

English Nonconformist entrepreneurs and their Mansions (1780-1900) - A PARADOX!

A recurring theme in the perpetual debate concerning the rise of entrepreneurial bourgeois elites is invariably the extent to which Nonconformist ethics impacted on burgeoning industrial society, not least the shaping of growth and development within towns and cities. Within the context of Max Weber's classic and continuously controversial work 'The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism', it is frequently asserted that essential characteristics of the middle classes and the emergence of modern capitalism, can only be fully understood within a religious context and that, predominantly Nonconformist - or, in the parlance of Weber, 'ascetic protestantism'. Evidence, using a collective biographical approach, is supportive of the view that religious ethics controlled, not only *all* aspects of the lives of significant numbers of 19th century English Nonconformist industrialists - work, leisure, domesticity, but also, by persuasive or coercive means, work and residential patterns of thousands upon thousands of the economically dependent working classes. It is not without consequence, however, to note paradoxical tensions between ascetic tendencies and opulence in life style, in *places of residence*, 'essential' accoutrements of successful business.

In arguing his case of religious foundations for worldly asceticism, Weber identifies three enduring tenets - diligence in worldly calling/vocation; systematic use of time; strict asceticism in respect of personal expenditure and worldly amusements - wasting time is sinful; '*resting* upon one's possessions . . the *enjoyment* of wealth' is morally reprehensible; 'possession of goods is suspect *only because* it carries with it the danger of this resting; . . *only activity*, not idleness and enjoyment, serves to increase [God's] glory' (Weber 2000: 104-5). While asceticism despised 'parvenu-like ostentation of boasters . . it [shone] a full beam of ethical approval upon the **dispassionate**, "self-made man" of the **middle class**' (Weber 2000: 109). Striving for riches 'within the dutiful performance of one's vocational calling . . is not only morally permitted but expected' (Weber 2000: 109). A remark from John Rylands (1801-1888), Nonconformist¹ entrepreneur extraordinaire (OHT), in silencing a loquacious commercial traveller, provides a succinct example: "My good man, if you can afford to

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waste *your* words I can't afford to waste *my* time; it is very precious – worth, in fact, nearly a guinea a minute” (Anon: 1888a). Weber postulates:

The idea of a person's *duty* to maintain possessions entrusted to him, to which he subordinates himself as a dutiful steward or even as a “machine for producing wealth,” lies upon his life with chilling seriousness . . . as one's possessions become more valuable, the more burdensome becomes the feeling of responsibility to maintain them intact for God's glory and to increase their value through restless work (2000: 115).

While Weber rejected a life history approach:

the stimulating task of illuminating the ascetic Protestant style of life . . . namely through biographies, unfortunately must be abandoned (Weber 2000: 225).

it does seem as if he is directly inviting biographical analysis of cotton manufacturer John Rylands, when he suggests that in the 19th century, classical representatives of the “capitalist spirit” 'were the Manchester or Rhineland-Westphalia upstart newcomers to wealth' (2000: 27).

Residences and lifestyles

Farnie, who has written extensively on Rylands, asserts that 'no other businessman approaches so closely to the ideal type of self-made man' (1973: 93). Certainly within his life it is possible to detect paradoxical tensions between austerity and great wealth. Historian, Clyde Binfield, describes him as, 'the least obtrusive but most opulent of merchant princes' (1977: 168). He began working life at the age of 16 as a handloom linen manufacturer, retail draper and commercial traveller. By 1854 he was the first native Lancastrian to become a self-made textile millionaire (Farnie 1985: 999). Until the last year of his life he retained complete control of all business activities - 'He was his own partner. He took the chair, and carried all the resolutions without putting them' (Parker 1893: 111). 'In his unrelenting activity', claims Farnie, 'he approaches the ideal type of Weberian entrepreneur inspired by other-worldly ideals' (1985: 1002).

At the age of 20, Rylands left the polluted atmosphere of St Helens² for Wigan, later Manchester, where he reigned supreme as 'Cotton King'. (OHTmaps) He lodged at 7 Green Street, Manchester, close to his warehouse in Lever Street. In 1834 he acquired a country residence at Smedley Lane in the

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northern suburb of Cheetham Hill also a town house at 3 Newton Street. In 1844 he moved to Gorton Villa, appurtenant to his mills in SE Manchester. Built in 1829 it is described as a 'capital mansion house' (Farnie 1993: 18). However, a prolonged strike in 1849, says Farnie, contributed to his moving a few miles to 24 Ardwick Green. He then migrated westwards 'in search of fresh air and open space' at Greenheys (Farnie 1993: 19).

In 1855 Rylands purchased Longford Hall (OHT), with 43 acres, at Stretford SW of Manchester, where Manchester merchants had established their 'country residences'. A newly built Longford Hall, described by Pevsner 'as the only surviving example of the Italianate style of architecture in the Manchester district' (Farnie 1992: 22), was completed in 1857. By 1873 the estate was 207.8 acres. Rylands threw himself into planning and developing his new estate:

guiding principles were . . . system, order and economy . . . he paid special attention to irrigation and to horticulture. All the water draining off the roof was collected in a deep well and was then pumped up to a high-level tank. The meadows fronting the hall were irrigated by subterranean piping. Extensive gardens and conservatories were laid out on the pattern of Chatsworth . . . 19 gardeners [were] employed [with] special houses (OHT) . . . to the rear of the hall. The kitchen garden was doubled . . . from 2 acres in 1862 to 4 in 1867. 14 conservatories with $\frac{3}{4}$ of an acre under glass in 1862 were doubled . . . to 31 by 1875, with 2 miles of steam-pipes, served by 6 boilers, a steam engine and a gas-works. Exotic fruit . . . were cultivated on a large scale, regularly carrying off prizes . . . Above all, he grew vegetables for sale, to the astonishment of the more traditionally minded! (Farnie 1993: 19-20).

Joseph Parker, minister and intimate of Rylands³, observed amusing attention to detail in household matters:

In walking round his Longford garden we came upon a book-keeper, from whom Mr Rylands ascertained precisely how much garden stuff had been credited that morning to Mrs Rylands. . . Every cauliflower was charged. Every melon was set down in silver. "This is the only way," said the millionaire, "by which you can really tell whether a garden pays or not" (1893: 113).

Rylands, was 'a Puritan with a difference', suggests Farnie. 'He loved a game of chess, billiards, bowls or croquet. He adorned his home with books, water-colours, engravings and statues sculpted in bronze or marble' (Farnie 1993: 53). But, how different was he? Similar eclectic interests, opulence in life style, are generally discernible within the lives of Nonconformist businessmen. Jeremiah James Colman (1830-1898) of Norwich (OHT), whose name is synonymous with the manufacture of

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mustard, had a wide range of pastimes, including horticulture, agriculture, astronomy, meteorology and aquaria. He liked riding, shooting and sailing, owning a steam yacht “Wild Wave”. He was keen on cricket, believing it to be a 'harmless and healthful game' (Colman 1905: 438). For the ascetic Protestant, asserts Weber, sports like everything else in life 'must serve a rational end; they must promote the relaxation indispensable for further physical achievement' (2000: 112). Essentially, Colman was a private individual. His daughter speaks of an anxious and sensitive nature, which sought peace and solitude away from the vicissitudes of work and public life (Colman 1905: 47).

He sought no society outside his home (OHTi), and preferred the company of his family. He was acquainted with many of the great and famous people of his time, but they visited him at Carrow or at his seaside house at Corton. He did not visit them (Mardle 1948).

(OHTii) The Clyffe at Corton was an Elizabethan-style house built in 1848.

Quarry Bank House at Styal in Cheshire (OHT), home of Unitarian cotton manufacturer, Samuel Greg (1758-1834), was noted for 'its cultured atmosphere . . . its simplicity (Rose 1986: 16). Samuel's son, Robert Hyde (1795-1875), had a passion for horticulture. For the grounds of his neo-Elizabethan home, Norcliffe Hall (OHT), also at Styal, and his estate in Hertfordshire, he imported exotic trees and shrubs.

Joseph Evans (1817-1889), Congregationalist and leading coal proprietor of SW Lancashire, is described as unostentatious and of a retiring disposition (Anon 1889). Of Hurst House (OHT), his residence at Huyton near Liverpool, it was said:

Its internal arrangements would gratify the art connoisseur, and the literary man would rejoice in the well stocked library' (Anon 1889b). He also maintained Haydock Grange . . . and Maenan House, his Welsh seat near Llanrwst. 'A large portion of the Deganwy estate and Great Orme's Head [Llandudno] belonged to him. . . He had also an estate in Algiers (Anon 1889).

To return to Rylands. Notwithstanding established extreme affluence and extravagances, ascetic tendencies were always discernible. Joseph Parker states that simplicity seems to have been his chief characteristic:

In his own warehouse Mr Rylands would have been the last man to have been fixed upon as the owner and master. Many of the buyers had larger watch-chains. Several heads of departments out-shone him in shirt-studs, as diamonds outshine pearl-buttons. And many a young clerk

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simply reduced him to humiliation in the matter of conspicuous neckties. Yet there he was, - the first to come, the last to go; simple, prompt, settling everything with a bare Yes and No. . . The masterfulness was seen everywhere; the master nowhere.

The word simplicity seems to fit Mr Rylands better than any other. It certainly fitted his household life . . . probably his head gardener . . . kept a better table than Mr Rylands kept. The head gardener might not have the champagne, but Mr Rylands had only one bottle of it . . . kept on the floor at his right hand, some of his guests often wondering whether he had forgotten it was there . . . All wines were alike to the abstemious host . . . [he] knew little about his wines, of which . . . he had a hundred and twenty dozen in his cellar (Parker, 1893: 111-112).

Other residences of Rylands included a house at Hoylake leased in 1846, where he entertained and kept a 30-ton yacht. 46 Argyll Road, Kensington leased in 1871 for £110 per annum. 67 Queen's Gate, Kensington, acquired in 1875 for £6,500. 34-37 Via Garibaldi in Rome, purchased in 1879 and valued 12 years later at £6,338. In 1882 he bought Beaulieu House, renamed Longford House, in the village of Haven Street, near Ryde on the IoW, with 14.8 acres, for £6,650. A year earlier he had acquired Corston House, Ryde, for £1,600, as a rest home for ministers of different denominations (Farnie 1993: 83-95, Green 1889a: 35). By 1886 Rylands' English estates aggregated some 230 acres. He did not, claims Farnie, seek 'to imitate the tastes of the aristocracy . . . the Rylands fortune remained in liquid investments and could therefore be turned in the fullness of time to creative use (1993: 55).

Davidoff and Hall examining the English middle classes between 1780 and 1850, write:

Although . . . middling groups had many affinities with aristocracy and gentry, the basis of their property and their value system and, not least the nonconformity of many . . . set them apart . . . when they bought land it was often more of an investment or asset to produce income for enlarging a business . . . or for paternalistic schemes for their workpeople (Davidoff and Hall: 1987: 18 and 20).

Location of entrepreneurial residences

A study of residential patterns of 19th century Nonconformist industrialists reveals that invariably main places of residence were situated in close proximity to business premises and, not inconsequentially, the homes of employees. Colman's, Carrow House, Greg's Quarry Bank House, literally adjoined their respective factories. Greg regarded the location of Norcliffe Hall and Quarry Bank House as a necessities – the Mill 'can be nothing unless I reside there' (Rose 1986: 84). Joseph Evans, lived

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initially at Garswood, not far from his Haydock mines. While, in later years, his main residence was Hurst House, Huyton, he continued to maintain the family home, Haydock Grange, near to the collieries. Between 1844 and 1850 Rylands home, Gorton Villa was close by his mills. The position of Longford Hall facilitated easy access to business premises in and around Manchester.

Shaping life-styles and residential patterns

That Rylands, in common with his industrial contemporaries, whether through paternalism or despotic control, shaped life style and residential patterns of thousands of industrial workers, is incontrovertible – but, again there are inconsistencies. For example, to argue that relations between Rylands and his workforce were consistently harmonious, or, conversely, acrimonious, is to avoid the truth. In 1849, the year of the strike at Gorton, factory operatives gave a vote 'of thanks . . . to Messrs John Rylands & Sons . . . for not running their engines more than 10 hours per day' (France 1989: 6). Rylands' insistence on absolute obedience resulted in many falling 'out of rank, unable or unwilling to comply with the conditions of the service . . . [but] others remained, and grew old in it . . .' (Green 1889a: 183).

The tentacles of Rylands paternalism stretched far and wide, pervading the lives of countless economically dependent individuals within the environs of Manchester, on the Isle of Wight, among the poor of Rome⁴. Two facts emerge, antipathy to ostentatious giving, the direct control maintained over his multiferious benefactions (Anon: 1888b). At Stretford he was 'virtual lord of the manor' (Farnie 1993: 54), building, at a cost of some £30,000, a Town Hall with gymnasium and public hall (1878); free public library (1883); public swimming baths (1886-87); lecture hall; coffee-house (1883); institute, with bowling-green, tennis-ground and playground (Green 1889b: 35-36, Farnie 1993: 54-55). Other projects included an institution for orphan girls, female penitentiary, homes for aged gentlewomen (Green 1889b: 35, Anon 1888b). He maintained a number of schools, believing that 'democracy without education [meant] violence and selfishness . . . with education . . . self-control and social unity' (Parker 1893: 114).

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While information regarding housing for employees is sketchy, there is evidence that Rylands was frequently landlord as well as master (Farnie 1993: 12 and 54).

This was certainly true for many of his contemporaries. In the 1840s Richard Evans (1778-1864) founder of the SW Lancashire coalmining enterprise, began an extensive programme of building in the village of Haydock - initially terraced "two up two downs" (OHT), later, semi-detached three bedroom homes. A century on, a population of some 30,000 were *totally* dependent upon the company (Smallwood 1986: 4). A report in 1878 spoke of 'a colliery village remarkably neat and clean . . . Messrs Evans have considerable pride in the appearance of their little colony (Simm 1988: 26).

Colman, similarly established 'colonies' at Carrow and in the Suffolk village of Corton. From both locations he exercised 'a benevolent and pious autocracy' (Mardle 1948). In the small self contained village of Corton, he provided land for a school and playing field, built the Methodist chapel, village hall, homes for estate employees (OHT):

substantial red brick affairs, semi-detached in the main and standing on good-sized plots, with carved white bargeboards on the cable ends and porches [bearing] initials J.J.C and the year of construction (Butcher 1977).

Invariably the construction of industrial colonies included garden plots for the growing of vegetables and the encouragement of habits of industry and self-sufficiency. Colman's involvement in education was ubiquitous but ambiguities in intention are discernible. In 1857 he wrote to his employees:

In these days of progress, that man is sure to be left far behind, who has neglected the cultivation of his intellect while he who strives to improve his mind stands a fair chance of raising himself in the social scale (Butcher nd: 366-368).

Yet, increasing emphasis was placed on technical education, on maintaining the status quo, the cultivation of manual dexterity which would prepare children 'for the various handicrafts by which they will hereafter gain their livelihood' (Colman 1932: 71).

The isolated location of Quarry Bank was used to advantage by the Gregs in maintaining paternal control over their workforce. Cottages were built (OHT), a shop opened, operating on a profit sharing basis:

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a farm . . supplied . . milk, butter and other farm produce. [A Sick Club was established in 1817 (Greg: 1849).] In 1822 a [Baptist] chapel was built [and a minister engaged] . . The following year an institution for lectures and social functions, and a school were erected . . (Collier 1941: 143).

Despite low wages, there were obvious advantages which encouraged families to remain for several generations - 'pleasant surroundings, a good cottage and large garden, steady work, and the social ties formed by living in a small self-contained community' (Collier 1941: 148). Samuel Greg jnr (1804-1876), controlled the Bollington mill, SE of Manchester. He provided houses, garden allotments, Sunday school, gymnasium, playing field, bathing house, library, drawing and singing classes, winter evening parties:

. . We do not invite all promiscuously . . [but] those . . whose manners and character mark them as in some degree superior . . who, we think, with a little notice and encouragement, and the advantage of good society, may gradually become civilized and polished . . [I] always find several . . who are not only able to ask a question and answer one, but to keep up a conversation . . As far as the case admits, [I endeavour] to carry on the party as if it were held in my drawing-room, and consisted of my own friends and equals in society (Faucher 1844: 103-104)

'Plans for the education of the labouring classes' declared Samuel jnr, are 'not to raise any individuals among them above their condition, but to elevate the condition itself' (Anon: nd).

Conclusions

'Puritanism', conceded Weber, 'contained within itself a world of contradictions' (2000 114). In using a collective biographical approach to research, Lawrence Stone calls for a greater 'willingness to recognise the baffling complexity of human nature, the power of ideas, and the persistent influence of institutional structures' (1987: 65). As this sketch of residential patterns of Nonconformist entrepreneurs and their economic dependents demonstrates, paradoxical tensions existed. There is abundant evidence that the number and grandeur of residences increased in proportion to respective positions as prominent men of business. Simultaneously, there are examples of ascetic tendencies in relation to expenditure. Robert Hyde Greg owned more houses than his father but Norcliffe Hall was built as economically as possible. In 1829 he wrote 'I am in hopes of getting cheaper off with building

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than I had expected' (Rose 1986: 84). Abhorrence at the sin of wasting time was a universal reality. Colman wrote to his wife shortly before their marriage in 1856 - 'I hope we shan't live an idle selfish existence' (Colman 1905: 134). As Weber commented:

. . . loss of time through sociability, "idle talk", sumptuousness . . . [was] absolutely morally reprehensible (Weber 2000: 105).

While a tendency to live in close proximity to places of business undoubtedly decreased as opulence in respect of family dwelling increased, an all pervasive controlling hand was never far away. As Edward Baines (1800-1890), Nonconformist entrepreneur and protagonist of voluntaryism, observed, 'a humane, religious and intelligent manufacturer has the power of bringing to bear on his workpeople a variety of strong inducements to virtue and industry' (Anon: nd). The nature of a 'cradle to grave' mentality, the creation of a working class 'in [our] own image' (Harrison 1988: 134), was vigorously pursued. The belief that the workforce, the populace at large, should mirror, albeit on an unequivocally modified scale, the life style of their masters, in domestic arrangements, in self-help, self improvement, above all unceasing industry, is repeatedly demonstrated. Nonetheless, we are faced with apparently ambivalent motives. The declared intention of Samuel Greg jnr 'to elevate the condition itself' (Anon: nd) must be set against his overt intention to *impose* his own social values on those within his employ. The management of the Sunday School was entirely with the workers, but Samuel's controlling presence was visible every Sunday. He was generally present at children's games (Page 1877: 589). 'I had [he declared] the opportunity of observing any breach of good manners or good temper, and gradually succeeded in breaking them into my system' (Faucher 1844: 102). Perhaps he succeeded! An employee is recorded as saying:

We used to want the morning to come . . . that we might get back to our work. But it was not like going to work . . . we were all so happy and so comfortable together (Page 1877: 590).

Again there is inconsistency. It is reported that Samuel 'was convicted twelve times between November 1835 and October 1836 for contravening the Factory Act of 1833' (Frow 1985: 78). During the mid-1840s he experimented with new machinery for stretching cloth. This led to a strike and,

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ultimately, his retirement from business. His wife spoke of his deep hurt, ‘. . . the feeling that others would point to his model village as a failure instead of drawing example and encouragement from his success (Page 1877: 590).

So, paradoxical tensions abound. The reality of increasing wealth and extravagances in life style, the size and opulence of mansions, juxtaposed with profound ascetic belief that wealth is a trust not to be used for purposes of selfish indulgence (Rathbone 1861). Ambivalent attitudes of employers towards the workforce, the all pervasive controlling hand, contrasted with values of self-help, of self improvement.

If there is a key to resolving the paradox it is, perhaps, in the dominant value driven concept of ‘activity’, the unequivocal belief in the unquestioning necessity for *all*, whether rich or poor, to engage in unceasing industry – ‘according to the will of God, *only activity* . . . serves to increase His glory’ (Weber 2000: 105)!

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