



## Michael Armstrong: Factory Boy





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In 1839 [Frances Trollope](#) decided to write a novel on young factory workers. She had become interested in the subject after reading a copy of the book on the life of [Robert Blincoe](#) published by [John Doherty](#) in 1832. Before writing the novel she carried out a fact-finding mission to [Manchester](#). Frances Trollope was accompanied by the French artist, Auguste Hervieu, who had been commissioned to produce illustrations for the book. Francis Trollope and Auguste Hervieu spent several weeks in [Manchester](#) and [Bradford](#) visiting factories and having meeting with people involved in the campaign for factory reform. This included [Richard Oastler](#), [Joseph Raynor Stephens](#) and [John Doherty](#), the editor of *The Poor Man's Advocate*.

The first part of *Michael Armstrong: Factory Boy*, was published in 1840. [Frances Trollope](#) was the first woman to issue her novels in monthly parts. Costing one shilling a month, *Michael Armstrong: Factory Boy* was also the first industrial novel to be published in Britain.

The novel tells the story of Sir Matthew Dowling, a wealthy businessman, who adopts Michael Armstrong, a factory child. Dowling uses the boy to illustrate his willingness to help those in need. However, Dowling gets bored with Michael and decides to get rid of him by apprenticing him to an establishment for unwanted pauper children. Michael escapes and after many dangerous adventures is reunited with the factory girl who he loved as a child. The main message of the novel is that individual philanthropy is an inadequate solution to the problems of industrialisation.

Several of the passages in *Michael Armstrong: Factory Boy* are based on

events described in *A Memoir of Robert Blincoe*. Some of the novel's critics pointed out that this was a book about conditions in the early days of the century. Frances Trollope was also attacked for producing a book that could be purchased in parts and therefore available to the working class. One writer suggested that the book would result in the "burning of factories" and that the author deserved to be sent to prison. One critic suggested that books like this should be left to male writers as "women are more at home in the flower garden and by the domestic hearth."



**Illustration of scavengers and piecers at work that appeared in Trollope's *Michael Armstrong* (1840)**

[Child Labour Debate Activity \(International School of Toulouse\)](#)

[Child Labour Simulation \(Spartacus Educational\)](#)

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**(1) In his autobiography, *What I Remember*, Thomas Adolphus Trollope described his mother and himself meeting a group of men in Manchester campaigning against child labour.**

Nearly all of them, men a little raised above the position of the factory hands, to the righting of whose wrongs they devoted their lives. They had been at some period of their lives, in almost every case, factory workers themselves, but had by various circumstances, native talent, industry and energy managed to raise themselves out of the slough of despond in which their fellows were overwhelmed. John Doherty came to dine but his excitement in talking was so great and continuous that he could eat next to nothing.

**(2) R. H. Hone, *A New Spirit of the Age* (1844)**

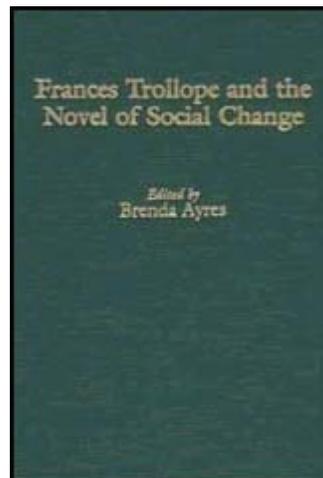
Mrs Trollope takes a strange delight in the hideous and revolting. Nothing can exceed the vulgarity of Mrs Trollope's mob of characters. We have heard it urged on behalf of Mrs. Trollope that her novels are, at all events, drawn from life. So are sign paintings.

**(3) *The Athenaeum* (1839)**

The most probable immediate effect of her pennings and her pencillings will be the burning of factories and the plunder of property of all kinds. The Rev. James Raynor Stephens has recently been sentenced to eighteen months imprisonment for using seditious and inflammatory language. The author of *Michael Armstrong* deserves as richly to have eighteen months in Chester Gaol. But if the text be bad, still worse are the plates that illustrate it. What, for instance, must be the effect of the first picture in No. V1 (mill children competing with pigs for food), on the heated imaginations of our great manufacturing towns, figuring as they do in every book-seller's window.



Illustration VI from *Michael Armstrong: Factory Boy*



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