

THE SLUM PROBLEM

BY

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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Reissue with a Chapter on the 1930 Housing Act

LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO.
LONDON :: NEW YORK :: TORONTO

1930

LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO. LTD.

**39 PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON, E.C.4
6 OLD COURT HOUSE STREET, CALCUTTA
53 NICOL ROAD, BOMBAY
167 MOUNT ROAD, MADRAS**

LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO.

**55 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK
221 EAST 20TH STREET, CHICAGO
TREMONT TEMPLE, BOSTON
210 VICTORIA STREET, TORONTO**

Published October, 1978

Made in Great Britain

INTRODUCTION

By SIR J. WALKER SMITH, M.Inst.C.E., F.S.I.,
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Ministry of Health.*

IN the near future the nation will probably be asked to join in a concerted attack upon the problems of the demolition and replanning of overcrowded and insanitary areas in Great Britain. There can be no doubt as to the readiness of all, who realize the moral and physical evils that result from slums, to do everything in their power to respond to the call.

But in our zeal and sympathy for those who have to live in unhealthy conditions, we must not let our heads be carried away by our hearts. For if we do, we may actually aggravate the evil. As a sane contribution to this question I am glad to welcome this book, written by a former colleague of mine at the Ministry of Health, who has also been Chairman for three years of the Housing Committee of the Hampstead Borough Council, and has acted as a consultant to the Building Research Board. He has had many opportunities of visiting insanitary areas in England, Scotland and Wales and obtaining authoritative information on the many factors involved in a complex problem.

Of these opportunities he has availed himself in full.



The individual views expressed in this book are of course put forward on his own responsibility, but with his general thesis that money alone will not permanently cure slums, all students of the subject must agree. Subsidies of any kind are apt to produce unexpected results, and I believe that the solution of the whole housing problem depends appreciably upon the building industry being freed from all the entanglements involved in State financial assistance. The experience of the 1919 Act under which approximately 178,000 houses were built at an estimated capital cost of £178,000,000—a £1,000 a house according to the Minister of Health—is a warning to us not to disregard economic laws. Mr. Townroe supports this view of the undesirability of subsidies by irrefutable facts.

The subsidising of house building has had about as much justification as the Rents and Mortgage Restriction by Statute. They have both been merely expedients. Thoroughly uneconomic the former has interfered with the Building Industry in such a way as to raise the costs of building, whereas the latter has led to gross profiteering by tenants, considerable injustice to owners, and has seriously complicated the whole housing problem. By modifications of the principle and the amounts of subsidy to Local Authorities and others, the injurious effect of the Government intervention has been gradually reduced; but the entire cessation of the subsidy, the removal of restrictions, and the restoration of freedom once more for the free play of economic forces are, in the public interest, devoutly to be desired.

The political exigencies which seemed to render

necessary the Government intervention in 1919 are well known. New houses have now been provided in sufficient numbers to meet the more clamant needs, and, when costs are further reduced as they will be proportionally as the Government's intervention diminishes, they will continue to be provided to meet the general needs. The removal of slums and the provision of new accommodation for the dispossessed will necessarily be a work of some duration and a sane policy is required in order to prevent a recurrence of the extravagance which disregard of economics has caused us to experience since the very active intervention of the Government in 1919.

Mr. Townroe shows that over one hundred schemes of slum clearances have been submitted, and confirmed by local authorities since the War. He gives, too, many pertinent illustrations of the need to encourage private investors to put money into new buildings that may be let, and of the necessity to manage these efficiently. This in my view is the heart of the whole problem. The only permanent remedy for foul housing conditions is to build new houses that can be let at rents within the reach of unskilled artisans or agricultural labourers, and to ensure that the tenants of such houses keep them clean and in good order.

Many practical suggestions on these matters are given in this survey which, I hope, will be carefully studied by all who are anxious to abolish unhealthy dwellings within a reasonable time.

HIS GRACE THE ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY at Lambeth Palace, on July 9th, 1928, gave permission for the following message to be quoted. It summarizes the object of the book :

“ It is unthinkable that we can leave unattended to, or listlessly handled, the housing conditions which so long as they are un-met are working havoc upon all that is meant by pure home-life. Everybody deplures the baneful state of things, and brave resourceful men in public life have, this last year, with marked success, done what in them lies to mend it. But they are only half-supported by the sort of public opinion which should be restlessly, resistlessly intolerant of so palpable and blatant an evil. Christian folk as such should be making their voices heard in a way that cannot be gainsaid. Scarcely any sacrifice, individual or corporate, civic or political, is too great for rolling away the reproach of conditions which to our grandchildren will seem as unbelievable as the facts and figures which confronted Wilberforce in his anti-slavery campaigns a century ago, or Lord Ashley in the mines and factories a little later. To me it seems that the best endeavours of public men will be paralysed until the voice of the whole people of every class—especially of the class which is not itself suffering from this intolerable ill—declares that this thing cannot be trifled with, and that, cost what it may to any group or class or fellowship, we must bring it to an end. I do not scruple to say that its continuance in a Christian country is contrary to the Will of God.”

PREFACE

IN this monograph I have tried to give a bird's-eye view of an extremely complex question, and realize that much more **might be said** on certain matters, and how possibly injustice is done owing to the inevitable compression. For example, there are many towns not **mentioned** at all where **admirable** work is being quietly carried out by local authorities in remedying slum conditions.

In the section on remedies I have tried not to be too dogmatic, and trust that some of the suggestions, tentatively put forward, may be found of value. I must, however, here emphasize that slums cannot possibly be swept away solely by legislative mandate, or by spending money alone, and that every block of slum property presents a particular problem with its own human complexities and conundrums, needing much care and hard thinking for their solution.

I have to thank the Editors of *The Times*, *The Edinburgh Review* and *The Spectator* for very kindly allowing me to publish extracts from articles contributed to their pages. My gratitude to many persons, including officials of the Ministry of Health, and of local authorities is very sincere, for without their help this collection of facts could not possibly have been made. Especially I have to thank my friends, Sir John Mann, Sir Walker Smith, and Dr. R. C. Maxwell for their skilled advice and encouragement.

B. S. TOWNROE.

HAMPSHIRE.

10th August, 1928.

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