

PROTO-MANIA

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As a member of the frequently patronised "general audience" may I be allowed a brief rejoinder to Roger Burt's response to my "20,000 Miners . . ." article (Kiernan 1992)?

Firstly, I have no quarrel whatsoever with Burt's attack on the alleged influence of foreign technology on the development of the British non-ferrous metal industry - the pre-war historians he quotes were too ready to accept at face-value the views of sixteenth-century economic writers and government officials. In mitigation, they were, to a large extent, dependent on sources drawn from the national archives and did not have access to the local records that have revealed what was actually happening on (and under) the ground. Burt does acknowledge that in my work on the introduction of the ore hearth to Derbyshire, I reached similar conclusions to his own, though without, I hope, xenophobic or jingoistic overtones (Kiernan 1989). I suspect that he has confused my views, which were - and remain - similar to his own, with my exposition of contemporary attitudes. I must have got the code wrong.

Before we leave this unaccustomed area of agreement I would add a note of caution. Not all "foreign" influences were bad or negligible; the jiggling sieve almost certainly came from Germany and its use rapidly expanded the range of smeltable ores; the first known sough in the Derbyshire Peak, which was desperately needed, was driven by a Dutchman, Sir Cornelius Vermuyden, around 1631. The derided Germans had been using the technique since the 12th century (Rieuwerts 1987).

Secondly, proto-industrialisation - and later on in Derbyshire, presumably - de-proto-industrialisation - Yuk! I did not, and still do not, wish to bore PDMHS members with the metaphysical musings of economic theoreticians. They increasingly resemble the linguistically impenetrable and self-referential worlds of the medieval schoolmen. For those members of the general audience who really want to know what the debate is about, the best guide, in jargon-free English, is an article (strangely not quoted by Burt) by Professor Coleman entitled "Proto-industrialisation: a concept too many" (Coleman 1983). It is all about that old chestnut, the causes of the industrial revolution. We are no longer allowed to have a variety or "shopping list" of causes but must instead subscribe to a socio-economic model which occupies an essential stage in economic growth that bridges that awkward gap between feudal and industrial economies and societies. The sad thing is that there are still economic historians who see the centuries before 1750 only in terms of what came next, the so-called industrial revolution. They will not "judge the economies and societies of the 16th and 17th centuries on their own terms but insist on seeing them as stages in a process leading to an inevitable outcome. The Derbyshire lead industry, which was by far the most productive in the country, does not fit into this pre-arranged pattern. It seems to have risen - from 1570 - and peaked - around 1680 - too early and was in decline when the other proto-industrial regions and industries were supposed to be transposing themselves into the "modern" industrial world. How inconvenient.

Finally, not being a subscriber to the "academic code of economic historians", I, perhaps naively, tend to believe that historians write what they mean and mean what they write. An article that concludes: "The general conclusions of this paper are straightforward . . ." and then continues exactly as I have quoted in my original article seems to me to clearly set down the author's views and is not taken "out of context". The evidence which I have looked at and which is all based on primary sources, contradicts those views in almost every case. Derbyshire may be the exception - I would not presume to question Mike Gill's evidence for the north Pennine lead fields which I read but did not consider relevant to my article on the Derbyshire industry. It does not say much for the substance of a model, however, when its exception was far and away the largest non-ferrous metal industry in the country for over a century and was producing and exporting over 10,000 tons of lead a year by the 1670s. It suggests to me that the proto-industrial bits were the exception.

As a final personal note, my mentors were not the authors mentioned by Burt. They were the economic, but not mining, historians the late George Ramsey, my undergraduate tutor, and Dr Joan Thirsk, my first postgraduate supervisor. The first urged me to go straight to the archives; the second taught me the value of local sources. If Dr Burt wishes to continue his excursion from his academic home in the theory-bound world of the 18th and 19th centuries back into the foreign country of the 16th and 17th, then I can do no better than to pass on their advice.

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