

# Industrial Identities and Civic Imperatives: The Life Tales of British Coal Masters and The Problem of Economic Decline

Michael Dintenfass<sup>1</sup>  
*University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee*

In the 1941-2 volume of the *Transactions of the Institution of Mining Engineers*, H.M. Chief Inspector of Mines F.H. Wynne published an appreciation of his recently deceased friend John Cadman. The author and his subject had grown up together in the “comparatively small and out-of-the-way mining township” of Silverdale in North Staffordshire. They had attended all the same schools, and each began his coalmining career at the Silverdale Collieries, where Cadman’s father was the general manager, before both entered the mines inspectorate. Only when they were in their early thirties did their paths diverge. While Wynne continued his climb up the ladder of government service, Cadman left the inspectorate for the chair of mining at the University of Birmingham.

At Birmingham Cadman established the first department of petroleum technology in Britain, and in due course he emerged as one of the most important figures in the British oil industry. In 1913 he served on the admiralty commission that reported to the British government on the Iranian oilfields. During World War I Cadman chaired the Inter-Allied Petroleum Council, which controlled all oil supplies to the Allies, and in 1921 he joined the Anglo-Persian Oil Company as its technical adviser. He succeeded soon thereafter to a directorship, and he ascended ultimately to the chairmanship of the enterprise. For his efforts he was made a commander of St. Michael and St. George, then knighted, and finally, in 1937, raised to a peerage. Wynne paid proper tribute to Cadman’s “great work,” “his activities in the world of Petroleum and...his services to the State,” but the main point of his heartfelt memoir was that “up to the last” Cadman had “remained faithful to Coal-mining” [13, pp. 43-5].

“Faithful to Coal-mining.” That is an extraordinary epitaph for an eminent industrialist and one for which the historiography of British economic performance does not prepare us. We are familiar, of course, with businessmen who aspired only to gentility. We are well acquainted with entrepreneurs who labored to aggrandize their families. We have read much about rational decision-makers optimizing their utility subject to the constraints that resources and techniques imposed. But fidelity to an industry? What was this about?

This paper explores what it meant to be “faithful to Coal-mining” and what it tells us about the culture of British economic life in the past that a prominent

---

<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank Mansel Blackford for his sustained interest in this paper and for his unflinching encouragement of the larger project of which it is a part.

mining man should have commemorated a truly outstanding business career in such terms. It does so by examining texts to which economic and business historians have rarely attended: the printed life tales that leading figures from the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century coal industry told about the mining lives of their peers and occasionally themselves.<sup>2</sup> These sources suggest strongly that civic virtue was the ideal that defined the self-perceptions of British industrialists, and not an aristocratic standard of dignified leisure nor an ethic of private accumulation. I will argue in conclusion that this abiding commitment to the *civitas* distinguished British industrialists from businessmen elsewhere and that this difference helps to explain the comparatively slow growth of British output, efficiency, and income since the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

### **R.A.S. Redmayne and the Ethic of Industrial Citizenship**

Let us begin with R.A.S. Redmayne, perhaps the premier British mining engineer of the first half of the twentieth century. The son of a Tyneside alkali manufacturer, he attended the Durham College of Physical Science before serving his articles under William Armstrong, one of the great North Eastern colliery viewers of the nineteenth century. In the course of a career that extended over seven decades from the 1890s, Redmayne managed coal mines in Durham, Natal, and Northumberland, was the first professor of mining (and Cadman's predecessor) at the University of Birmingham, the first chief inspector of mines at the Home Office, assistant to the coal controller during the Great War, chairman of the Imperial Mineral Resources Board, and a free-lance engineer whose practice included most of "the important legal or general mining consulting cases" between the wars and whose reputation was "second to none" [17, p. 558]. Along the way, Redmayne was also the managing director of two North Staffordshire colliery concerns, sat on the board of a South Wales coal company, and served as the director of a large British rope manufacturer. Throughout these different postings, Redmayne proved himself a staunch advocate of greater efficiency in mining, and in the debates after 1914 about how to improve the performance of the British coal industry, he was a forceful proponent of colliery amalgamations, fuel conservation, and the mechanization of extraction and haulage.

In 1942, at age seventy-seven, Redmayne published *Men, Mines, and Memories*, "not an autobiography, but merely some swept leaves of memory – recollections and reflections concerning some of the happenings in a long, varied, and active career – a record of incidents, which, it seemed, might prove of general interest" [10, p. vii]. Looking back with the benefit of more than forty years hindsight on the management of coal mines, he found the occupation in which he had spent the first phase of his working life to be a rewarding one. "The life of a colliery manager," he wrote, "is extremely varied and interesting." What made it so were the "wide opportunities" it afforded "for service to one's fellows." "Apart from the purely technical work which colliery management involved, there were schools to look after...the miners' cottages to inspect and repair...the farms to

---

<sup>2</sup>All of the individuals who appear in this essay, with the exception of Basil Pickering and W.F. Clark who coauthored life stories discussed below, were among the 155 figures whom the *Colliery Guardian*, the leading voice of the British coal trade before nationalization, included in the "Men of Note in the British Coal Industry" series that it published between 1923 and 1929.

supervise...and Parish Council meetings to attend” (as chairman and vice chairman). “There was also co-operation in the social-cum-educational life” of the miners, workmen’s institutes to direct, lectures to arrange, and university extension courses to organize [10, p. 23].

For all that Redmayne emphasized the colliery manager’s obligations to his community, he was not himself indifferent to money. He turned down the chief inspectorship of mines when it was first offered “for its acceptance would entail a much greater sacrifice of income than I considered warrantable in the circumstances,” and he relented only when the home secretary improved “somewhat the financial conditions attaching to the post.” Similarly, he left the Imperial Mineral Resources Board because it “absorbed the whole of my time and the emolument was inadequate to meet my requirements” [10, pp. 72 and 248].

Redmayne was nonetheless outspoken in his condemnation of acquisitiveness as a motive for action. It was, he said, “one of the least admirable of human qualities.” “Acquisitiveness of riches, wordly distinction, or of power, the acquirement of all...is frequently at the expense of friendship, and certainly tends towards depreciation of character” [10, p. 284].

The priority that Redmayne accorded service to society over the satisfaction of self-interest found ample expression in the gallery of eminent contemporaries with which he closed his recollections. The composition of the group of the great and the good whose pen portraits he presented there alone speaks volumes about the primacy of citizenship over entrepreneurship in Redmayne’s understanding of the world. Fifteen of the twenty prominent figures whose acquaintanceship he documented had made their mark outside the confines of industry and trade. Twelve were politicians, among them two prime ministers, A.J. Balfour and Neville Chamberlain, and the seven home secretaries under whom Redmayne had served as the head of the mines inspectorate. The economist and civil servant Robert Giffen, the physiologist J.S. Haldane, and J.M. Barrie, the creator of Peter Pan, also figured among the best and brightest whom Redmayne had been privileged to know personally.

The five men with ties to industry among the contemporaries Redmayne chose to celebrate in print were the chemist J.T. Merz, his son Charles Merz, the eminent electrical engineer, Charles Parsons, inventor of the steam turbine, Robert Smillie, the Scottish trade unionist, and Austin Hopkinson, a manufacturer of coal-cutting appliances. There was not a single coal owner nor a single mining engineer on the list. In more than half a century in the British coal industry, Redmayne had not met a solitary figure connected with the business of raising and selling coal whose virtues he felt worthy of public notice. The best he could do was to endorse the tribute that Smillie, a president of the Miners’ Federation of Great Britain, paid to the Durham coal master A.F. Pease: a man of “wide and kindly outlook,” of “high ideals and integrity” [10, pp. 301-2].

Certainly Redmayne did not scorn commercial competence. Indeed, he judged J.T. Merz, whose accomplishments included a four-volume study of *The History of European Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, to have been “a good man of business” [10, p. 285]. It is clear, though, that Redmayne’s idea of the good industrial life had much more to do with civic virtue than with operational efficiency or profitable balance sheets. Parsons, whose “attainments in the world of invention and industry” he left to “others much better qualified to discourse on” than himself, was “in business... ‘straight as a die.’ He had, for instance, a hatred of secret commissions” [10, pp. 292 and 297]. About the younger Merz, a pioneer of

electrical supply and railroad electrification in Britain, an energetic promoter of electrical power the world over, and one of the great engineers in the early days of the electricity industry, Redmayne was concerned to emphasize his services to the state and the still greater service he might have done it.<sup>3</sup> Before parliamentary committees “he was a superb witness, calm and collected, and in his replies lucid, accurate, and penetrating.” “He would have been supreme,” Redmayne wrote of a man of exceptional industrial talent and accomplishment, “as a Civil Servant had he entered the Government service” [10, p. 287]. Smillie, the one figure among Redmayne’s heroes who had been directly involved in the coal industry, gained his place in Redmayne’s pantheon by virtue of his self-abnegation: “he seemed devoid of ambition in the matter of personal advancement and acquisition of money. His one aim was the promotion of the interests of labour” [10, p. 302].

If self-denial was the essence of trade-union leadership as Redmayne understood it, it was also the attribute he found most admirable in a businessman, as his portrait of Austin Hopkinson revealed. Redmayne first met Hopkinson, who turned out to be a friend for life as well as the longtime MP for the Mossley division of Lancashire, at the end of the First World War

when a tall soldierly figure stalked into my room at the Coal Control, a man unknown to me, dressed in khaki with a corporal’s stripes. He was a cavalry man and had been right through the War. He informed me that in civil life he was a manufacturer of mechanical coal-cutting machinery and that he felt bound to call upon me to let me know that, although such action was against his own financial interests, he considered the course we had recently adopted at the production department of the Coal Control in requiring the collieries to obtain their coal-cutters from America in order to concentrate at home on the production of armaments was, in his opinion, the correct one in the circumstances and he hoped that adverse criticism would not deter us from sticking to it [10, p. 310].

For R.A.S. Redmayne, one of the most successful and celebrated figures in the British coal industry in its last half century as a private enterprise, faithfulness to coal, it seems, meant putting the country and the community before the company.

### **Coal Masters’ Memoirs and the Community of Coal**

The R.A.S. Redmayne who articulated an ethic of industrial citizenship was exceptional in his attainments, his literary inclinations, and his readiness to reflect philosophically on the conduct of business life. Most of his fellow men of coal were made of more practical stuff. Indeed, practicality was a virtue to which they readily paid homage. Thus G.P. Hyslop, the Midlands mining engineer who managed the Madeley Collieries and sat on the board of Robert Heath and Low Moor Ltd., wrote

---

<sup>3</sup>Leslie Hannah has written that “if anyone deserves the title of the British Edison, it is surely Charles Merz, who, more than any of the British pioneers, shared Edison’s capacity to view the engineer’s duty as that of creating an economic and *integrated* system. It was Merz’s unique combination of commercial vision, engineering skill and controlled business optimism which guaranteed that the crucial decisions in the [Newcastle-upon-Tyne Electric Supply] company’s history paid off” and that made the firm’s network “the biggest integrated power system in Europe” before World War I [5, p. 33, emphasis in the original].

in praise of F.H. Wynne that "he was distinguished by his practical outlook and his thoroughness. He was no mere theorist, but sought facts and reality" [14, p. 264]. The biographical essays that Britain's coal masters and colliery managers undertook to write were practical exercises. Occasioned by the deaths of mining friends and colleagues, these memoirs and appreciations were read at the meetings of Britain's regional institutes of mining engineers and then printed in the *Transactions of the Institution of Mining Engineers*. How did the conceptions of industrial distinction to which they gave expression compare with the ideal of business citizenship that informed Redmayne's commentary on his life and contemporaries?

The biographical tales that Britain's leading mining men told in their obituaries of their peers were woven out of three strands. The first consisted of the deceased's roots in the world of coal. Hyslop's appreciation of F.H. Wynne, for example, began with the late chief inspector's industrial genealogy. He "came of a Mining family. His father, Richard H. Wynne, practised as a Mining Engineer in Staffordshire, and his grandfather, Thomas Wynne, was elected as Hon. Member of the North Stafford Institute in 1873 and was one of the first group of Mines Inspectors appointed by the State" [14, p. 263]. Next these posthumous tributes surveyed the occupational histories of their subjects. Narrating the career of Robert Clive, Douglas Hay, formerly professor of mining at Sheffield and the managing director of the Barrow Barnsley Main Collieries, and his coauthor Basil Pickering moved from Clive's apprenticeship with A.H. Leech, mining engineer of Wigan, and then T.Y. Greener, general manager of Pease and Partners, County Durham, to his sixteen years as the manager of Barber, Walker and Co.'s Bentley Colliery and lastly to his secretaryship of the South Yorkshire Coal Owners' Association, in which capacity Clive spent the remaining twenty-two years of his life [15, p. 172]. The final basic element of these biographical constructions was an account of the deceased colleague's services on behalf of mining's professional societies. The consulting engineer, mineral valuer, and colliery-company director Alexander Smith, whom the mining engineers W.F. Clark and L. Holland remembered, had been secretary of the South Staffordshire and East Worcestershire Institute of Mining Engineers for thirty-two years, president of its successor body the South Staffordshire and Warwickshire Institute, an active participant in the federation of the various regional institutes into the Institution of Mining Engineers, a vice president of that organization, and a member of the Institution of Civil Engineers [11, p. 60].

This almost ritualistic invocation of industrial lineages, mining-trade histories, and voluntary-society activism worked implicitly to inscribe the subjects of these practical biographical essays within a community of coal. The presidential address that Dr. J.S. Haldane, the scientist whose researches into human activity underground greatly advanced the understanding of miners' diseases and the development of safe working practices down the pits, delivered to the Institution of Mining Engineers in 1924-5 explicitly recognized the existence of just such a community, and it made loyalty to its members the first principle by which coal owners, mining engineers, and colliery managers ought to live. It was, as J. Ivon Graham, Haldane's assistant director of the Mining Research Laboratory at the University of Birmingham, recalled, "a philosophical address [and as such] unique in the Institution's history." In it, Haldane "emphasized comradeship as being the value which in reality embraces all the other values." By comradeship he meant "just action based on the placing of value upon the interests of neighbours. It carries with it respect, and the very highest kind of respect, for those who show it, whether

they be rich or poor, known or unknown." Lest all this be too abstract for his coal-hardened audience, Haldane explained that comradeship was "part of the atmosphere of a British pit, and real pitmen seem always to carry some of it round with them" [12, p. 419].

The comradeship that Haldane preached was a virtue that Britain's leading mining men found practiced in the lives of some of their most eminent contemporaries. It was at the heart of the eulogy that Hay and Pickering delivered on behalf of Robert Clive of the South Yorkshire Coal Owners' Association. He was, they wrote, "at all times prepared to go out of his way to help his brother Mining Engineers in the various difficult problems which faced them" [15, p. 173]. Comradeliness was also the benchmark by which Prof. J.A.S. Ritson of the Royal School of Mines took the measure of Henry Walker, like Wynne and Redmayne at one time head of the mines inspectorate.

No Chief Inspector of Mines [he wrote] had so many friends among all classes of the Mining Industry. To the mine owners he was a strong and just administrator of the Mining Laws and Regulations; to the management he was a sound judge of mining practice and a personal friend willing to help, especially when trouble was in the offing; and by the miners' leaders he was respected to the full [16, p.179].

Where amidst this celebration of industrial fellowship did technological and managerial accomplishments fit into the obituaries that British men of coal penned about their compatriots in the trade? Few, in fact, of these brief lives found space for their subjects' endeavors with respect to the efficiency and profitability of the undertakings that engaged them, and where they did so, discussion of such matters was generally subordinated to some other aspect of the late departed's mining career. Ritson, for example, moved directly from the successful completion of Henry Walker's apprenticeship to his admission to the mines inspectorate, passing over in silence the five years Walker spent managing the Liverton and Stanghow collieries [16, p. 179]. The same author recalled Redmayne's time as the manager of the Seaton Deleval mines in Northumberland in his memoir in the *Transactions*, but the importance he attributed to these nine years of Redmayne's life was that "it was during this period that he mastered the Tyneside dialect and collected the repertoire of stories that afterwards delighted his friends" [17, p. 558]. Hay and Pickering acknowledged that Robert Clive had pioneered modern mining practices in the deep seams of South Yorkshire while in charge of the Bentley Colliery and that "the technical developments [he had] carried out" there "attracted considerable attention," but they found it just as "interesting to note that no less than twelve of these students [who apprenticed under Clive at Bentley] attained important positions in the Mining Industry" [15, p. 172]. Clark and Holland wrote expansively of Alexander Smith's "large practice as a consulting engineer and valuer," his retention "by many of the largest firms in the Midlands," his expertise "in rating matters," and his appearances "as a witness in a large number of important cases." At no point, however, did they describe concretely any of the deeds that had laid the foundation of Smith's repute [11, p. 61].

Both the formal structure of the narratives that leading mining men in Britain composed about their late peers and the judgments they made about their subjects' virtues suggest that, for the best and brightest of the British coal industry of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mining was a calling undertaken on behalf

of the industry's participants and not a business whose fortunes depended on the efficiency with which the demands of employers, clients, and customers were met. The rendering of mining lives in terms of familial and educational links to the trade, coal-industry employments, and dedication to professional mining societies placed the deceased among their comrades in coal. Tributes to their neighborliness memorialized their good offices while among them. The boundaries of the coal community these practical biographical essays drew may have been narrower than those of the *civitas* as Redmayne understood them, but nowhere in these lives of company directors, mining engineers, and colliery managers does the ethic of industrial citizenship yield much ground to tangible business accomplishment, either technological or managerial.

### Conclusion

The faithfulness to coal that Wynne treasured in Cadman and that his mining peers subscribed to was not a concern with the productivity and profitability of the trade as such or of any of its constituent enterprises. Fidelity meant rather a comradely or neighborly commitment to one's fellows in the industry. In practice, this brotherly ethos enjoined Britain's leading mining men to the discipline of civic activism: to the leadership of coal-trade societies and the superintendence of pit-village philanthropies, as well as to the assumption of administrative and judicial posts at the local level and participation as expert witnesses and committee members in the workings of the central government.

For Britain's coal-trade elite there was not, then, a fundamental distinction separating private enterprise from public service. Its members routinely attended to both spheres within a single working day. They regularly moved back and forth between them over the course of years. As these colliery managers, mining engineers, and coal-company directors understood the conduct of a coalmining career, profit-seeking undertakings and public initiatives were complementary and inseparable domains of an industrial life.

The sense of service to the larger community that is so evident in the stories British men of coal constructed about their comrades in industry was deeply rooted in Victorian culture. Its lineaments are visible in the powerful hold of the concept of altruism over intellectual discourse and in the charitable traditions of the middle and working classes. They can be seen as well in the public discussion of social-welfare provision and in the vast array of voluntary societies that proliferated almost from the beginning of urbanization and industrialization [3,6,7,8,9].

If the ideal of civic virtue assimilated coal owners, mining engineers, and colliery managers to the world of middle-class professionals at home, it also differentiated them from their counterparts abroad. It distinguished them from the "charter entrepreneurs" of early nineteenth-century America, whose autobiographies, Joyce Appleby has shown, lauded the economic achievements of their heroes and treated "their country as the locus for beneficial exchanges of talents and riches" [1, pp. 180-1 and 187-8]. The dedication of British industrialists to the public good also set them apart from the businessmen of Wilhelmine Germany who, as Hartmut Berghoff and Roland Moller have demonstrated, were far less active in local government, parliamentary politics, and charitable endeavors than their British equivalents [2, pp. 278-83].

The commitment of Britain's industrialists to the community was not without consequences for the long-term performance of the country's economy. The time

these men spent on the magistrates' benches, at the lunches of philanthropic bodies, in the rooms of trade societies and professional associations, and in the corridors of Whitehall was time they did not spend at the works and the exchanges. This is not to say that British industrialists were indifferent to the fortunes of profit-seeking enterprises, for they were not. Nor is it my argument that at some moment during the nineteenth century the stewards of British firms lost some of their appetite for business. Rather, the point is that, as the increasing competitiveness of the international economy altered the challenges that British industry faced, the engagement of businessmen with public concerns led them to prefer the managerial strategies that were most immediately to hand and least demanding in terms of time and attention. In the case of coal, this bred a fixation with lower wages and longer hours and a relative neglect of innovations in extraction and haulage techniques, economies in the purchase and use of materials and stores, and the changing demands of consumers and the coal-preparation and selling practices required to meet them [4]. The civic imperatives that lay behind this approach to industrial management perhaps enriched public life in Britain. By encouraging quick fixes of business dilemmas, however, the ethic of community betterment that animated industrialists may well have slowed the growth of British wealth.

## References

1. Joyce Appleby, "New Cultural Heroes in the Early National Period," in *The Culture of the Market: Historical Essays*, Thomas L. Haskell and Richard Teichgraber III, eds. (New York, 1993), 163-87.
2. Hartmut Berghoff and Roland Moller, "Tired Pioneers or Dynamic Newcomers? A Comparative Essay on English and German Entrepreneurial History, 1870-1914," *Economic History Review*, XLVII (May 1994), 262-87.
3. Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850-1930* (Oxford, 1991).
4. Michael Dintenfass, *Managing Industrial Decline: Entrepreneurship in the British Coal Industry Between the Wars* (Columbus, 1992).
5. Leslie Hannah, *Electricity Before Nationalisation: A Study of the Development of the Electricity Supply Industry in Britain to 1948* (London, 1979).
6. Jose Harris, "Political Thought and the Welfare State 1870-1940: An Intellectual Framework for British Social Policy," *Past & Present*, 135 (May 1992), 116-41.
7. Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (New York, 1995).
8. R.J. Morris, "Clubs, Societies, and Associations," in *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950*, vol. 3 *Social Agencies and Institutions*, F.M.L. Thompson, ed. (New York, 1990), 393-443.
9. F.K. Prochaska, "Philanthropy," in *The Cambridge Social History of Britain*, iii, 357-93.
10. Sir Richard A.S. Redmayne, *Men, Mines, and Memories* (London, 1942).
11. *Transactions of the Institution of Mining Engineers* [hereafter *TIME*] 75 (1927-8).
12. *TIME* 91 (1935-6).
13. *TIME* 101 (1941-2).
14. *TIME* 103 (1943-4).
15. *TIME* 104 (1944-5).
16. *TIME* 114 (1954-5).
17. *TIME* 115 (1955-6).