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## Keeping New England's Factories off Limits: Horatio Alger's Erasure of the Industrial Landscape

When Horatio Alger, Jr. moved with his family from Chelsea to Marlborough at the age of twelve, in 1844, he could hardly have escaped the presence of factories in Central and Eastern Massachusetts.<sup>1</sup> The area around Worcester was a vibrant center for new industrial development. Canals and railroads facilitated travel and transport of goods. Worcester, whose population grew dramatically between 1820 and 1850, became known for its metal industries, including wire mills. Nearby Framingham was home to a cotton and wool manufactory by 1829 (Barry 149). At the Lowell Works, where textile manufacture began early, wage-laborers had been demanding better pay and reduced hours. In Marlborough itself, an 1835 map of the town pinpointed a few saw mills and grist mills along its waterways; a town historian noted in 1862 that until recently, “[h]aving only an inconsiderable water-power, she has had no factories of any note” (Hudson 260-261). Another town historian indicated the presence of “two small wool-fabric mills on water-power of the Assabet River” (Bigelow). However, by the time of the 1837 state census of manufactures, seven years before Alger’s arrival, Marlborough was home to boot and shoe manufactories plus a few tanneries, and some women were employed making straw bonnets (Hudson 261). The population of Marlborough doubled between 1840 and 1855, and nearly tripled from 1840 to 1860 (Hudson 252-253). The valuation of shoes manufactured in Marlborough more than doubled between 1837 and 1845 (Hudson 262).

The region’s economic and social transformation would only become more dramatic after the Civil War. When Harvard College and Harvard Divinity School graduate Horatio Alger, Jr. began publishing serialized stories and novels under his own name around 1864, many were set in the New England states and in New York. And yet the rare appearance of a shoe, furniture, or brick manufactory or mill in these stories featured pre-industrial skilled labor. The work process had not been noticeably altered by mechanization.

In those few instances when Alger’s heroes briefly join the industrial workforce, they are hurried out of it. In *Five Hundred Dollars*, an Alger story serialized beginning in 1889, hero Bert Barton loses his job as a shoe pegger because of the introduction of a machine (52). This was a very rare occurrence in an Alger story. In *Brave and Bold*, an 1874 novel, Robert Rushton has been the mainstay of support for his family by working in a brick factory in Millville. We are told that this factory provides almost the only employment in town—although Robert’s mother braids straw for a hat manufacturer in a nearby town—that Robert earns six dollars per week, and that there is a twenty-five-cent docking for tardiness (6, 10-11, 23). In *Ben Bruce*, a story serialized beginning in December, 1892, the hero wants to leave his mean stepfather’s household and meets a friend who superintends a “factory for the manufacture of leather board.” The friend is willing to offer Ben a job, and Ben expresses a preference for this factory job over working on a

farm, with the friend indicating that Ben would be preparing himself for “higher” work. The wage is satisfactory, but just before a bargain is struck, the dam that supplies water power for the factory is blown up before their very eyes; two workmen who have been let go apparently accomplished the deed (*Ben* 9-12). So Alger goes to dramatic lengths to save his boys from entering the world of manufacturing. These fictional youths often begin work as actors, circus riders, bootblacks, newspaper boys, or magicians’ apprentices, but Robert Rushton, Ben Bruce, and Bert Barton are among the very few who seek out factory work. His boys generally avoid taking up a craft or trade, often asserting that they don’t think they are cut out for the particular work. Alger’s stories hardly ever describe factory work, and the reader rarely glimpses the inside of a manufacturing establishment. Alger’s heroes succeed by avoiding such employments.

In fact, although Alger treated his readers to big city street scenes and sights (most often in New York), rarely does a hero see a factory on his travels, even as he wanders the city in search of work. In Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, set in Chicago the same year that Alger finished *Luke Walton*, the title character passes a number of manufacturing establishments on her long walk downtown, and when she is unable to find a position as a shop girl, she takes an unpleasant and poorly paid job manufacturing shoes. Carrie notices men engaged in heavy labor and poorly clad girls in shops and factories with little chance of improvement. Alger’s young hero in *Luke Walton*, however, sees none of this as he walks downtown. In urban settings, instead, Alger’s title characters see merchants, shopkeepers, bankers, counting houses, clerks, and errand boys. They do discover that many jobs in the city will not pay a living wage, but note that these must be jobs for boys who live at home and work to augment the family earnings. Boys who see squalid tenements find victims and moral defectives living there. Employers tell protagonists that they can find plenty of boys who will take these (sub-survival) wages. Alger’s heroes are not among them.

Looking for opportunities to rise through the ranks, Alger’s heroes find jobs in the white-collar workforce, even though only 18 percent of the workforce was classified as white collar as late as 1900 (United States, Series D182-232). Rather than make a Faustian bargain for factory wages, these boys find that something or someone intervenes so that they will not have to settle for such work. Women who have to work in Alger’s stories are not as geographically mobile as boys and men. They cannot so easily walk or run away from home to avoid factory labor. Alger’s fictional females often participate in manufacturing by sewing, either in the putting out system or through piecework. In *Rough and Ready*, one female character dependent on her earnings sews in her room for long hours each day, earning only a third of what the title character does as a newsboy. She is losing her health and barely earns enough to survive; she tells the hero that if anyone complains, employers “take away their work and employ somebody else” (97). In *Helen Ford*, we meet a woman who labors for long hours at sewing but finds her wages reduced by 20 percent, while “many could not obtain a chance to work at any price” (255). Alger considers the wages and working conditions of seamstresses unhealthful and disgraceful. Only marriage or some other form of rescue can help these women in Alger’s stories. Mindless drudgery and participation in the manufacturing process are linked with the female.

Alger clearly did not believe that the factory provided sufficient opportunities for mobility. It also suffered from the threat of unstable work. Of the shoe and boot industry around Marlborough, it could be said that “though diversified, the local economy was not immune to the cyclical fluctuations which plagued the shoe industry at large” (Scharnhorst with Bales 13). An Alger shoemaker, forced to close down temporarily during a market glut, comments: “that’s the worst of the shoe-trade. It isn’t steady. When it’s good everybody rushes into it, and the market soon gets overstocked. Then there’s no work for weeks” (Alger, *Bound* 204). While some of Alger’s contemporaries and some later historians thought that there were many opportunities to rise from day laborer to manager or factory owner, he saw various downsides to such a project for upward mobility.

One problem was that Alger thought the modern factory system offered inadequate opportunities for personal contact between employers and employees. Alger’s heroes enjoy frequent contact with their employers, which is essential so that praiseworthy and steady character can be noticed and rewarded. Alger was furthermore not convinced that manufacturing establishments nurtured good character, providing positive examples for the young; corruption of character through exposure to the bad habits of co-workers was a danger. Since Alger’s young bootblacks, newsboys, and baggage smashers who have grown up on the streets of the city already have some bad habits, they are especially in need of nurture to improve their character flaws. Because Alger frequently considered “capitalists” greedy and machine-like themselves, unfeeling and uncaring about the human consequences of their business decisions, the factory was not a good place to deposit heroes.

Alger, a product of antebellum Harvard Unitarian training, tended to share the view that “man had both a mind (that is, a spirit) and a body, but his destiny clearly lay in developing the power of the former” (Howe 42). After Ralph Waldo Emerson’s 1847 trip abroad, he wrote that “the machine unmans the user” (qtd. in Kasson 127). For Alger, likewise, the factory work environment that he may have first noticed as a boy in Marlborough did not help to make boys *men*. To have some power or control over oneself, one had to be engaged in work where there was some discretion over tasks and time, along with opportunity to use one’s mind and wits. Repeated application of one’s physical capacity for labor to routinized work paid by the hour was linked with absence of power. Only boys who had some opportunity to exercise judgment and intelligence on behalf of an employer could prove themselves to be loyal and trustworthy.

In Alger’s fictional universe, which may have been shaped in part by Marlborough’s growth as a manufacturing town, the community of interest between employees and employers must endure. The factory is a troubling place in this landscape.

## Notes

1. An earlier and extended treatment of Alger’s treatment of the factory appears in Carol Nackenoff, *The Fictional Republic: Horatio Alger and American Political Discourse* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), Chapter 5. Material used by permission of Oxford University Press.

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