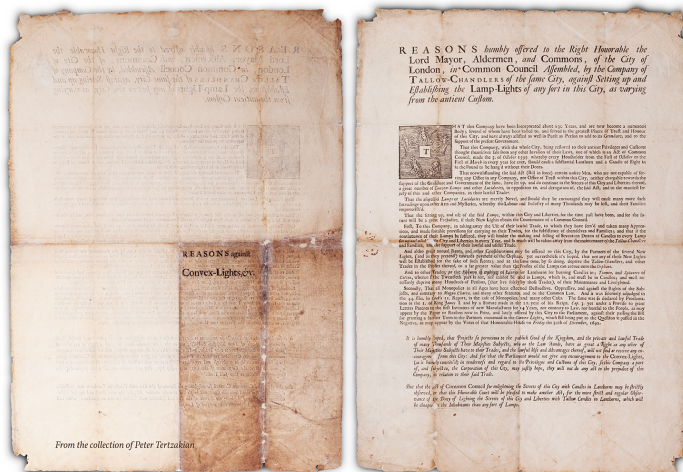


Civilization's Growing Pains

By Ada Zhang, MBA 2021



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LONDON, 1692

Edward Clarke's return from his candle-making workshop is punctuated by the heady stench of tallow and a bellow of indignation.

"This is blasphemy - Work of the devil, I say!"

Timothy sighs at his father's exclamation. Much to his dismay, it was the fourth time he had heard this statement in as many days.

"Father, you needn't be so petulant. Your Tallow Chandlers peers have been working night and day to persuade the Common Council and public, no? Handing out that brochure with reasons to ban the convex-light?"

His father fumes wordlessly and nods.

Timothy pauses, and continues cautiously, "But truly, would it be so terrible if we used these new lights? You must admit, candles have their limitations. The little ones often lose their way once evening arrives - the candle streetlights barely illuminate the path, nor our door!"

A tense silence follows.

"My boy," Charles replies, his rage melting into sadness as he rubs his temple with calloused fingers. "The Clarke's have been chandlers for generations. I am afraid we will lose our livelihood if these convex-lights become commonplace. We would become impoverish'd."

With this, Timothy thought of his dearest mother, near bursting with child, and his six younger siblings, thin and often shivering in their hand-me-down garments. Winter would be upon them soon and they could not afford to lose nourishment.

An abrupt surge of motivation jolts Timothy from his seat.

"Let us go to the city square and help distribute brochures," he insists earnestly, "Certainly more hands would persuade the Common Council to understand the consequences of this invention."

And so, father and son determinedly trek to the city square.



There is a flurry of activity at the square, with members of the Tallow Chandlers hurriedly handing out brochures. The rare bypassing Common Council member would be quickly swarmed by the members, imploring him to truly think of families who would go hungry if not for policy intervention.

Edward and Timothy are waved over by a familiar crowd of chandlers but stop in their tracks to acknowledge an approaching acquaintance.

“Good day, Doctor Bownell,” greets Edward, nodding at the tall, wiry man.

Doctor Walter Bownell was certainly the most unique individual in the city, known for his rambunctious, vocal nature and his eccentric foresight.

“Good day Edward, Timothy,” the doctor cheerily welcomes the duo, “Are you gentlemen here to participate in this convex-light protest?”

“Well, yes, but what is your business here?” Edward curtly asks.

“Ah, just looking to gain some new perspective and enjoy some titillating discourse!” The doctor replies, somewhat mischievously.

Edward grimaces. “New perspective?”

Unaware of or indifferent to his disdain, Walter heartily responds, “It is simply marvellous to witness the birth of such new technologies, is it not? Think of all the ways our city will benefit! The luminescence! The new applications!”

Unamused, Edward retorts, “So, what do you suggest we do to feed our families should the convex-light replace our candles?”

The doctor ponders at this, eyebrows furrowing.

After a beat, he snaps his fingers and exclaims, “Soap!”

Edward appears confused, though his son immediately understands. Timothy has heard of tallow being used to create soap, a product growing in popularity in some regions within London.

The doctor continues his trail of ideation.

“Nay, you can use your nimble fingers in other crafts, tallow-related or otherwise. Perhaps we can negotiate with the Common Council for new apprenticeships, ensuring all members of our city can maintain a living.”

His eyes glimmer with inspiration, “Let us teach all the chandlers to make convex-lights! We must make haste for the future!”

At this point, Edward has had enough of Walter’s naive romanticism. He had spent his life as a chandler and there was far too much at stake to pursue this gleaming illusion of a ‘future’ when the present was already sufficient.

Meanwhile, Timothy is divided. Surely, his father was close-minded and the doctor was idealistic, but both parties were oversimplifying a complicated matter. He couldn’t help but think that, perhaps, Walter was on the brink of a brilliant idea. Perhaps the convex-light was *not* the enemy, after all.

If only we could truly collaborate with the Common Council for the good of the kingdom...

His thoughts are interrupted by the tail end of Walter’s impassioned speech, “I also know of an old friend looking to employ coal miners in the East end of our city. He has been mighty successful since London’s wood sources have been depleted and if you ask me, that coal trade has a good bit of promise.”

Though Edward scoffs at the prospect, Timothy’s interest is piqued. He had never been fond of the repugnant scent of tallow and preferred physical labour, given his athletic form.

As such, the younger Clarke decides that the coal mine might just be the place for him to forge his own path.

Little did Timothy know, he was about to join the next phase of an energy revolution.

LONDON, 300 YEARS LATER

“What is this nonsense! I will not stand for it!”

An irate Edgar Clarke slams the newspaper down on the kitchen table, fuming at British Coal’s announcement of closing 31 of its 50 remaining mines and laying off tens of thousands of miners.¹ The impact nearly extinguishes his wife’s favourite lavender candle centrepiece.

Martha rolls her eyes, realizing that her father was on the brink of yet *another* tangent.

“Our family has been in the coal industry for centuries, but the bloody government keeps tightening the noose around our necks with pit closures,” Edgar rants.

“They’re killing our coal mines—our livelihood! And now these natural gas plants are popping up and stealing our limelight.”

Before he can continue, Martha quickly interjects.

“But is it so terrible? Do recall the Great Smog of London, father. Surely, cleaner gas energy is beneficial for everyone!”

Edgar frowns and clears his throat, starting a lecture on the lengthy history of Britain’s coal production and the economic ramifications involved in its diminishment. This, of course, included a summary of the vicious political war between Margaret Thatcher and the National Union of Mineworkers.

Martha straightens in her chair. She always had a special interest in environmental causes and was prepared with counterpoints to her father’s old-fashioned perspectives.

In the living room, the other two members of the Clarke family observe the father-daughter energy debate with passive interest.

“It’s quite fascinating, mother,” Henry muses, tapping a page of the heavy Psychology textbook he was reading for a university assignment.

“In 1988, the ‘status quo bias’ was coined. A study found that people have a disproportionate preference for the current state of being.”

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/10/14/business/britain-to-shut-most-of-its-coal-mines.html>

“Even if the potential benefits outweigh the losses?” Emily asks, taking a sip of tea.

“Even if so,” replies Henry. “I suppose it can’t be helped, it’s simply human nature.”

His mother tilts her head thoughtfully and smiles. “Ah, but there’s nothing simple about that, is there?”

Henry chuckles. He reminds himself to share this amusing exchange with Martha later, after helping her prepare for her interview with British Gas.

And so, another cycle of civilization’s growing pains begin.