Graduate Research Symposium Proposal

Title – “Richard Oastler: Champion of Factory Children”

Program of Study – European History

Presentation Type – PowerPoint (Remote Oral Presentation)

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Category – Textual
Abstract: Charles Dickens writes in *Oliver Twist or the Parish Boy’s Progress*,

For the next eight or ten months, Oliver was the victim of a systematic course of
treachery and deception. He was brought up by hand. The hungry and destitute situation
of the infant orphan was duly reported by the workhouse authorities to the parish
authorities. The parish authorities inquired with dignity of the workhouse authorities,
whether there was no female then domiciled in “the house” who was in a situation to
impert to Oliver Twist the consolation and nourishment of which he stood in need.¹

These words from the classic tale of *Oliver Twist* reflect the era of British workhouses
and what some have argued was the criminalization of poverty because of Lord Althorp’s 1834
British Poor Law Amendments. Richard Oastler is a name that is now often forgotten, but his
work championing the cause of factory children set a precedent in child labor laws. The
following paper will explore the work of Richard Oastler – his factory reform, his compassion
for the poor, and his fearlessness when standing for the common people. It will explore the
historiographical interpretations of Oastler’s work, which typically champions his often socialist
ideals of the enemy of free trade and plight of the working class. Professionals in the area of
children’s welfare point to the work of Richard Oastler as a predecessor of modern-day ideals of
children’s rights.

¹ Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist of the Parish Boy’s Progress* (Garden City, NY: Nelson Doubleday, Inc.,
1837-1839), 18.
Bibliography