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A History of Reed & Barton

This month the members of the Business Historical Society are receiving *The Whitesmiths of Taunton, a History of Reed & Barton, 1824-1943*, by George S. Gibb. This is the eighth volume in the Harvard Studies in Business History published at the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration under the direction of Professor N. S. B. Gras. It is the first volume in the series to be devoted wholly to the history of a manufacturing concern.

The subject of the study is a company known today for its manufacture of silverware. Reed & Barton had its beginnings in a partnership established in 1824 in Taunton, Massachusetts, by two young men of the village who were in the jewelry trade, Isaac Babbitt and William Crossman. Through experiments in his jewelry shop, Babbitt had discovered how to make the Britannia metal used in the ware by that name which the British were selling in the United States. In the workshop of Babbitt and Crossman was produced Britannia ware made according to their own formula. The author traces the history of the concern—in the 1840's it became Reed & Barton—in five parts: (1) The early struggle for existence, 1824-1836; (2) Growth and industrial leadership of the firm under Henry G. Reed, 1837-1860; (3) George Brabrook and the shift to a marketing emphasis, 1860-1900; (4) Financial consolidation under William B. H. Dowse, 1901-1923; and (5) The recent period, 1923-1943.

The book is about one company, but in fact it tells a story that is representative of a segment of our industrial history. The key men were those who owned and administered the firm, but the author sees the business as a group of men, indeed one might say a community, working coöperatively in producing goods to sell, first in a local, then in a regional, a national, and an international market.

In following the history of Reed & Barton the author gives much information on the history of design and of techniques in the use of metals, on external and internal organization, on personnel management, on production control, on pricing, on marketing, and on finance. Success was often tenuous; strain and stress there were aplenty. At rare times employees were difficult; sometimes design, or production, or inventory, or the market gave serious trouble; and there was always the specter of costs to be met, occasionally threatening but always a driving reality. Sometimes there were even clashes among the top men. On the whole, however, the story is one of substantial success. There was the financial success which enabled the company to give its stockholders, employees, and administrators satisfying though moderate rewards, but there was also the producing and selling of a reliable and honest product at prices set in a highly competitive market. It is, on the whole, the success of industrial capitalism at its best in America.

The Whitesmiths of Taunton is readable in form as well as rewarding in content. The organization of the book is clear and logical. The characters in the story are drawn as real individuals. The production process, marketing, and finance are handled with the sureness of one who is at home in design, industrial technique, and business in general. Moreover, the author has a gift for turning a subtle phrase that is both entertaining and full of meaning.

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As the members of the Society get one after another of these company histories in the Harvard Studies in Business History, they may wonder about the process of their composition and the purpose for which they are published. These points may well be passed in review at this time.

A primary consideration in preparing these books is to work with the firm itself. The Reed & Barton executives provided free access to the records of the firm and gave such other help as could be of use. During the critical composition of the book the com-



A WHITESMITH AT WORK

pany gave essential assistance when questions of fact arose which they, alone, could help to clear up. They not only supplied information freely and fully, but they left to the author and editor full freedom in the use of that information and in the judgments and generalizations to be drawn therefrom. It was therefore possible to write such a book as could not have been written from outside sources.

The importance of the individual studies resulting from such coöperation may not be clearly evident; they are, however, a part of a process of creating a new literature of business history. They are based on a definite social philosophy. Much of the old work that has been done in and around the history of business has been based on a philosophy of determinism, be it the materialistic determinism of Marx or the natural law philosophies of the eighteenth century. Much has also been written under the influence of the Institutional School, which has emphasized political institutions and their policy as the instruments for attaining a greater social well-being. The *Studies in Business History* accept the importance of material and social forces and of social and political institutions and policies, but conceive of man as a thinking, choosing, willing, and acting factor within his material and social environment. These efforts may be called empirical or pragmatic; may they not also be considered simply as attempts at that full description which is the primary basis for understanding?

One hastens to add that the result often falls short of that full description which is the aim. Written records have disappeared and men have passed away. Those records which survive generally fail to reveal certain intangibles which are of vital importance. This is a handicap under which students in all fields of history must labor—though literary men and politicians are probably more revealing in the records they leave than are men in business, executive or laborer. Within the period spanned by men still living, memory can be of some help. In the writing of the Reed & Barton history, for instance, the author talked with many individuals who had worked in the factory or who had lived in the Taunton community and had known the company from the community point of view.

What the influence of such a literature of business history may be, no one can foresee. Through the assistance of the companies and of the Business Historical Society, the *Studies* are reaching many readers of varied interests. Those readers may

be interested in the history of the firm or they may see that history as a part of the larger development of business. They may find in the emphasis on administration and operation something which has general meaning for the social sciences. Without question, administration will be a most vital point in our



REED & BARTON MODERN STERLING TEA SERVICE
RENAISSANCE PATTERN

NOTE: This illustration and the one on page 99 are reproduced from the Reed & Barton history, with the permission of the Harvard University Press.

economic and political life in the years that lie before us and will require study as never before. It is not inconceivable that this series may do more to put the social sciences on an even keel than expenditures on a far larger scale, made by business and educational institutions, designed to accomplish that end.