The smokeless city
Simon Ernest Darwin
This photograph, taken in Manchester on June 23rd, 1922, shows how large a part the house chimney plays in polluting the atmosphere, even in summer time.
THE SMOKELESS CITY

BY

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WITH A PREFACE

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WITH FRONTISPICE

LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO.,
39 PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON, E.C. 4
NEW YORK, TORONTO,
BOMBAY, CALCUTTA AND MADRAS
1922
Fox, Jones & Co.,
Kemp Hall Press, High Street,
Oxford.

Made in Great Britain
PREFACE.

Those persons, who have paid any attention to the subject of smoke and air pollution, and, considering the many millions of human beings affected, they are remarkably few in number, are aware that, roughly speaking, there are two kinds of smoke—industrial and domestic. The efforts of reformers in the past have been directed almost entirely against the former, and the public spirited work carried on for many years by various Coal Smoke Abatement Leagues in the face of active obstruction and of official apathy, seem to be within measurable distance of success, since the present Minister of Health has recently undertaken to bring in a Bill embodying the recommendations of the Departmental Committee on Smoke and Noxious Vapours Abatement.

The battle therefore against industrial smoke may be said to have been won in principle; but it is scarcely necessary to warn enthusiasts that there are many parliamentary dangers to overcome, and that governments are not as a rule particularly zealous in forcing through bills of a non-vote-catching nature. Even if we can assume that a thoroughly satisfactory measure is passed and duly enforced, the melancholy fact remains that, if we are fortunate enough to get rid of industrial smoke, we shall, nevertheless, remain dirtier than other European countries owing to domestic smoke.

The relative share of industrial smoke and domestic smoke in polluting our atmosphere has been hotly disputed, and the conclusions arrived at in this book will doubtless arouse much opposition. But in any case there can be no question as to the competence of the writers. Miss FitzGerald, who has had valuable experience in public health work, is a well known
authority on questions connected with heating and cooking in working class houses. Mr. Simon, Lord Mayor of Manchester at the present moment, has for some years been one of the prominent figures in the smoke abatement campaign. He is honourably distinguished for the many services which he has rendered to his native city; he is Chairman of the Housing Committee and also of the Air Pollution Advisory Board; and enjoys the practical advantage of being an engineer possessing works of his own. In view of the knowledge and experience of these writers, it would be idle to dismiss their case against coal fires and kitchen ranges as unfounded, and it might be added that no more appropriate town could be selected for investigation than Manchester, where it has been calculated that the necessary extra washing of collars alone costs £50,000 at pre-war prices, and that the damage due to smoke amounts to over one million pounds annually.

The fact that the authors have so frequently used Manchester statistics to illustrate their arguments might be taken as indicating that Manchester is worse as regards air pollution than other great cities. The reverse is nearer the truth; it is because not only smoke reformers, but also the municipality, through several of its committees, have been particularly active in Manchester, that the facts concerning smoke abatement are better known for that city than for any other.

Leaving aside, for the moment, the question of industrial smoke, it is a remarkable and deplorable fact that the very Ministry which was established to protect the health of the people has hitherto completely ignored the damage, waste, and discomfort caused by domestic smoke. A striking instance of this indifference was furnished in 1920, when the Committee to which reference has already been made was requested by the Ministry of Health to issue an interim report which might be of assistance to the various local authorities in connection with their housing schemes. An interim
report was accordingly drawn up, containing recommendations with reference to the heating of the new houses, and one special recommendation was to the effect that no building scheme should be sanctioned unless provision was made for the adoption of smokeless methods, except in cases where the central authorities were satisfied that it was impracticable. Strange to say, the Ministry of Health did not even go to the trouble of sending the report to the local building authorities until remonstrated with in Parliament, and the natural result was that plans were passed all over the country perpetuating all the old objectionable features, whilst a magnificent opportunity for improvement was lost. Fortunately some municipalities and public utility societies have been wise enough to act in spite of this disheartening official apathy.

It would be impossible for any unprejudiced person to read the lucid and convincing statement of Miss FitzGerald and Mr. Simon without realising the strength of the case against the open coal fire and the old fashioned kitchen range. Hitherto all criticisms of our present system have been met by indignant expostulations that the open fire is one of the sources of England's greatness and prosperity, and that any attack upon it is in the nature of high treason. But it must eventually dawn upon people, if in fact it has not already occurred to them, that whatever legislation may be passed with regard to industrial smoke, so long as raw coal is continually consumed for all domestic purposes, our atmosphere will remain polluted to a degree unknown in other European countries. The truth is that, looking at it from the view of cleanliness, cheap coal has been little short of a curse. It has in the past been so abundant and so cheap that there was no object in economising its use, and consequently it has been employed indiscriminately for all domestic purposes. We are now beginning tardily to recognise the waste, dirt and trouble involved; strikes have taught us that there
need be no apprehension of cheapness in the future, and we are also beginning slowly to realise, for instance, that the process of hauling coals up to the fourth or fifth floor has its disadvantages. No one in his senses would propose that the householder should be forthwith compelled by law to substitute some other form of heating for his existing open coal fire, but a study of this book will show how a compromise can be arrived at, and local authorities would be well advised to pay attention to the valuable and practical suggestions which it contains.

The deplorable atmospheric conditions under which a large proportion of the British race lives can only be appreciated fully by those who have had the opportunity of comparing them with those prevailing in other countries. It is no exaggeration to say that many millions of inhabitants of the north of England have never seen real sunlight in their places of residence except in the event of a bank holiday or of a coal strike, and most of them have become so inured to this deprivation that they are profoundly sceptical as to any possible remedy. There are, too, a large number who entertain the conviction, naturally encouraged by certain manufacturers, that dirt and wealth are synonymous, and that consequently any attempt to abate smoke must be disastrous to industry. It is a pity that persons holding these views should not have the opportunity of seeing what can be effected in other countries. Last autumn, Mr. Simon and I, representing the Smoke Abatement Committee, visited part of the Rhine industrial district, where the conditions largely resemble those of South Lancashire. The conclusions we arrived at will be found in an appendix to the Report of the Committee, and are not flattering to our national pride. Obviously one of the main factors which contribute to the superiority of German over English conditions is the almost complete absence of domestic smoke in Germany, and it is painful to an Englishman to compare
cities like Cologne and Düsseldorf with corresponding industrial towns such as Manchester and Leeds. One simple fact illustrates the difference. A manufacturer in Cologne or Düsseldorf is content to reside in the town, because the town is an agreeable place of residence. But a manufacturer in Manchester or Leeds hastens to remove his residence to as great a distance as is compatible with his business, as soon as he can afford to do so. Is it surprising in view of the evidence contained in this book?

It would be difficult, as has been already pointed out, to over-estimate the value of the work of Smoke Abatement Societies, both in London and in the provinces, in endeavouring to educate the public. For years they have struggled against official and unofficial apathy and have at last succeeded in inducing a Government to introduce legislation. To Sir Alfred Mond belongs the credit of being the first Minister to act, but if the truth must be told, he is only doing his obvious duty. What is the use of creating a Ministry of Health unless it occupies itself with a nuisance which closely affects the daily life of many millions of British citizens? Where is the logic of spending millions of pounds on so-called social reform if this particular nuisance, expensive, unnecessary, and offensive, is to be permitted to continue unchecked? The only answer to these queries is that very little thought has been given to the matter, and that we are only just awakening to the fact that the conditions described in this book are discreditable to a highly civilized community.

Newton.