

Historical Variations

Two books on the history of Birmingham are catalogued in our library whose only resemblance is that both have as subject that famous industrial region in the heart of England. One called the "History of Birmingham to the end of the year 1780" by a W. Hutton was presented by H. B. Vanderblue, Vice-President of the Tri-Continental Corporation of New York. The second book, published in 1929, by G. C. Allen, Lecturer in Industrial Organization of the University of Birmingham is "The Industrial Development of Birmingham and the Black Country, 1860-1927."

The books are representative of their period. In the eighteenth century an author surveyed all aspects of a city's life and we find in Hutton's book chapters equally divided on such diverse subjects as "Religion and Politics," streets, industries, "Lords of the Manor," the theater, schools, and the important "edifices" of the town. By the twentieth century historians had cut up man's activity into the minutest segments. Not only did a student write economic history but he limited himself to an industry or more probably to a portion of an industry. But the German "Gestalt" conception of the importance of the whole is penetrating the social sciences — evidenced, for example, in the cross-section description of a typical middlewestern town in the sociological study "Middle-town" by Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd. In economic history it has perhaps best appeared in this able study of Birmingham by Professor Allen.

The historian writing in 1780 makes evident in the dedication that he is a kind of home-spun philosopher. He is critical of the scholarship of his period whose usual method is "to polish up a sounding title-page, dignified with scraps of Latin, and then, to hammer up a work to fit it, as nearly as genius, or want of genius, will allow." The value of a book, he declares, depends neither upon its sponsors nor its flattering dedication but upon the subject matter itself. And one suspects that the biography of the author would have been more enlightening than his history of Birmingham when he asks, "Will it augment the value of this history, or cover its blunders, to say, That I have never seen Oxford? That the thick fogs of penury prevented the sun of science from beaming upon the mind? That necessity obliged me to lay down the battledore, be-

fore I was master of the letters? And, that instead of handling systems of knowledge, my hands, at the early period of seven, became callous with labour?"

At the time of Hutton's writing Birmingham had become the center of a powerful iron industry as well as of a group of allied metal industries making buttons, buckles, guns, brass products, etc. The author's conclusions are summarized in the statement that Birmingham began with the productions of the anvil, and probably will end with them. At another time the writer comments, "Ironstone and coal are the materials for this production both of which are found in the neighbourhood in great plenty. I asked a gentleman of knowledge, if there was a probability of the delphs failing? He answered, 'Not in five thousand years.'"

Professor Allen's book, published last year, is important not as evidence of the falsity of the unknown gentleman's statistics but because, as J. F. Rees states in the introduction, the West Midlands have anticipated the course which British manufactures now seem to be pursuing. And this adaptation is "increasing concentration on the production of finished goods of high quality."

The iron industry in Birmingham and the Black Country as described in the old volume survived and flourished for almost a hundred years after Hutton had written. From 1875 to 1886 the district had sunk to a position of almost no importance. This was due to the lack of raw materials which had been menacing the district for years and for two other reasons: first, the introduction of Bessemer and open-hearth steel which transformed the mechanism of the industry and moved it to coastal districts, and second, foreign competition. This coincided with the decline of elaborate metal decoration characteristic of the Victorian era.

What happened? Birmingham had a reserve of skilled labor and organizing ability. The area expanded and thrived with a new set of industries demanding a high degree of technical skill. Some of these trades found the old iron set-up peculiarly convenient, i. e., cycles, motor cars, electrical apparatus, weighing and measuring apparatus, and machine tools. Other industries were of an entirely different character such as artificial silk, rubber manufactures, and food and drink products. The movement has been from the manufacture of semi-products and of rather simple articles to the most highly finished and composite products. Along with this has gone a tendency toward large scale production, highly centralized control and thorough rationalization of the whole system.

Professor Allen's conclusions are that Birmingham is one of the most sensitive industrial centers in all England and that "it seems reasonable to hope that the success which has attended the transference of industrial interests in this one district may also be attained by the country as a whole." The decaying of old staple industries does not mean a decline of the country if the manufacturers are quick to seize new sources of demand. The success of Birmingham, he ends, "points to the conclusion that, for the entire country, policy should be directed towards speeding up the inevitable transformation and towards easing the process of transition, rather than towards supporting by artificial means the decaying members of the industrial structure."

"Mr. Owen, the Philanthropist"

WHO today can be compared with Robert Owen, the "great manufacturer with a bent for benevolence" who rebelled against the crudities of a vigorously expanding industrial organization? The difference between Owen and our great modern benefactors is perhaps that they are always manufacturers with a bent more or less accentuated for benevolence, while Owen's bent became a fanatical passion to redeem a hostilely suspicious world which ultimately repudiated him.

The culmination of Owen's economic and political philosophy is found in his communistic experiment in Indiana called "New Harmony" in 1825. The plan was for a pure community based on full equality of the settlers who arrived from everywhere. G. D. H. Cole's comment on the community in his biography of Owen is, "The failure was from the first inevitable; for a small Community of idealists, each with his own set of theories and each compelled to put theory into instant practice over the whole field of life and in circumstances of exceptional difficulty, offers the very maximum of opportunity for quarrels and divisions. The surprising fact is not that New Harmony collapsed but that it lasted so long, and that visitors and residents bear testimony to the fine spirit which prevailed there even amid the dissensions and confusions which brought it to an end."

An early pamphlet of the Business Historical Society by Robert Owen is "Observations on the effect of the manufacturing system;