

Of a Scale Unknown



by Theodore Dalrymple

Few places on earth are more dismal than steel towns without steel. Once an industrial powerhouse, Rotherham, in Yorkshire, England, is now an industrial wasteland, with an inspissated gloom that hangs over it (or, at least, did when I stayed there for a few weeks 15 years ago), doubtless much as a pall of real pollution hung over it in the days when it was a great manufacturing center.

Yet Rotherham is an ancient borough. It has one of the few remaining medieval chapels in England built on a bridge and also one of the country's finest fifteenth-century churches, Rotherham Minster, a true architectural masterpiece—though when I visited it, the interior had been adorned by a kitchen made of plywood for the distribution of cups of tea, in a fashion typical of the Church of England's guardianship of its treasures. Thomas of Rotherham, archbishop of York, who died of the plague in 1500, was Edward IV's chancellor and the

town's most eminent son, founding a grammar school there in 1483; a descendant institution, the Thomas Rotherham College, remains in existence.

The postwar years were not kind, architecturally, to Rotherham. For example, the Central Library, now demolished, was built in the 1970s in a brutalist style so comically awful that it gave me the idea of founding a competitive prize for architectural students, the winner being the one who could design something even uglier, a task requiring great imagination. In this way, by indirection, students who went in for the prize would learn the principles of beauty by understanding the ugly.

Kurdish refugees filled the library in those days, often using the municipal computers to access pornography. The refugees—at any rate, the young men claiming asylum—had probably been sent to Rotherham in the hope that they would soon apply to return home. I would eat in an astonishingly inexpensive Kurdish canteen, above which young men, forbidden to seek employment because of their refugee status, whiled away the best years of their lives playing pool.

But for many years now, the name “Rotherham” has meant only one thing to the rest of the country: the sexual abuse scandal of the first decade and a half of this century, in which gangs of men of Pakistani origin—descendants of immigrants to the town—sexually abused white girls in an organized and systematic fashion. This activity was ongoing, unbeknown to me, though not to the authorities, during my brief residence in Rotherham.

I cannot do better to describe the scandal than to quote the first five paragraphs of the executive summary of the independent report into it, published in 2014. Written by a professor of social work, Alexis Jay, it has the power to shock, as few official documents have:

No one knows the true scale of child sexual exploitation (CSE) in Rotherham over the years. Our conservative estimate is that approximately 1400 children were sexually exploited over the full Inquiry period, from 1997 to 2013.

In just over a third of cases, children affected by sexual exploitation were previously known to services because of child protection and neglect. It is hard to describe the appalling nature of the abuse that child victims suffered. They were raped by multiple perpetrators, trafficked to other towns and cities in the north of England, abducted, beaten, and intimidated. There were examples of children who had been doused in petrol and threatened with being set alight, threatened with guns, made to witness brutally violent rapes and threatened they would be next if they told anyone. Girls as young as 11 were raped by large numbers of male perpetrators.

This abuse is not confined to the past but continues to this day. In May 2014, the caseload of the specialist child sexual exploitation team was 51. More CSE cases were held by other children's social care teams. There were 16 looked after children who were identified by children's social care as being at serious risk of sexual exploitation or having been sexually exploited. In 2013, the Police received 157 reports concerning child sexual exploitation in the Borough.

Over the first twelve years covered by this Inquiry, the collective failures of political and officer leadership were blatant. From the beginning, there was growing evidence that child sexual exploitation was a serious problem in Rotherham. This came from those working in residential care and from youth workers who knew the young people well.

Within social care, the scale and seriousness of the problem was underplayed by senior managers. At an operational level, the Police gave no priority to CSE, regarding many child victims with contempt and failing to act on their abuse as a

crime. Further stark evidence came in 2002, 2003 and 2006 with three reports known to the Police and the Council, which could not have been clearer in their description of the situation in Rotherham. The first of these reports was effectively suppressed because some senior officers disbelieved the data it contained. This had led to suggestions of coverup. The other two reports set out the links between child sexual exploitation and drugs, guns and criminality in the Borough. These reports were ignored and no action was taken to deal with the issues that were identified in them.

The number 1,400 is now widely believed to be more of an underestimate than an exaggeration. At a rough guess, about 5 percent to 10 percent of the Rotherham girls of an age susceptible to being sexually abused were abused. After the publication of the report, another appeared the following year into the workings of the town council.

It noted that:

Despite Professor Jay's findings, which we fully endorse, and substantial quantities of information available within the Council, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council demonstrates a resolute denial of what has happened in the borough. This took several forms—notable in their recurrence—including dismissal of Professor Jay's findings, denial of knowledge of the "scale and scope" of CSE, blaming others, and denial that CSE remains a serious problem in present day Rotherham.

The real problem for the Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council, it turns out, was how to cover up the situation.

The affair will not go away. In 2022, a report into police conduct during the scandal found appalling deficiencies, including that the police thought, as an excuse for doing nothing, that young girls regarded an Asian boyfriend as "a

fashion accessory." Not a single policeman has been sacked or otherwise sanctioned for gross dereliction of duty.

But even the reports do not shock by comparison with testimony of some of the girls, now young women, who were abused in Rotherham. An entire genre of memoirs has emerged in England relating the experience of organized and large-scale abuse in the city, with titles such as *Violated* and *Just a Child*. Mostly, the books are ghostwritten, yet while one may question the literal accuracy of the reports of conversations held years before, supposedly reproduced word for word, they nevertheless plausibly preserve the everyday language of the principal authors, including local locutions such as "right fit" for a boy deemed very attractive.

In outline, the manner of proceeding was this: the abusing men, often taxi drivers, would park outside schools or where young girls would hang out in the evenings, and pretend to befriend them. They would offer them rides, together with snacks and drinks. At first, they would appear kind and gentle; they would introduce them to their friends or relatives in their houses, where they would begin to ply them with drink (usually vodka, for quick results) and drugs, from soft to hard. This process came to be known as "grooming."

Soon the girls were addicted and would have to "pay" for their drinks and drugs with sex, often with multiple partners. Pimps would transport them around the country to other groups of men of Pakistani origin or descent. However, another pattern was that the initial abuser would pose as the abused girl's special "boyfriend," with promises of later marriage and eternal devotion. Little did the girls know that the "boyfriend" was already married with children and was promising precisely the same thing to other girls—in one case, 18 of them. If any girl tried to break away from her principal abuser, she was discouraged by violence, blackmail, and plausible threats of death, including against her family. Groomed girls would also induce girls younger than themselves

to start on the same path, claiming that their lives were great fun, unable to recognize their own abuse. Gertrude's speech, describing the death of Ophelia by drowning in a brook, comes to mind:

Her clothes spread wide And mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up,

Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,

As one incapable of her own distress.

They did indeed sing the praises, "the old lauds," of the lives they were leading—even as they were drugged, beaten, and raped—as ones incapable (that is, unaware) of their own danger.

Naturally, some girls were more vulnerable than others. The degradation of life among some of the white, formerly working class can hardly be exaggerated. It was a world of broken homes, violence, drink, and drugs, uninterest in education, even a complete absence of cooking: to read of the diet of most of the girls is depressing in itself: the worst kind of takeout food, frequently consumed not in the house but on the street. It was a way of life utterly without charm or redeeming features, in which children quickly learn to utter vile verbal abuse, often as a prelude to violence. In one of the memoirs, a girl aged ten, not yet a victim of sexual abuse, called her teacher "a fucking slag."

In one of the memoirs, *Violated*, by Sarah Wilson, the protagonist, aged 12, befriends Hayley, who tells her: "My dad doesn't give a shit what time I come home. You should stay at mine sometime and we can stay out all night. It'll be a laugh." Wilson then describes the place to which Hayley had invited her:

There were empty cans of lager and fag ends everywhere, and I

immediately recognised the horrible smell of damp that I've come to associate with all the houses I visited around this time [where she was drugged and raped]. There were no sofas and the carpet was so frayed and stained it looked as if it had been there for decades. None of the lightbulbs worked, but in the darkness I could see around a dozen Asian men spread across the floor. . . . "They all come to chill here because they know my dad won't mind. . . . He even gives us all fags."

Then, Wilson meets Hayley's dad:

It was no wonder Hayley's dad never gave her a curfew or quizzed her about who she was bringing into the house. I soon realised he was barely conscious for long enough to notice what she was up to. Hayley led us into the dining room, where he was lying face down on the only couch they appeared to own. He was wearing nothing but a tatty pair of old blue boxer shorts. . . . Even in the half light, I could see he'd shit himself. . . . "He's passed out again," Hayley said. "Typical."

Sarah Wilson's sister, mildly mentally handicapped, was later stabbed 40 times and thrown into a canal by two young men of Pakistani origin, both of whom had had sexual relations with her and by one of whom she was pregnant at 16. One was acquitted of the killing; the other received a prison sentence of just 17.5 years because he was a juvenile at the time of his crime. He will get out when he is 35, giving him plenty more time for fun.

Not all the children were from broken or degraded homes, however: some even had two parents. In the prison in which I worked many years ago, I met two incarcerated young men of Pakistani descent who managed to lure a 16-year-old girl of prosperous parents to live with them. They tried to addict her to heroin; after she died of an overdose, they disposed of her

in the nearest reservoir. They were each sentenced to ten years' imprisonment—in effect, no more than six, given automatic remission because no intent to kill or even seriously to injure could be shown. They had been convicted only of unlawfully concealing a death.

Perhaps the most startling aspect of this whole sordid story is the refusal of the authorities to act. Many times, desperate parents turned to the authorities for assistance; when they turned to the police, they often found themselves in more trouble than did the perpetrators of the abuse. Social services were often blind to the abuse, and even complicit with it. When another victim, Sammy Woodhouse, was placed in a children's home, her mother having despaired of preventing her from climbing out the windows to meet her principal abuser, the home made it even easier for her to do so by allowing her out till until 10 PM, though fully aware of what she was doing.

There are none so blind, it is said, as those who will not see. But the Rotherham story is worse than mere willful blindness, however much that might have played a part. Corruption of the old-fashioned kind might explain some of the police's conduct, but it was combined with stupidity (the more educated the recruits to the police, the more stupid the police become), as well as political correctness and the fear of being accused of racism if they acted against the abusers.

Some of the police behavior beggars belief. When Sarah Wilson's mother confiscated her daughter's phone, she found the names of 177 men of Pakistani origin or descent on it (this fact alone suggests the scale of the problem). She showed it to the police, who had already received many reports of the girl's disappearance from home. Her daughter was 14 at the time. The police said that they could do nothing because of the Data Protection Act and investigated no further.

Here is an account of what happened when one girl's father,

who “always made efforts to track her down whenever [she went missing],” discovered that she was at a property owned by her abusers:

Unfortunately as he was shouting he used a racist comment towards the people inside. . . . Neighbours heard the fracas and reported that someone was racially abusing people in their street. The police arrived pretty damned quickly, the door was opened and they went inside. By all accounts [the girl] was just getting out of bed with her abuser when the police came through the front door. So she hid under the bed while the man was caught pulling on his trousers. When they finally brought her out from under the bed she was intoxicated, semi-naked and clutching a police truncheon. She didn't come out quietly, apparently, which led to her being arrested and charged with disorderly behaviour, as was her father. And although the house was full of men, one of whom had just been in bed with a fourteen year-old girl, not one of them was spoken to, arrested or charged with anything.

Social services, incidentally, knew about the girl because her doctor had previously reported to them that she was pregnant by a 25-year-old man with a criminal record of violence and drug-dealing, but they regarded the relationship as consensual and happy, even though she was below the legal age of consent.

Here is another case, involving a girl named Amy:

The poor girl was in and out of hospital regularly, the result of beatings that left her black and blue, and sexual assaults. . . . On one occasion when Amy was missing from home she was found by the local police in the car of one of her abusers at the back of an unused building. However, no arrests were made. . . . On another occasion Amy was battered severely for offending her abusers in some small way and her family received threats and had to be moved to a safe house. At this time Amy tried to get away from these men only to

find they would turn up at the family house and make threats towards her mother and siblings.

Again, no arrests took place, and when Amy moved to an aunt's house for safety, the aunt agreed, no doubt intimidated, to sell her as a bride to a man seeking to come to England. Luckily, she was still underage.

Scores of such episodes occurred. Each time, the police found a reason not to act. If the police stopped a Pakistani man driving with a young girl, they would let him go without further questioning, as the driver often had accused them of racism. On one occasion, a girl of 14 had gone missing; her abuser delivered her to the police on condition that he not face prosecution. A relative of his, a Rotherham town councillor and chair of its police committee, arranged the deal. Two of the councillor's brothers and one of his sons were subsequently convicted when the scandal finally became public. The abuser eventually received a 35-year prison sentence and is now confined to a wheelchair, having been shot in the back by a member of a rival drug gang.

Sometimes, the police acted as if they were themselves gangsters—for example, pointing out to a youth worker, who was trying to expose the ongoing abuse, that people knew where she lived: clearly a warning to desist.

Social services proved no better. The council launched an organization in 1997 called Risky Business to look into rumors of widespread abuse. When it reported as truthfully as it could, the council reacted furiously. In one case, an employee of the group was told not to use the word "Asian" with regard to the perpetrators (Asian in Rotherham is synonymous with Pakistani origin or descent) and was put through a racial-awareness course. The local Member of Parliament—subsequently sent to prison for fraudulently claiming expenses that he had not incurred—spoke at a meeting about child sexual

exploitation with Rotherham officials, saying, in the purest of politically correct *langue de bois*, "If we could all just learn to get along and accept the ways of different cultures and stop competing then we would have a lot more harmony between the different sections of our community."

The toxic mix of two degraded cultures intermingling in the context of a public administration that is bloated, cowardly, unsure of itself, and rotted by ideological stupidity resulted in child abuse almost on assembly-line principles. The Rotherham scandal was some years ago now, but it was far from unique. Something similar happened in Rochdale, in Huddersfield, in Luton, in Derby, in Oxford—and in Telford, ten miles from where I write this, on a level comparable with Rotherham's, and more recent. There is little reason that it should not have happened elsewhere, and that it should not be happening now.

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