

The Rise and Fall of the Scottish Cotton Industry, 1778-1914, 'The Secret Spring'

By Anthony Cook, Pp.237

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During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries a large number of cotton manufacturing businesses were established in Scotland. They brought with them new technology, new skills and work regimes, as well as new opportunities for business investment. Several writers have written on this important subject such as Devine, Knox, and Whatley, but in *The Rise and Fall of the Scottish Cotton Industry, 1778-1914*, Anthony Cooke presents 'a close study of the Scottish cotton industry in its heartland of Glasgow and Paisley, where it was the dominant player until the rise of heavy industries...from the 1830s' (p.2). According to Cooke, by helping to stimulate expansion and invention within other industries such as steam, iron, construction, transport, as well as trade, this provided the 'secret spring' for early industrialisation within Scotland. Researching the cotton industry is hampered by the fact that a great number of the business records are either missing or incomplete. This provides a formidable challenge to the historian who wishes to explain the developments that occurred. By meticulously probing a wide range of untouched archive material and merging this with his earlier research findings, Cooke has successfully risen to this challenge producing a book of quality that acts as a welcome addition to the historical analyses of this important area of Scottish manufacturing.

The volume is divided into six chapters. The first three provide a chronological examination of the rise and fall of the industry whilst the remaining chapters are thematic in style probing the issues of the role of technology, the workers, and the employers. Beginning with a 'pre-history' of the industry Cooke engages with the theory of proto-industrialisation before going on to show how the Scottish cotton industry benefited from earlier technological and organisational developments made in the linen industries and from colonial capital ventures. He then goes on to examine the expansion that took place within the industry from 1778 to 1830 setting this against the backdrop of early developments, changes in markets, employment, and international relations. Persuasive evidence is provided to show that success in the cotton industry helped generate the main thrust of economic growth during the early industrialisation of Scotland. From 1830 up to 1914 many of the successes were followed by failure. Reasons for this are explored including the tendency of the Scottish manufacturers to concentrate production on a small range of goods whilst coping with a decline in foreign markets and increased competition from England and abroad. In addressing the technology that came to be used it is argued that rather than being inventors the Scots tended to improve on that which already existed elsewhere in the cotton industry. However, this was not the case in the bleaching and finishing trades where inventions were made, a factor attributed to the Scots more 'practical, scientific and generally more accessible system of education' (p.125). Regardless of invention, the cotton industry, like most others, depended to a large extent on the effort of its workforce. Cooke devotes chapter five to an examination of the 'workers' including Issues of solidarity and division as well as productivity and worker control. Drawing on new evidence derived from wills, probate inventories and other source material the final chapter addresses the cotton masters.

This deals with a neglected area of research and therefore provides new information on the main players who were involved in funding and operating within the industry as well as comparing their role with that of their counterparts in England.

Although labour and industrial relations issues are discussed it is perhaps a pity that so little is said about the health hazards that cotton workers experienced. Knox touched on these in his 1995 publication *Hanging By a Thread*.¹ However, since then historians of occupational health history have gone on to research and analyse such issues. For example, Mclvor has presented evidence of the debilitating effects caused by long hours of work, the injury and death caused by occupational accidents, and of the dangers of occupational disease.² In *North and South* Gaskell utilised the character of Bessy Higgins to comment on the lung damage caused by the inhalation of cotton dust. This damage would be later defined as byssinosis the subject matter of an article written in 2003 by Bowden and Tweedale.³ Perhaps some mention of this type of research would have helped to provide a more realistic assessment of the conditions endured by the cotton operatives and how their employers valued them. Nonetheless, this book is the result of painstaking research and undoubtedly helps to deliver new and interesting information on the historiography of the Scottish cotton industry.

¹ W.W. Knox, *Hanging by a Thread: The Scottish Cotton Industry.c.1850-1914*, Carnegie Publishing (Preston)

² A.J. Mclvor, 'State Intervention and Work Intensification: the Politics of Occupational Health and Safety in the British Cotton Industry, c.1880-1914, in A Knotter, B.Altena and D. Damsma (eds) *Labour, Social Policy and the Welfare State* (Amsterdam 1997) also, A. J. Mclvor, *A History of Work in Britain 1880-1950*, Palgrave, (Hampshire 2001), especially Chapter 5

³ S. Bowden and G. Tweedale, 'Mondays without Dread: The Trade Union Response to Byssinosis in the Lancashire Cotton Industry in the Twentieth Century', pp.79-95 in *Social History of Medicine*, Volume 16, No. 1, April 20, 2003