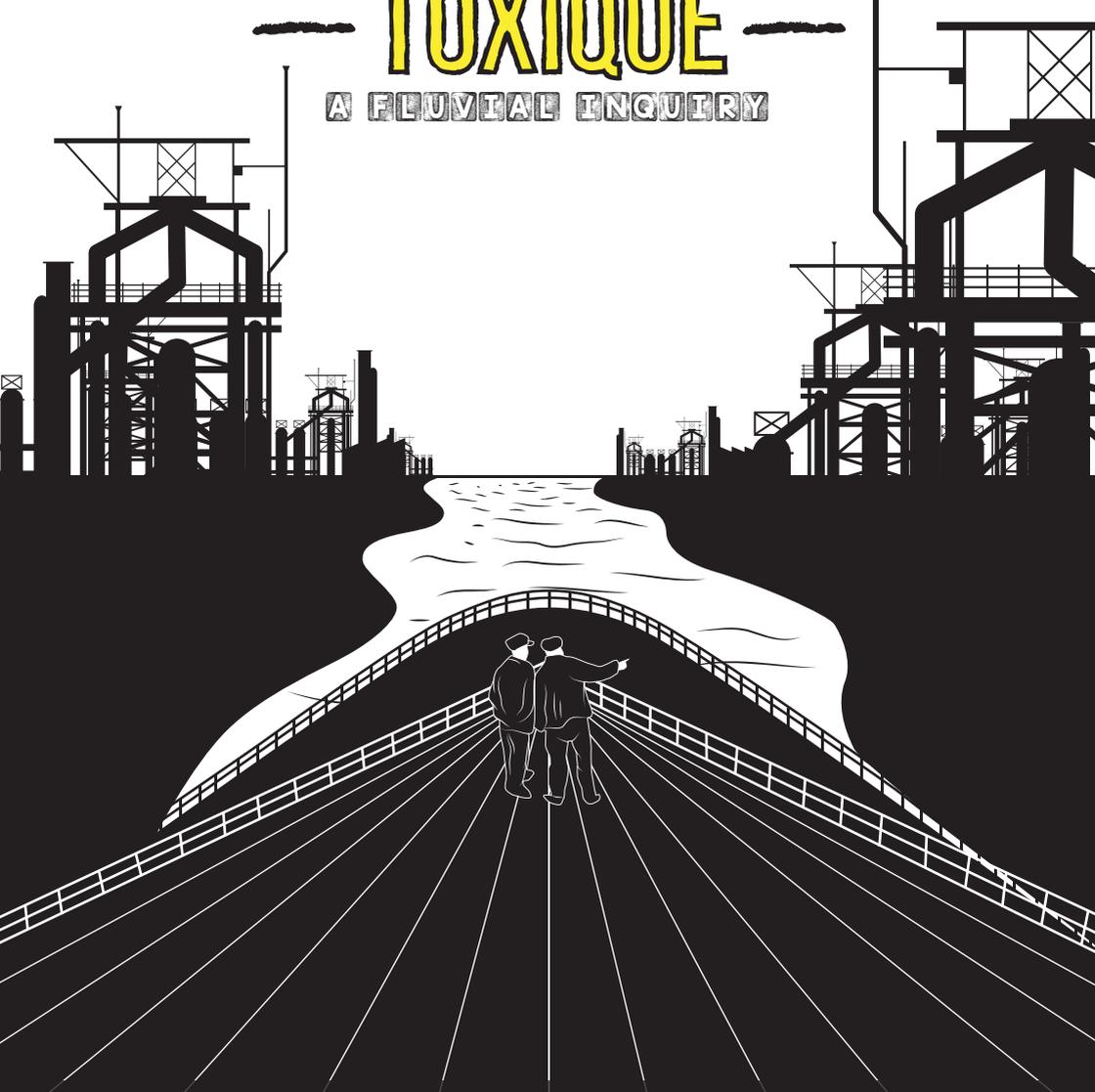


CROISIÈRE TOXIQUE

A FLUVIAL INQUIRY



Interreg



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Grande Région | Großregion

GRACE

GRACE is an innovative collective comprising cultural institutions, local governments, and academic establishments. Together, these partners promote arts education for all citizens of the Greater Region. They aim to strengthen the role of culture and sustainable tourism in economic development, social inclusion, and social innovation. The Art, Science & Innovation Unit represents the University of Liège within this consortium.

The industrial heritage shared by the regions that make up the Greater Region is visible to their inhabitants, although these traces are not always given the attention they deserve. Buildings, old tools and remodelled landscapes are now an integral part of our history and culture. Today, we must approach them with a critical eye and a desire to re-evaluate them in light of the abundance they have generated and what they have witnessed. This edition of the *Croisière Toxique* focuses on the Liège region's rich industrial past and considers its many legacies.

It is funded by the INTERREG VI A Greater Region programme, supported by Wallonia and the Wallonia-Brussels Federation.



Since its establishment in 1995, Spiral has developed unique expertise in science and technology studies (STS), the anthropology of science and technology, and the evaluation of public policy, with a particular focus on science policy and innovation. The centre hosts a large team of over 30 researchers whose expertise spans a wide range of fields, including risk and governance, public policymaking, STS (science, technology and society), ecology, methodological innovation, and participatory knowledge-making processes. With a critical yet pragmatic hint.

This edition of the *Croisière Toxique* is organised as part of the project '*The Body Societal*' funded by the European Research Council (StG GA959477).



D'une Certaine Gaieté

Founded in Liège in 1999 as a continuation of *Cirque Divers*, the *D'une Certaine Gaieté* association operates at the crossroads of popular education and culture. It is recognised as such by the Wallonia-Brussels Federation.

Its preferred territory is the Sambre and Meuse valley, an industrial area undergoing constant redevelopment. The closure of the blast furnaces and the hot phase of steelmaking has led to significant changes in the Liège basin, impacting minds, bodies and the atmosphere. *D'une Certaine Gaieté* aims to shine a spotlight on what is happening below the radar, what lives on the margins and stirs up dissent, demanding visibility and claiming new social rights.

WELCOME ON BOARD!



On a Toxic Cruise, you will journey down the Meuse and hear a tumultuous account of the river and the industrial activity that shaped it. Rather than an enchanting story of smooth progress and a prosperous golden age that is sadly now gone, you will hear a tale of conflict over settlement, industrial pollution, the rectilinear development of the landscape, wastelands, infrastructure, and the way resources have been, and still are, exploited (as resources, precisely).

Toxic Cruises emerged from the convergence of several disciplines and interests concerning environmental issues, industrial heritage, and the creation of narratives on these subjects. These interests and stories are fuelled by the current shift towards 'environmental humanities'. This project focuses on the Meuse industrial basin and brings together anthropologists, historians, political scientists, philosophers and cultural and continuing education professionals.

The major challenge is to propose new narratives that challenge a nostalgic, heroic and technophile interpretation of the history of the Liège basin. Far from linear and deterministic accounts, the Toxic Cruises explore alternative perspectives on the industrial wastelands that make up the Meuse basin.

It is important, for example, not to ignore the conflicts over industrialisation or the various forms of pollution that have affected the basin, including the infamous 'toxic fogs' of 1930. It is also important to convey the extent of the developments and wastelands created by industrial activity in the Meuse valley. In short, how can we challenge the established narrative of this history and reinterpret its legacy? How can we make the territory controversial again? How can we give the basin and its evolution a meaning that transcends the constant political discourse on crisis or reconversion?

As we follow the river, we will explore the industrial landscape and its reconfigurations, accompanied by Xavier Lambert (scientific and cultural mediator at the Metallurgy and Industry Museum), Alexis Zimmer (historian and professor at the Faculty of Architecture at ULiège, author of *Brouillards toxiques*) and Arnaud Péters (Sites^H ASBL and historian specialising in soil decontamination). This brochure would not have been possible without the valuable contributions of Anne Stelmes, Alexis Zimmer and Arnaud Péters, the compilation and translation work of François Thoreau and Xavier Lambert, the layout by the non-profit organisation D'une certaine gaieté, the printing by the GRACE collective, and the organisation of this 9th edition by the Spiral laboratory (ULiège).

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When the protective screen of air
against the oppressive heat disappears
muscle strength wanes
and man suffers in silence.
When the eyelashes can no longer
channel sweat to the sides,
the eyes fill with brine,
and vision fades into shifting shadows.
A moment of relief would be welcome —
but the merciless giant
strains to give birth to its molten core,
desperate to unleash
its infernal and diabolical entrails.
Before it stands the man,
struggling and relentless.
He wants to conquer it,
to force it to spit out
every last spark,
to draw out the final drop.
Such was the eternal struggle
of the smelter of yesteryear,
facing a titan —
untamed,
and forever unruly.

Louis Drieghe, *Mon coeur y était. Souvenirs d'un haut fourneux d'Ougrée 1946-1982*,

self-published, 1984, p. 16. [Free adaptation of the French original]

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UN DE L'ACIÉRIE

The sensation keeps me precariously balanced on the rail, right where the curve begins. I am a layman, lost in an industrious night.

The Thomas steelworks suddenly struck me as hostile. All violence. All unpredictable treachery. A vast, secrete carcass, festering with great red abscesses; from which torrents of drunken comets gush, from which glorious, blinding geysers erupt. What silent work is happening in the depths of the barely altered shadows? What titans are clashing behind them? The ground trembles. Somewhere, a shrill, festive sound. What deafening labor echoes from the darkened edges of the void? What giants are fighting in the shadows? The ground quakes. Somewhere, a screeching song garlands the din.

"Whenever you're ready..."

I had forgotten the helmeted foreman — my guide. I follow him, stumbling, trying to detect in the crunching slag the treacherous obstacle beneath my bare feet.

As we approach, a retort bows and drools. Lava ricochets and splashes, casting purple light onto pale blue silhouettes, also helmeted. At the retort's round, tortured mouth, the men insert a kind of spear — a pointed rail maneuvered with long tongs. A table lifts the strange tool. Chunks of burning crust break loose, fall, crash, or roll. "Let's go up to the platform..."

The iron staircase leads into a sealed phantasmagoria : columns, heavy pillars, thin twisted rails. Shifting lights play over the grey-painted skeleton, casting hues upon its bones.

Unexpected puffs and gasps. Large, articulated pipes echo with metallic clattering.

Heat and light surge. And noise — shifting, chaotic, relentless. All around, the retorts : suspended mid-air in different positions. Men in asbestos armor, hooded, tend to their chapped lips. Others, masked in black mesh, brace themselves against the beasts, pressing down on bars. Still others feed them — shoveling fuel from scattered heaps into their gaping maws.

A rumbling. At the far end of the vast platform, a misshapen vehicle lumbers forward. On its back, it carries an enormous crucible filled with molten iron.

From the now-hidden bowl, dirty smoke begins to rise — and then a spray of sparks bursts forth, soaring straight upward.

A man leans over a ladle of incandescent material that has just been withdrawn. "The operator," the foreman

tells me.

"And here is the most senior of the "second crucible operators" on break... His name is Auguste Dantine. Thirty-four years old. Fourteen years in the steelworks. He's been through the whole process..."

At the signal, the man pauses near us, curious.

Tall and broad, lean, square-shouldered. His shirt gapes open, but a neckerchief is tied at his throat. A thick apron protects his legs.

He lifts his mask. Backlit, his damp face is rimmed with scorched gold. His eyes are bright. Like his smile :

— Ah? Yes : I live in Ougrée... Rue Famelette, right at the top... Do you know it? A few red brick houses... His open laughter :

— Flowers? Of course I love them! There's a little flowerbed in front of my house... Why do you ask?

Why? Oh! it's too complicated... I just wanted him to love flowers. That's all. Can such things be explained? Can the whims of the imagination be explained? His clear eyes, for example, remind me of wide skies, and windblown heather fields...

— Well, I love all that too, would you believe it? Hiking in the woods, in the countryside... I was a scout for a very long time...

His gaze drifts, nostalgic, over the railing :

— Ah! Yes, open space, greenery, sunshine... beautiful landscapes... I take lots of photos... I develop them myself...

I watch him as I listen. I notice his large, muscular hands. hands that can be supple, delicate enough to tend to flowers or to dip photo paper into tiny trays... And those eyes — so often confronted by bottled volcanoes — I now see them glowing in the reflection of a small red-shaded lamp...

— Someone's calling me. Excuse me...

I watch him walk away towards his comrades. His mask is already lowered. He crosses the light. That quiet strength... He had said to me : "When I started here, I was tall and thin... I didn't think I'd last"... But I held on..."

He's almost at the back now. Soon, I'll struggle to pick him out from the others. All faceless officiants in a hallucinatory ritual...

Near the stairs, the foreman is waiting. He's going to walk me back to the edge of real night.

If only there could be a little drizzle...

THE RAILWAY



Why classify the railway under the heading of ‘big industry’? Because the railway — with its tracks, carriages and locomotives — is the very embodiment of heavy industry. Conversely, without the railway, there would be no reliable supply of raw materials and no access to distant markets. (...)

“In the summer of 1838, we went one Sunday with Uncle Jean to Bierset, a village about a league from Les Cahottes, to see a convoy pass by — though they didn’t yet call it a train — on the railway line from Brussels to Liège via Mechelen, which had only recently been constructed and opened to traffic.

This brand-new mode of transport created such a stir that hundreds of curious onlookers came from the sur-

rounding villages just to witness it. A song was even composed about the event, the chorus of which—if memory serves—went something like this :

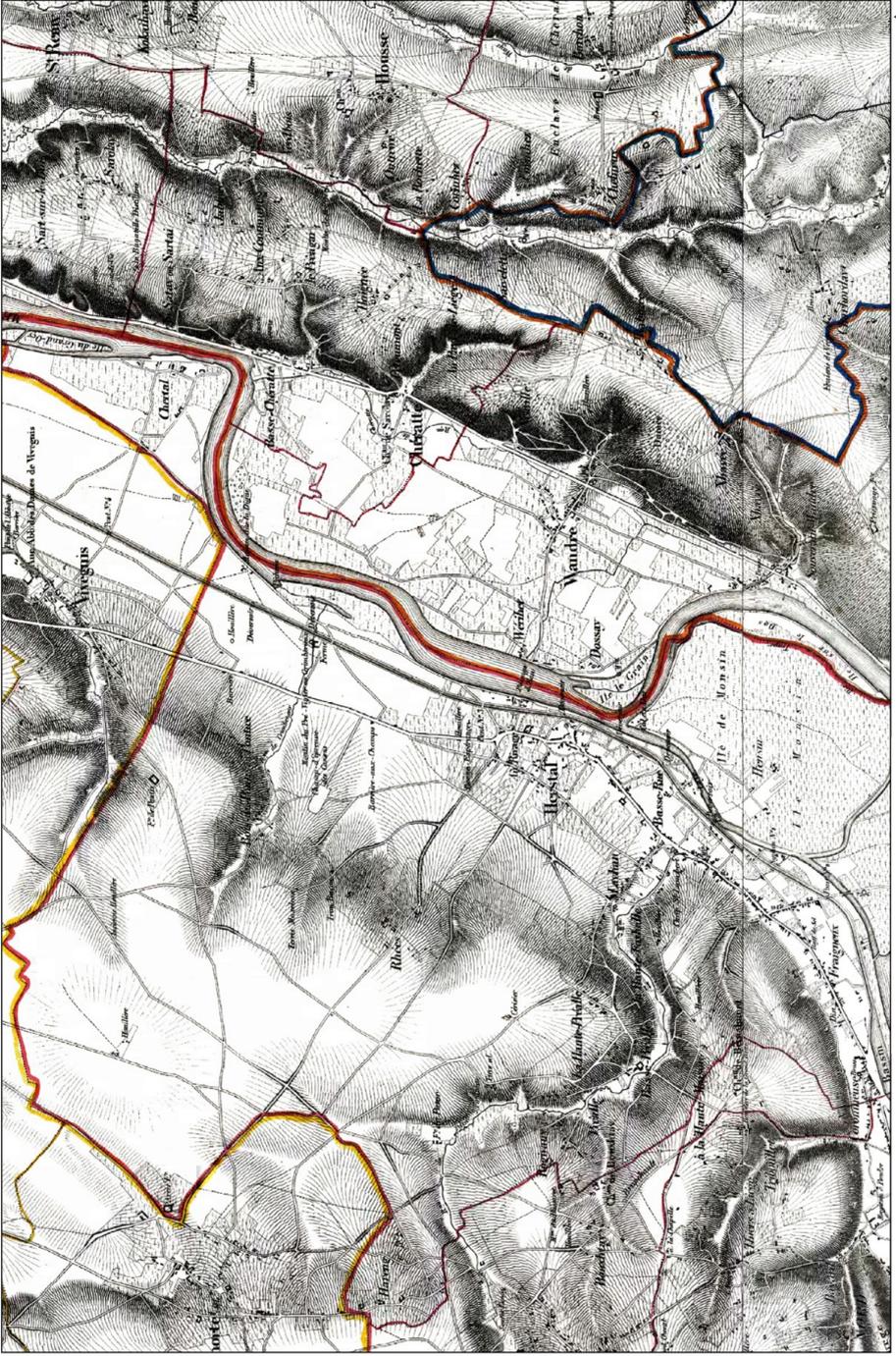
*“From behind and from ahead
The steam goes like the wind
Long live the new trade”.*

The first – or one of the first – locomotives to run between Brussels and Mechelen and from there to Ans (since the line did not yet go any further)¹, bore little resemblance to the trains of today. With its massive chimney spewing fire and smoke, it had a fearsome appearance. Seeing it approach from afar was genuinely terrifying.”



Fig. 1 : Mémoires et souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse par A. LANGE, officier de police en retraite, Liège, 1898, p. 19, cité dans Carl Havelange, Etienne Helin et René Laboutte (éditeurs), *Vivre et survivre. Témoignages sur la condition populaire au pays de Liège. XI-XXème siècles*, Editions du Musée de la Vie Wallonne, 1994, p. 142.[Free adaptation of the French original]

¹ It was not until the construction of the ‘inclined plane’ and its winches that, in 1842, the Ostend-Cologne line reached Gullemin station.



Zoom Herstal-Monsin-Chertal

Source : Carte de l'Etat-Major, Service géographique de l'Armée (1890).
 Source de l'Etat-Major, Service géographique de l'Armée (1890).
 Carte en papier : Centre d'histoire des Sciences et des Techniques - Université de Liège



Zoom Liège-Angleur-Jupille

1:20 000



Produit par le Centre d'Organisation et de Recherche Géographique (COROG) de l'Université de Liège.
 Révisé et mis à jour en 2011.
 Carte en papier : Centre Français des Sciences et des Techniques - Université de Liège

SUR LES LUTTES

OUVRIÈRES ET LUDDITES (CONTRE LES MACHINES)

A

The nail makers' strike of December 1719 is not only one of the oldest known in the region — it also exhibits features that would characterize workers' struggles well into the late 19th century, and in some cases even beyond. Driven by fears of wage cuts and unemployment, the strike was accompanied by loud demonstrations and public processions. The anger of the strikers was directed not only at the employers who refused their demands, but also at fellow workers who continued to work, at the employers who kept them employed, and even at the tools of the trade. The employers, in turn, invoked their "freedom to produce" and initially requested protection from the Prince, then asked for his arbitration — aware that, in the long run, military intervention would prove ineffective.

"Deny Manay, nail merchant in this city, will represent [...] that as certain nail merchants of your city of Liège have defaulted or refused to provide iron and work to their nail workers, and as these workers — or many among them — noted that the workers employed by other masters, including the petitioner, had iron and employment and had not ceased to work, they presumed — whether out of whim or incitement, and in an effort to prevent others from working as they did — to go out beating drums, bearing arms and banners, into all the surrounding villages where nail workers lived, forbidding anyone to work and even threatening to kill or mistreat those who did. They entered the forges by force and took or destroyed the bellows. And this they indeed did to many workers, such that many of the petitioner's own workers, being thus threatened, no longer dared to work, out of fear."



B

[...]The worker harbors a deep-seated resentment toward machines. Many of those who owe their livelihoods to them would gladly smash them — if they were not restrained by the very civilization from which they benefit so little. It is a strange thing : they complain — or let others complain on their behalf — that they are the outcasts of labor. Yet at the same time, they claim a kind of monopoly over it. What truly angers them, however, is the transition — that brutal, unjust, and merciless rupture that falls upon the workshop like a mass layoff order. It is the machine, suddenly appearing and stripping away the work and wages of a hundred laborers at once, in a society bristling with prohibitions, that has no real plan for reabsorbing the newly unemployed — and that understands only one side of the idea of Providence. But it will soon be necessary to confront this reality.

Machines are transforming every industry and swelling the ranks of available workers, whose idle time grows dangerously long. Hunger, with its dark instincts, sours each passing moment. Once born into the world, great inventions do not retreat. They advance with implacable force, sweeping away all the older methods and routines they were invented to replace. Just as printing swept away the institutions of the feudal world, so too — God willing — will steam sweep away all the prohibitions, restrictions, privileges, and monopolies that enrich so few and impoverish so many. And the work of demolition will take less time for steam than for print, because print will now come to steam's aid. And there is nothing that can long withstand the union of these two greatest forces known to the material and moral worlds.

A. Carl Havelange, Etienne Helin et René Leboutte (éditeurs), *Vivre et survivre. Témoignages sur la condition populaire au pays de Liège. XII-XXème siècles*, Editions du Musée de la Vie Wallonne, 1994, p. 282. [Free adaptation of the French original]

B. D. Nisard, *Souvenirs de voyage*, T. II, Paris, 1839, cité dans Carl Havelange, Etienne Helin et René Leboutte (éditeurs), *Vivre et survivre. Témoignages sur la condition populaire au pays de Liège. XII-XXème siècles*, Editions du Musée de la Vie Wallonne, 1994, pp. 283-284. [Free adaptation of the French original]

HUGO



Near the road streams of fire glared like the eyes of tigers. By the roadside was a frightful dark chimney stalk, surmounted by a huge flame, which cast a sombre hue upon the adjoining rocks, forests, and ravines. Nearer the entry of the valley, hidden in the shade, was a mouth of live coal, which suddenly opened and shut, and, in the midst of frightful noises, spouted forth a tongue of fire. It was the lighting of the furnaces.

After passing the place called Little Flemalle, the sight was inexpressible — was truly magnificent. All the valley seemed to be in a state of conflagration — smoke issuing from this place, and flames arising from that; in fact, we could imagine that a hostile army had ransacked the country, and that twenty districts presented, in that night of darkness, all the aspects and phases of a conflagration — some catching fire, some enveloped in smoke, and others surrounded with flames.

This aspect of war is caused by peace — this frightful symbol of devastation is the effect of industry. The furnaces of the iron works of Mr. Cockerill, where cannon is cast of the largest calibre, and steam engines of the highest power are made, alone meet the eye.

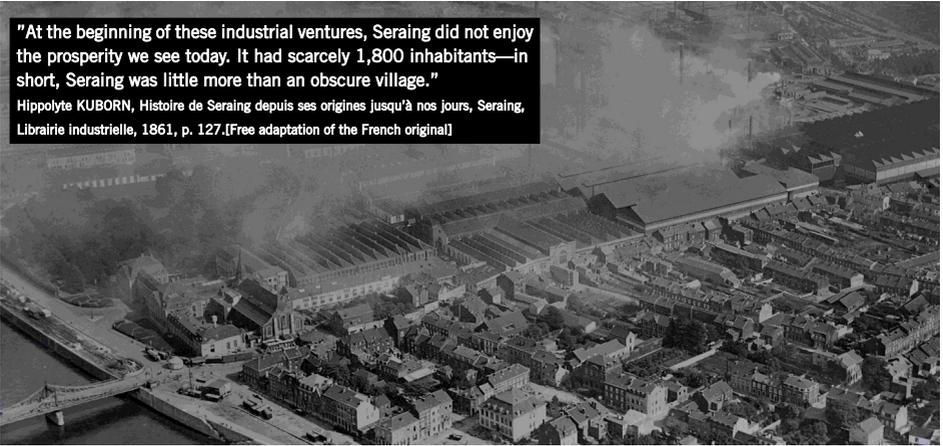
A wild and violent noise comes from this chaos of industry, I had the curiosity to approach one of these frightful places, and I could not help admiring the assiduity of the workmen. It was a prodigious spectacle, to which the solemnity of the hour lent a supernatural aspect. Wheels, saws, boilers, cylinders, scales — all those monstrous implements that are called machines, and to which steam gives a frightful and noisy life — rattle, grind, shriek, hiss; and at times, when the blackened workmen thrust the hot iron into the water, a moaning sound is heard like that of hydras and dragons tormented in hell by demons.

Victor Hugo, *The Rhine : Letters to a Friend*, Chapter 7.
[Translated by D.M. Aird]

CONTRASTS

"At the beginning of these industrial ventures, Seraing did not enjoy the prosperity we see today. It had scarcely 1,800 inhabitants—in short, Seraing was little more than an obscure village."

Hippolyte KUBORN, *Histoire de Seraing depuis ses origines jusqu'à nos jours*, Seraing, Librairie industrielle, 1861, p. 127. [Free adaptation of the French original]



"I drank to the principle of modern civilisation. For coal is fire, and fire is soul. Industry is the soul of modern times. Coal applied to industry is one of the fruits of the tree of science — just like those other fruits that, once ripened, man can no longer live without : bread, printing, the compass, the press... Bittersweet fruits, from which both great good and great harm have come — but perhaps more good than harm."

D. Nisard, *Mélanges*, Paris, Delloye et Lecourt, 1838 (*Souvenirs de voyage*, T. I), p. 399-400.



"Around Liège, everything is black and dusty : nature has met a relentless adversary here — industry. This is Lemnos and its Cyclopes. The earth, the grass, the animals themselves are darkened by factory dust. It seeps into clothing, into the body, blinding us even as we breathe it in."

ANONYMOUS, *Guide to the Northern Line*, London, Cologne, Aachen, Paris, Paulin et le Chevalier, 1855, p. 80. [Free adaptation of the French original]

ZINC MANUFACTURING

SAINT-LÉONARD AND NEIGHBOURHOOD DISPUTES

"La Vieille Montagne — a company driven above all by the pursuit of profit, with no effort to reconcile its private interests with the public good or with the interests of humanity. We need not dwell here on the devastating effects of this factory on the health of the northern district; sadly, they are all too well known. The deep loathing expressed by the residents speaks louder than any reflection on our part — it is a mea-

sure of the suffering inflicted by this dreadful neighbour. We therefore appeal to your wisdom to take swift and decisive action to limit the harmful effects of zinc production. In particular, we ask that the company not be allowed to expand its operations — already far too large — and that it be required, without delay, to adopt all available methods to mitigate the damage it causes."

Excerpt from the 'Petition of the inhabitants of the northern district of 12 October 1853', reproduced in Bulletin administratif de la Ville de Liège, 1853 (session of 25 October 1853), Liège 1854, p. 528. [Free adaptation of the French original]



"The Meuse Valley in the province of Liège stretches along one of its banks, uninterrupted, dotted with industrial towns that change names but not streets. Beneath the grey sky, there is nothing but a tangle of buildings, iron walkways, steelworks towers, blazing blast furnaces, and the constant flicker of fire and steel. Concrete flows like a dark, uniform stream. On the other side of the sluggish river — canal-like in its stillness — at the foot of wooded slopes, thick clouds of smoke crawl across the flatlands, devouring all vegetation in their path. No livestock remains on this once fertile land. The fumes have killed off the meadows."

Le Matin, 8 December 1930. [Free adaptation of the French original]

"When a zinc factory was first established, some forty years ago, in the heart of Liège's Saint-Léonard district, the volume of zinc fumes escaping from the furnaces was so immense that it blanketed the factory yards and neighbouring properties. A thick, whitish

haze clung persistently to the ground. Vegetation, coated with powdery residues, withered and died. Even dogs couldn't remain inside the factory for long. The only viable solution was to move away."

BOENS, H., Hygienic study of the influence that industrial establishments have on plants and animals living in their vicinity, or examination of the damage generally attributed to these establishments, Charleroi, 1855, p. 12. [Free adaptation of the French original]



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