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**Origin of the new system of manufacture, commonly called "power-loom weaving" and the purposes for which this system was invented and brought into use, fully explained in a narrative, containing ...**

**Radcliffe, William**

**Stockport, 1828**

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Introduction.

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## INTRODUCTION.

**T**HE period has at length arrived when I am at liberty to report the progress I made in Parliament nine years ago, on the great national question respecting the great evil of exporting our cotton yarns, a debt I have long owed to the weavers, manufacturers, bleachers, printers, dyers, finishers, merchants, and bankers interested in the cotton trade, who so handsomely supported me by their memorial to the Prince Regent and petitions to the Honourable the House of Commons in the years 1816-17, in my application to government. But as few persons are aware of the just claims I had to take a lead in this important question, and as I may perhaps by some be thought a busybody in the business, I think myself called upon to shew the grounds on which I took so prominent a part at the period to which I allude. In performing this duty I shall at the same time give an outline of the origin and progress of the new system of manufacturing, best known under the name of *power loom weaving*, and of the cause that occasioned its introduction, in order that the motives which induced me to sink an independent fortune in perfecting this system for practical use, may be fully and correctly appreciated.

With a view to enable the public to judge whether the cotton manufacture at that time required the aid of this new system or not, it will be necessary to go back to the state of things prior to its first introduction, as well as to the gloomy aspect that lay before us at that period, which was the cause of the trade requiring additional aid from machinery, *if it could be found*. But could I have foreseen that after the new system had shewn itself equal to work up the surplus produce of our spindles, that the export of cotton yarns would have been continued, I believe I never should have made the attempt; I acted simply on the opinion generally expressed by spinners, manufacturers, bleachers, printers, dyers, and more especially by that of the merchants who exported finished goods to the continent. Having the means and confidence within myself that I could find out this system so absolutely necessary to keep so lucrative a trade in the nation, I went to work (with the patronage and assurance hereafter mentioned) as if the protection of the manufactures and commerce of our country had for a time been officially committed to my care; and I confidently appeal to every candid man who may read the following narrative, whether placing himself in my situation at the time I commenced, he would not have acted in the same manner.

In the performance of what I now undertake (with my limited education) I flatter myself the reader will readily grant me his indulgence, as regards language and style, for as the poet says,

“ He whose sole object is the people’s good  
Cares not to shine, so he is understood,”

The narrative I am now about to publish, was written in the years 1819 to 1822 inclusive, having been addressed in successive letters to a monthly club, the members of which were power-loom manu-

facturers; which club *I had formed* in 1811, with a view of conveying to the trade such practical improvements as daily experience brought out, either in the system itself, or in the teaching and management of the hands. Our works at all times were open to every member when he had any difficulty to overcome; and whenever a master spinner, instead of selling his yarns for export, had a wish to manufacture them by our patent hand-looms or by power-looms, we were equally open to him,—if he even wanted hands to set him going, we furnished him with the best we had, so long as he might require them; for this purpose we always kept one or two hands more than our business required. This liberality operated greatly against our private interests, but I shall by and by shew that I considered it no more than my duty, a national remuneration having been promised me from such high authority.

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If to the changes connected with national wealth and manufactures recorded in history, and to the energies of our own nation for many centuries past, were added a true history of the rise and progress of the cotton trade both at home and abroad, and the effects it has produced by its continued improvements during the last fifty years, it would be of more value as a guide to the statesman who has to frame laws for the government of his country, than all the jargon of political economists. Food, raiment and shelter, form the only wants in life. No nation ever flourished if confined to the production of the first, and through every age of the world that people which excelled in the production of the second stands pre-eminent in history. All that has been recorded of

former ages on this subject can only relate to the old system of fabricating raiment by the labour of the hands, a species of industry that has at length given way before the magical power of machinery, which subjects wool, linen, silk and cotton to illimitable production by mechanical agency that consumes no bread. Of these cotton has attained a decided pre-eminence over every other substance, whether animal or vegetable, and by the magnitude of its manufacture, must now justly rank as the staple trade of this kingdom. By a necessary consequence the fluctuations of this gigantic manufacture naturally tend to raise or depress not merely every other species of manufacture, but even the whole property of the kingdom which is at all times more or less affected by the prosperity or depression of the cotton trade.

It is to be regretted, that amongst the various publications which deluge this country, no authentic detail has yet been given of a trade, which, while it produces abundant wealth to one class of persons who have embarked in it, has brought total ruin to another class by whose personal labour they have been enriched—for from such detail alone can the statesman derive that knowledge whereby he might frame protecting laws congenial with existing circumstances. It is unhappily now too late to enquire whether the remarkable change effected by the cotton trade in our manufacturing population is for the better or otherwise; it nevertheless is consolatory to know that the evils of the present system are not absolutely irremediable, and that it only requires that they should be properly understood by those to whom the welfare of the State is confided, to enable them to give appropriate protection to a manufacture of such acknowledged importance, and the very numerous population whose existence depend on its prosperity. In the reign of Elizabeth, spinning,

one of the most ancient arts of social life, was rendered obligatory on every parish. One of the earliest Acts of Parliament for regulating our poor, enjoined all overseers to employ those who received relief, in spinning, for which purpose they are authorized to purchase wool and flax out of monies raised by a rate on the parishioners. The quantity of yarn, especially woollen, produced under this regulation was immense—but in place of following up the system of industry so *judiciously* introduced, and *weaving* the yarn so spun—the Flemings were permitted to export the greater part to Flanders, from whence it was returned to this country in the shape of cloth. The whole of the productive labour on the weaving, and other processes of the finished manufacture, and the commerce emanating from it, were thus lost to the country. Time, however, opened the eyes of our statesmen, who having at length discovered the value of the English fleece, by wise restrictions, and salutary encouragement, for many years held a monopoly of what, until the cotton trade arose, was justly considered the most valuable and extensive of any manufacture yet known in society. Possessing a raw material of surpassing quality, it was the natural and obvious policy of the state not to suffer so inestimable a product to pass into the hands of the foreigners, until it had received the last effort of human ingenuity and labour, fitting it for consumption. On this principle successive laws were passed, prohibiting the export of the wool, whether in the fleece or in yarn, or in fact, in any other state than that of manufactured cloth or stuff, under penalties of peculiar rigour and severity. The policy of manufacturing our yarns into woollen cloth, does not appear to have been fully understood until the reign of William and Mary. That Prince and Princess were accompanied from Holland by persons of sound

judgment, who convinced the people of this country that their interests, as regarded commercial polity, had been grossly misunderstood. It is indeed true, that but little progress was made in the restrictive system during that reign; but it laid the solid foundation of that system—the little that was done, was found to work so well, that it was followed up by every parliament until the commencement of the reign of George the Third, at which period the restrictive system was finally established. It was at this period, (and I beg the reader to bear it in mind) that spinning by machinery commenced, and with this began the competition between hand labour and mechanical operations, impelled in the first instance by water power and subsequently by that of the steam engine. Spinning machinery, as was inevitable, has long since extinguished the old system of hand-spinning. The industrious spinsters were finally deprived of their domestic and useful occupation, and the hand wheels which had found a place in every cottage and farm-house, thenceforth became useless.

But for the reason before mentioned, I must not attempt to write the history so much wanted, I will proceed to narrate such parts as concern myself, and rest content with occasionally recording some particulars that may hereafter be of use to the historian.