriage, had worked with Booth from 1886 on the early stages of the survey. A hand-written note, 'with the author's compliments', marks them as her personal volumes; this provenance makes them especially valuable to this library.

Charles Booth, born in 1840 the son of a Liverpool corn merchant, became apprenticed to Lamport and Holt's shipping company. On his father's death, using a £20,000 bequest as capital, Charles and his brother Alfred set up a company trading with New York mainly in leather. They prospered through a concern for fair dealing and accurate record keeping. The business provided Charles's income when he moved to London after his marriage in 1871 to Mary Macaulay, niece of the historian.

Charles Booth in London, Samuel Rowntree in York and Joseph Chamberlain in Birmingham were among philanthropists who addressed 'the condition of England' question in the 1880s, while Gladstone's government was more concerned with Ireland, Egypt and the Sudan.

Impressed by Samuel Rowntree's study in York Booth set out to survey the working population of London. Among influential friends who contributed were Jessie Argyll, Octavia Hill, Esme Howard, Graham Balfour, E.C.Grey and Samuel Augustus Barnett, vicar of St. Jude's, Whitechapel.

Work on the first series, entitled 'Poverty', began in 1886 and was published in 4 volumes in 1889, the year of the London Dock strike. For this part of the survey Booth divided the metropolis into sectors: East, Centre and South London. The maps which accompanied the text, colour-coded to describe the conditions of residents in each street, have become the best-known aspect of the work.

His investigators learned about home conditions from School Board visitors and enquired about attendance, dress and cleanliness of pupils from their teachers. Booth deplored the lack of detail in the 1881 census, but used it to establish the birthplace of London's inhabitants, noting the scale of migration into London both from outlying districts and from abroad. Overcrowded and insanitary housing was a major concern. Octavia Hill contributed a chapter on 'Block Housing', advocating the need for secure open space, ample light and good sanitary arrangements, with supervision to maintain standards. The fourth volume explored the trades of East London where poverty was rife, and led to the second stage of the survey, the 5 volumes on Industry, published in 1891.

Each trade was studied separately: building tradesmen, wood and metal workers, workers in precious metals, printing and sundry trades; workers in dress trades; food dealers, clerks and transitory workers; the professional classes and domestic servants. It was found that many workers toiled in unsafe conditions. The detail leads us to a better understanding of the rise of organised labour and the concerns of the Fabian Society of which Booth and the Webbs were prominent members.

Though Booth himself rejected formal religion, material for the seven volumes of the 3rd series on 'Religious Influences' was gathered with the help of Church of England parishes. Non-conformist efforts at philanthropy were also recognised. This study covered an expanded London reaching southward into Surrey and Kent. Investigators explored marriage patterns, church attendance, drinking habits and leisure pursuits.

Booth himself wrote the final volume, published in 1902, detailing the social changes since the work began. He hoped that the work would influence the Royal Commissions on Housing, Sweated Trades and Old Age Pensions. He stressed the dignity of labour and noted that while destitution degrades, poverty is no bar to happiness. While most people then lived near their employment, Booth foresaw a time when London would spread over the Home Counties and people would travel for an hour by overground or underground railway into London to work. He noted less over-crowding than formerly and higher personal standards of life and health.

Booth, with the help of his many friends and collaborators, highlighted the concerns of working people. This pioneer social survey, though ponderous and subjective, inspired the work of the London County Council as well as legislation for social reform. It provides us with a graphic picture of London's working people at the end of the nineteenth century.

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