

Mary B. Rose, *The Gregs of Quarry Bank Mill. The rise and decline of a family firm, 1750–1914*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1986, pp XV, 169, clothbound, £ 22.50.

It is surprising that so few histories of English cotton firms have been written. The pioneer study of Samuel Oldknow and the Arkwrights (by Unwin and his students) appeared in 1924 to be followed after a long interval by accounts of the Strutts and the Arkwrights (by Fitton and Wadsworth), the Ashworth enterprise (by Boyson) and M'Connel and Kennedy (by C. H. Lee). Dr Rose's account of the rise and fall of the Gregs of Quarry Bank Mill is a very welcome addition to this brief list of business histories of English cotton firms. Quarry Bank Mill was established by Samuel Greg in 1783 in the Cheshire village of Styal which lies in the picturesque wooded valley of the River Bollin. It became the centre of a large and prosperous cotton enterprise. In 1939 a descendant of the founder presented the factory and the village to the National Trust and in 1975 an independent organisation was created to restore the property. Quarry Bank has become an important centre for the study of the cotton industry and its many visitors can appreciate the nature of a rural textile factory in the age of the industrial revolution.

The history of Quarry Bank is of particular interest since the Greg firm was far from being a typical cotton enterprise. During the industrial revolution many quite small spinning mills and weaving sheds were established by men who had little capital. Robert Owen's first partnership was established with only £ 100 of borrowed money while the M'Connel, Kennedy, Sandford enterprise started with an initial capital of about £ 600. Samuel Greg, on the other hand, began his career as a millowner with a fortune derived from his uncles and from his wife's dowry. Again Samuel Greg differed from many of his rivals inasmuch as he ran a textile merchant house in Manchester at the same time as he expanded his manufacturing interests. The Manchester firm, though an independent concern, provided an assured outlet for the produce of Greg's factories.

In 1816 Quarry Bank was still a medium sized spinning mill which employed about 250 operatives. It could not be compared with firms like those run by Robert Owen, the Murrays, the Strutts, and M'Connel and Kennedy which each had a labour force of well over one thousand. But between 1817 and 1831 Samuel Greg greatly expanded his enterprise. The number of spindles at Quarry Bank increased from 4.512 to 10.846. More important was Greg's acquisition of four factories at Caton, Lancaster, Bury and Bollington. In 1844 Faucher stated that the Gregs »possess five factories, 4.000 power looms and employ more than 2.000 people«.

Samuel Greg's four younger sons became managing partners in the firm, each running one of the factories. When their father died in 1834, the partnership was continued, only to be dissolved seven years later. Robert Hyde Greg was the only son of the founder to inherit his father's abilities. He introduced power looms at Quarry Bank with the result that this factory enjoyed a new period of prosperity. But the other sons of the founder – and the grandsons – who joined the firm were no more than competent businessmen who tended to rely upon their factory managers. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century ring spindles were introduced to Quarry Bank between 1888 and 1892 only to be abandoned in 1894. Quarry Bank now concentrated upon weaving, Northrop automatic looms being introduced early in the twentieth century. On all these matters Dr Rose is a sure guide and she also discusses the role of the Gregs as enlightened employers, as landowners and as politicians.

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