THE LIFE AND TIMES OF SAMUEL CROMPTON

The Life and Times of Samuel Crompton

Whispers of the Industrial Revolution

by

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Oh, words are poor receipts for what time hath stole away.

Fragment from John Clare (1793-1864), Remembrances

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In memory of my Mother Freda Leece (nee Pimbley) whose love, support and kindness will never be forgotten.

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Prologue

As a boy I would often cycle along lonely moorland roads, laboriously struggling up winding hills only to propel myself back down again at breakneck and brakeless speeds, frequently flying over the handlebars and grazing my knees and elbows. The moors held and still hold a special fascination. With a gentle wind the heather parts in great red and buff waves, with nothing on the horizon to gain any perspective. There are times when there is no sound at all, only to be broken by the melody of a single skylark. When the rain and hail sweeps in it can feel like the top of the world and it is a wonder that people were able to build some of the now abandoned properties and the old dry-stone walls. On one occasion, caught by the inclement weather, I took shelter in a derelict cottage. Only the living room had been spared, with raised rubble where the kitchen had stood. Painted on the flaking cottage walls were mysterious figures. Bright colours wearing away with age, adults waving, sprightly smiling children and incongruous cavorting wild animals. It was impossible to date these paintings, they appeared ageless, a silent yet lively dance from the past.

It is these memories that have led me to sub-title this book *'Whispers of the Industrial Revolution'*. Fanciful it may have been, but the wind did seem to whisper, on that and other days, a confusion of voices, sadness, disappointment, determination. The book tells the story of Samuel Crompton (1753-1827), inventor of the spinning mule, set in the context of the unfolding industrial revolution. A story of invention, honest endeavour and betrayal. Crompton according to his nineteenth century biographer Gilbert French experienced his own whispers:

"The scientific discoveries of Priestley and Black reached him probably in feint ***whispers*** *only, but they were* ***whispers*** *to which his acute ear would be ardently opened."*[1]

Samuel Crompton combined this scientific knowledge with his exceptional practical expertise to construct his spinning mule an invention which had an enormous impact on the economy, society and the course of British history.

There are numerous books on the causes of rapid industrial change in Britain,[2] and in recent years many television documentaries. For the television programmes it is difficulty to catch even a passing reference to the great inventor. Indeed, there has been a noticeable tendency to leave out the cotton industry altogether; despite the clear importance given to the textile industry by historians such as Phyllis Dean[3] and Eric Hobsbawm. The latter noting that; *"to speak of the industrial revolution is to speak of cotton".*[4] There has been an inclination to focus upon the more glamorous themes, such as the influence of the Enlightenment, scientific discoveries and the economic and political liberalism of Britain.[5] One, of the aims of the book is to bring cotton and Samuel Compton back into the fore of our understanding of this tumultuous time.[6] In fact the book is a biography of his reputation as much as the story of his life. A reputation which flared or dimmed according to the dramatic events of the day, including Luddite riots and the assassination of a British Prime Minister.

Christine Macleod[7] has argued that inventors were elevated to the status of heroes as a challenge by the manufacturing class to the landed aristocracy, and a resurgence of Crompton's fame in the late nineteenth century certainly fits this model. However, there can be no doubt regarding his impact upon the economy and industrialisation.[8] The peculiar character and timidity of Samuel Crompton also explains the fluctuations in how he was viewed and treated. Through the lens of his abiding integrity, we can detect the less attractive aspects of human behavior that underpinned the industrial revolution. With Samuel Crompton we have a fixed point from which to observe a murky and calculating world. Throughout the book there are vivid examples of success based upon deceit, and privilege, rather than honest endeavour or creativity, though those virtues are also evident.

It is interesting that the one television programme to feature Samuel Crompton was an investigation into the possible haunting of Hall i' th' Wood (Hall in the Wood),[9] a complex Tudor farmhouse, part of which was home to Crompton and his family, where they spun yarn on his spinning mule. The programme suggested that the mansion is haunted by Mary, Samuel's wife, and Betty his truculent mother, who is reputed to be heard shooing away mischievous children playing about the hall. It was also claimed that Samuel Compton was *"famous in these parts."* Yet Crompton was in fact famous

way beyond *"these parts"* and was visited by foreign Counts, cultivated by continental governments, and subjected to acts of espionage to discover the secretes of the mule. He was also sought after by leading industrialists such as Robert Peel[10] to be a business partner. His treatment, at times, as a humble, pestering artisan, rather than a great inventor, by a Parliament with much else on its mind, might have contributed to the promotion of the parochial view of Crompton as a merely local celebrity. Yet it is fitting that he should feature in a television documentary concerning ghosts. Crompton was a scientific man, but also deeply superstitious.

Superstition also has a place in this book. The myths and legends of Lancashire are metaphors for the fear of change that often generated virulent opposition to inventions and threats to traditional ways of living. The stories provide further insight into the attitudes and morality of the times.[11] The reader may be surprised by the occasional personal recollection. I grew up in the Lancashire town of Horwich during the 1950s, a railway town with a tradition of cotton goods manufacture, in a moorland setting. The personal stories are a vehicle to represent the legacy of the textile industry, celebrating, the sense of community and the challenges of change.

There have been several books, and short publications, celebrating the life of Samuel Crompton. In 1825, in preparation of an appeal to the British Parliament to supplement a previous reward for the invention of the mule, a young journalist, Mr. John Brown published a memorandum laying out the basis of Samuel Crompton's claim to a second remuneration. This was later published as a pamphlet,[12] though it was not widely circulated. When Samuel Crompton died on the 26 th June 1827 there appeared to be an unseemly rush to write his life story. In August of that year Thomas Cropp of the Bolton Chronicle wrote to Samuel's eldest son George expressing his desire to write a short biography and requesting family materials.[13] An even more deserving case for writing a biography was the manufacturer Mr. John Kennedy, who had been a firm friend and strong supporter of Crompton. He requested materials from the family,[14] including a family pedigree. However, Kennedy's final manuscript was a limited edition with private circulation only.[15] Again Samuel Crompton's reputation receded.[16]

The definitive text, though it contains some minor errors,[17] is the 1859 biography written by Gilbert French,[18] '*Life and Times of Samuel Crompton.*' Most subsequent books have taken French as their lead and echoed his sentiments, comments and in many cases the style and cadence of his narrative. My book is no exception in owing a great debt to French's

lucid and compelling manuscript.[19] French's book can be said to be in the heroic tradition, proffering a vivid, visceral picture of Samuels obsessions, ingenuity and primarily psychological suffering. He also had the advantage of interviewing Crompton's son George.

In 1862, an obliging Manchester printer[20] set out, on a single printed sheet summaries of all the newspaper reviews of the 3rd (*"and cheap edition,"* price of one shilling) of Gilbert French's, *Life and Times of Samuel Crompton.* The reviews are interesting for what they say about the inventor, as much as comments on the book itself. For example, *The Gentleman's Magazine* intoned:

"Few men have done service of a special kind to their country than Samuel Compton did by his vast improvement in spinning machinery; and the services of few men have been worse requited during their lives, or less remembered after their deaths.....It has been Mr. French's praiseworthy object to lift out of obscurity the memory of a man who has high claims upon the gratitude of our commercial nation"[21]

The same publication claimed that by 1859 Crompton's reputation had fallen into obscurity. The 1860s and 1870s were a period when the Crompton story revived, possibly due to his appeal to Victorian rectitude and Gilbert French's campaigning. Crompton's personal struggles were perfect material for a compelling book to celebrate hard work, inventiveness and persevering against the odds. His integrity was celebrated in several Victorian publications offering moral instruction. For example, '*Famous Boys and How They Became Great Men*"[22] *(1861).* Also, *"The Triumphs of Invention and Discovery"*[23] (1863) and *The Living Age 1861.*[24].

Two key books were published in the twentieth century, Daniels in 1920[25] and Chapman in 1951,[26] both texts structuring their narratives around French's book. Daniels, the great scholar of the Lancashire cotton industry, was able to use newly discovered material. In 1913 a set of commercial documents, involving business between Crompton and his friend and associates John Kennedy and James McConnel were found under the floorboards of the McConnel and Kennedy factory in Ainscow, Manchester. Cameron utilised a second tranche of materials, originally in the possession of a Mrs. Irving of Blackburn, also in danger of being lost or destroyed. While both books stayed true to the biographical pathway set out by French, the newly discovered letters, manuscripts and business correspondence gave fresh insights into Crompton's thinking, business activities and life.

I have adopted a different approach than other publications by placing Samuel Crompton more firmly in the context of his times and family. My writing is informed by a wide variety of sources not available to French and later writers. The primary source was the largely unexploited Crompton Papers lodged in Bolton Libraries and Museums History Centre, replicated online by the British Data Archive. When I combined this material with the ever-growing British Newspaper Archive and the widely available out of print historical texts, not forgetting the increasingly accessible National, county and local archives, it was clear that there is a need for a new book on the life and times of Samuel Crompton.

Part I (Ruthlessness and Dreams) introduces the book and its approach, using elements of the Crompton Papers Archive to establish the context of the early stages of the industrial revolution. Part II (Superstition and Fear) looks at Samuel Crompton's childhood, along with the fears and anxieties surrounding technological change. Part III (Betrayal and Disillusion) examines conflicts over property in terms of ideas, machines, coal, and the perils of partnerships. These issues highlight the social and economic environment impinging on Crompton's fight to protect his invention and profit from its use. Part IV (Vanity and Rebellion) treats the expectation of great wealth by Samuel Crompton's family, the importance of political patronage and influential friends, and the Parliamentary campaign for a reward, amidst the poverty and social unrest of 1812. Part V (Disharmony and Persistence) deals with the aftermath of his campaign and a second attempt, in 1825, to augment the reward for his invention. Part VI (Charity and Guilt) concludes the book with a reflection on the character of Samuel Crompton and the issues raised by his life and treatment.

In this biography we will meet assassins, duelists, rioters, benevolent and scheming industrialists, abductors and guileful politicians. In some ways the book encompasses not just the saga of a reputation, but a biography of the multitude. It was impossible to research the material for these stories without meeting new and interconnected people, related through family, enterprise, shared endeavors, debt, affection etc. Each person adds to the incredible history of a society in transition. Napoleon reflecting, while detained on the island of St Helena, described his life as one that would make a good novel,[27] *"What a novel my life has been."* This book tells the story of Samuel Crompton and the spinning mule, not strictly as a novel, but certainly as an unraveling drama.

Part One

Ruthlessness and Dreams

Chapter One

A Gathering of Whispers

"History has many bypaths of, and in journeying along some of these we may pick up some pebble, hear some feint echo that perchance may lead to the discovery of some important link. In the hope that some such may be found herein has been our object."

Thomas Hampson, Horwich Its History and Legends, 1889[28]

Samuel Crompton was born on the 3 rd. December 1753 into a rural environment; a snug group of cottages known as Firwood Fold, Bolton Le Moors. Gilbert French reflected, from the vantage point of 1859, upon the nature of Bolton Le Moors in the year of Samuels birth:

"Gardens, meadows and bleaching crofts, dotted here and there with cottages stretched on the north side down to the Croal, then a pleasant stream of pure water; and, besides the comparatively considerable suburb of Little Bolton, the neighbourhood of the town was thickly studded with groups of cottages in hamlets, or folds as they are called, many of which have since been surrounded by new houses and now form part of the town itself. There were no tall chimneys in Bolton in those days, but many considerable warehouses to contain the heavy fustians and other piece goods made in the neighbourhood."[29]

Industrialisation would radically alter this landscape and the growth of factories would follow from the machines devised by inventors such as Richard Arkwright and Samuel Crompton. Arkwright's water frame facilitated the use of power to drive cotton spinning machinery, while the quality of yarn produced by Crompton's spinning mule increased the scale of production. The mule was a revolution in the spinning of cotton that added immeasurably to the industrialisation of Britain, leading to a dominance of the export market for textiles. It has been argued that the subsequent

increased financial returns to the British Government turned the tide of the Napoleonic wars in the country's favour. For many manufacturers this industrial change meant increased prosperity, and Samuel Crompton's later life was dominated by attempts to share in this good fortune.

Though Crompton is a neglected figure in contemporary discussions of the Industrial revolution, we can appreciate how he was celebrated in the recent past by looking back at Bolton's commemoration of his life and achievements, held 100 years after his death, in 1927. The celebrations provide a background to the story of the rescue of the many letters and documents in the Crompton Papers archive, so critical to the writing of his book.

A special souvenir booklet was published outlining a week's events lasting from June 5th to June 11th. 1927.[30] These included competitions, performances by bands, lectures, visits by dignitaries, banquets, pageants and a light opera "Merrie England" by Basil Hood, music by Edward German. On the Wednesday there was an historical and symbolic pageant by 3,500 school children to be performed at Bolton Wanderers football stadium, Burden Park.

After acting out the story of Samuel and the mule a pageant cleverly associated pictures with emotions and feelings. The opening dance was the spinning wheel and depicted *"dull monotony and weariness."* The dance of the mule and its moving parts depicted mischief, with the attempts to steal its secrets. Fear accompanied the anxieties of local people as to the consequences of the mule. Truth, Joy and progress are the celebratory feelings that follow in sequence. Finally in a grand scena, a progression of changes in clothes and fashion, paraded it is said before the *"whole world and his wife."* A final cry rendered by everyone assembled was *"All honour to the name of Samuel Crompton."* This crypto religious chant is heady material, but it is hard to think now what reverence Samuel Crompton was held in by the people of Bolton. This was a marked contrast, as we shall see, to his treatment during his life of invention when many of both Manchester and Bolton manufacturers treated his claims for financial compensation with disdain. In fact, the prelude to this pageant heralded:

"Let us hope that his memory may yet be revived, and his name worthily honoured not only in his native parish but reflected thence throughout the world which his invention has done so much to civilise, and that history may yet inscribe the neglected name of Samuel Crompton on one of the brightest pages of her annals."[31]

The souvenir programme contained thirty pages entitled *"Brief Account of the Life of Samuel Crompton"* written by Thomas Midgley curator of Bolton Museum. Midgley also produced an accompanying booklet, presenting a more detailed biography.[32] He had come into possession of the recently discovered letters and documents, relating to Crompton; with just a few weeks to read and incorporate them into his version of the inventor's life story, ready for the celebrations. It appeared to have been George the first son of Samuel and Mary (b. 1780) who preserved this collection. Then it was the widow of the grandson of George, Mrs. Irving who passed these on to Thomas Midgley, from where they were deposited at the Hall i' th' Wood Museum.[33] It is said that Mrs. Irving nearly destroyed these papers and letters, but that the fuss and celebration of the centenary of Crompton's death, then taking place throughout Lancashire, gave her pause for thought. It is this treasure trove of business and family correspondence, accounts and order books that informs the narrative of this book.

There is a handkerchief designed to commemorate the life of Samuel Compton, created as part of the celebrations in 1927, which was the winner of a competition among the students at the Bolton College of Art; a specimen of which was given to each of the schoolchildren in the town. It is a pleasing, complex pattern of the images of the silhouetted Bolton skyline, the mule and Hall i' th' Wood (The Hall in the Wood). The four corner illustrations enclose a central cartouche which displays an elephant stood on a rocky moor, supported by a red and a black lion:[34] each corner showing the tools of spinning and weaving: the bobbin and a spinning wheel. Emblazoned on the image is the town motto of *supera moras* (to overcome difficulties or delays). This book follows the spirit of this lively and colourful cloth and weaves a pattern of the rise and fall of Samuel Crompton's reputation.

A Moorland Prelude

The events and stories narrated here took place, many times, in the isolated moorland regions of Lancashire and their valleys. Earlier texts attributed a degree of wildness to both the region and its people. Indeed, Camden visiting Lancashire in 1607 expressed *"a kind of dread"* in having to approach the inhabitants.[35] Many years later in 1795 when the Kings Light Infantry, of which Beau Brummel was a captain, was ordered to locate to the unsettled North of England he was reported to have pleaded with the Prince Regent that:

"I have heard that we are ordered to Manchester. Now you must be aware of how disagreeable this would be to me. I could really not go; think, You're Royal Highness, Manchester!"[36]

The North, South divide was, as we shall see, a factor, if not the prime cause, in the struggles that Samuel Compton endured in trying to obtain recompense from Parliament for the national benefits of his invention. He was undoubtedly seen as a simple north countryman likely to be content with a small sum.[37] His simple dress and plain manner, with a painful shyness and reticence, all added to this impression of the humble mechanic who would look particularly unprepossessing in a society and political system dominated by the aristocracy, with a growing manufacturing class professing to be gentlemen.

The moorlands are a veinous network of tumbling streams which at first provided the water for the bleaching, printing and dying of cloth and later drove the new water powered factory-based inventions of the cotton spinning industry. Coal, found in rich abundance beneath the surface of the moor and its lower reaches would provide the fuel for the later use of steam engines; while the streams and tributaries, when redirected, supplied the water for the canal systems that revolutionised transport. It is a landscape populated by names of farming families long gone, and within its shifting cloak of mist horrific crimes were enacted, executions carried out and the innocent and unwary lost. Yet it was the cradle of the domestic cottage industry of spinning and weaving combined most times with small scale farming with a family perhaps keeping no more than a single cow. Families working together in an existence it is tempting to idealise. Samuel Crompton, though a progenitor of the factory system and resultant urbanisation, appeared to prefer this pastoral life for himself and his family. For a while he retreated from unwanted fame and attention to live in an isolated moorland fold named Oldham's.

Not surprisingly the moors are also the source of many mysteries and legends that lend ready metaphors for the changes wrought by the industrial revolution. One story has it that a large boulder, to be found on Turton moor, was thrown by a giant from Winter Hill, a promontory opposite, and that the giant's fingerprints can still be found impressed into the rock. There is no accompanying story as to why the giant threw the stone - through temper, fear or anxiety? In the period covered by this book the new factories must have suddenly appeared like the exertions of giants, at first as images of wonder, but later as long shadowed edifices of threat, promising very

different lives. The fears and anxieties of the mill workers and inhabitants of the mill towns would express themselves in riot, at times bordering on revolution.

The environment before and after industrial change was poetically captured by Edward Baines in his *History of Lancashire*, where he describes the countryside about the settlement of Horwich, a town with the moors as a dramatic backdrop that features in the Crompton story.

"Horwich.....was sixteen miles in circumference, with its wild boars, and dairies of eagles, has long since disappeared, and their places are supplied by bleach works, cotton factories, and all the modern indications of manufacturing industry; but the woody dingles which abound in this extensive tract seem to recall the memory of those times, when the ladies and Ferrers, followed by their vassals, plunged into the thickets in the ardour of the chase, and emerged only at a distance of several miles to witness the dying struggles of the weeping deer."[38]

A noteworthy peak in this moorland terrain is Rivington Pike. The land about the Pike still shows the remains of old coal mining shafts, long since filled in, together with the drift from the disused mines. The remnants of these onetime coal pits excite the curious like Egyptian tombs, but they can no longer be accessed. On very rare occasions in inclement weather, and moorland storms, the entrances to the pits open, one time at least, revealing steps carved in the stone, descending deep into the hillside.[39] The far stretching panorama, viewed from the pinnacle of the Pike, embraces the long history of cotton manufacture in a single imagining. The romantics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century would have grasped the awe and infinity of the view but would have baulked at how the terrain buckled and teared as the factories and towns erupted with only the backdrop of an unwelcoming moor remaining untainted.

Look to the west from the summit of Rivington Pike and you can see the Irish sea, facing it the holiday resort of Blackpool, then further south the shimmering outline of the Welsh mountains. A more informed local glance will pick out Anderton the residence for a while of Samuel Oldknow a pioneer of cotton manufacture who introduced fine muslins to the market; and where Joseph Shaw of Bolton had attempted to make British muslins but lacked the fine yarn necessary to do that.[40] Then to the northwest, Coppull the place of one of Richard Arkwright's first factories, Birkacre, burned down by rioters in 1779. South along this visible coast is the port of Liverpool and during the seven year's war with France (1756-1763), it was possible to signal from Liverpool to Rivington Pike, to alert the population to a possible

French attack. It was feared that the infamous French Admiral Thurot was planning an invasion of England. A party of soldiers were camped on Everton hill with instructions that if Thurot appeared to signal to beacons at Ashurst, Billinge and Rivington.

It was beyond the near view from this moorland peak towards Liverpool that the cotton manufacturers, merchants and farmers increasingly turned their attention, particularly after the seven year's war, when Britain had established naval supremacy. Facing the North American and Caribbean colonies, less prone to probing and marauding French privateers, Liverpool from the mid eighteenth century grew exponentially. Not yet out competing London and Bristol it entered enthusiastically into the infamous and more risky slave trade.

The remaining two chapters, in Part I of this book, consider merchant enterprise and the arrival of inventions. Not solely concerned with the history of the industrial revolution, but rather the restless spirit and calculating behaviour of the participants. These issues are critical in understanding what motivated Samuel Crompton, and the challenges he faced within a fiercely competitive commercial environment. The early family documents in the Crompton papers offer insight into mercantile attitudes and behaviours in late eighteenth century pre-industrial society, particularly surrounding trading out of Liverpool. Were Samuel Crompton, and his family, willing and able to navigate this emerging new world and gain a reward for his contribution to the flowering of inventions and industrial growth?