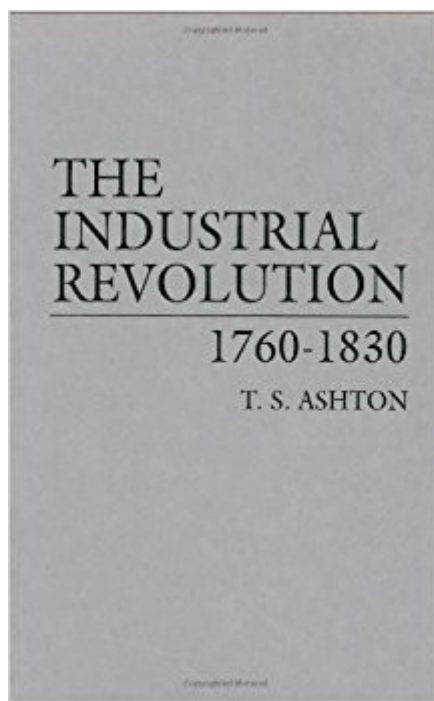


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The Industrial Revolution, 1760-1830:



Synopsis

The Industrial Revolution has sometimes been regarded as a catastrophe which desecrated the English landscape and brought social oppression and appalling physical hardship to the workers. In Ashton's classic account, however, it is presented as an important and beneficial mark of progress. In spite of destructive wars and a rapid growth of population, the material living standards of most of the British people improved, and the technical innovations not only brought economic rewards but also provoked greater intellectual ingenuity. Lucidly argued and authoritative, this book places the phenomenon of the Industrial Revolution in a stimulating perspective. A new preface by Pat Hudson surveys recent research in the areas focused on by Ashton and a completely updated bibliography ensures that this book will continue to be of value to modern readers for many years to come. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

Book Information

Hardcover: 119 pages

Publisher: Praeger (March 26, 1986)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0313250413

ISBN-13: 978-0313250415

Product Dimensions: 5.6 x 0.5 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (10 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

First published in 1948, this book has gone through many editions, the latest, as we can see here, put out in 1998. I recently read the 1964 edition, picked up long ago at a booksale in Melbourne, Australia. Ashton's work is probably timeless. It is a down-to-earth, very well reasoned history of the various historical tendencies and phenomena that together are called "the industrial revolution". I cannot vouch for this volume being absolutely correct. The author does not have much time for those who dwell on the evils of industrialization, or who want to include class struggle in their analysis. Though I was not fully convinced of this, still I was willing to listen. Not being an expert in

the field, I was looking for a decent explanation or summary of the whole process. I definitely got my money's worth in Ashton's book. It is well-written, without jargon and without presumption of vast historical knowledge on the part of the reader. It gives you an overview of such various fields as population growth, early forms of industry in England, the technical innovations, capital, banking, labor unions, conditions of workers, industrialists' clubs, and relation of agriculture to industry. Though I found the part about banks and interest rather rough going, it was entirely due to my own poor understanding of the field. My edition could have used a map. The shires, the rivers, and the many towns of England are not all imprinted firmly in the brains of North Americans. Other than that, I would heartily recommend this book to anyone who wants to improve their understanding of the Industrial Revolution.

I can't believe I'm the first to write about this. I bought this a few years back while a graduate student in modern European history. My focus was primarily industrialization. This book is a joy. Ashton provides a thorough picture of the Revolution from several perspectives. He describes how events and developments built upon each other and how the innovators fed each others efforts. Most importantly, Ashton is a terrific writer. Other books on this and like topics can be as dry as the Sahara. Ashton is engaging and witty. This is not a book that requires a terrifically large commitment. Even if you are not a student but simply interested in the topic, please read this.

Thomas Southcliffe Ashton (1899-1968) was professor of economic history at the London School of Economics from 1944 until 1954, and also wrote the books *An economic history of England: the 18th century*, and *Economic Fluctuations in England 1700-1800*. He notes that "It has often been observed that the growth of industry was connected historically with the rise of groups which dissented from the Church by law established in England." (Pg. 14) He states that as with industries making use of "casual" labor today, "more people entered these trades than could be assured of regular work. Underemployment, rather than periodic unemployment, was the bane of the domestic worker." (Pg. 39) Ashton points out that throughout the 18th century, it was customary for manufacturers to be paid for their goods as long as two years later; but with the speeding up of transport and communications, "there was a tendency to shorten the accommodation." He adds, "A new sense of time was one of the outstanding psychological features of the industrial revolution." (Pg. 69) When dealing with the question of child labor, Ashton cautions us, "The conduct of factory masters must be judged in the light of their own age and of that which preceded it," since we now have a standard of life "immeasurably higher" than theirs, and we place "a different value on child

life." (Pg. 79) He perceptively observes, "It is sometimes suggested that the presence of women in an industry has a humanizing effect on the men who work in it; but one would need to take a very optimistic view of the nature of man to believe that this was true of coal-mining." (Pg. 83) After noting that not until "the whole apparatus of government has been drastically reformed and a body of qualified public servants had been called into being could life in urban areas be other than squalid," Ashton summarizes, "If the industrial revolution was not able to bring its rewards in full measure to the ordinary man and woman it is to the defects of administrative, and not of economic processes, that the failure must be ascribed." (Pg. 97) Ashton's book is an intriguing and persuasive perspective on this controversial period.

This book is a collection of essays on economic history pertaining to the Industrial Revolution. It is not a politically correct book, often turning traditional accepted beliefs about the industrial revolution on their heads. For example, one of the reasons why many poor families had dingy, windowless dwellings was the window tax charged by the government based on the number of windows in your house. Ventilation and health suffered as a result. Another example is the reason for the shoddy tenements built in the cities experiencing rapid industrial growth. Government rent and building regulations made it awkward to invest capital in housing. As a result, the cities that witnessed the greatest economic growth were often some of the least developed and regulated prior to the Industrial Revolution. In short, this is a well-researched economic history that suggests free markets and property rights as being central to the Industrial Revolution while demonstrating that the government regulations often made things worse for the working poor. If you like this, you'll enjoy books by Burton Folsom, like the *Myth of the Robber Barons* or *Empire Builders*.

If you are looking for a well written and concise history of the Industrial Revolution then this book is for you. It provides a decent overview but little detail or analysis.

Obviously well-researched but sometimes very specific; this book may be better for one already acquainted with the subject looking for a fresh take, than for someone looking for an accessible introduction. Still, there is a lot to glean from it for a layman, even if that layman must do some work to do the gleaning. Recommended.

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