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The Life and Influence of Samuel Slater

Samuel Slater was an early English-American industrialist who immigrated to Rhode Island in 1789 and designed and operated some of the first textile mills in the United States. Known as the "Father of the American Industrial Revolution," it is difficult to overstate his influence in regards to the textile industry, as well as business management. However, a comparative look between two articles demonstrates that his influence isn't universally agreed upon. James L. Conrad Jr.'s article, "Drive that Branch: Samuel Slater, the Power Loom, and the Writing of America's Textile History," analyzes the historiography of Slater, arguing that nearly all scholarly research on Slater is based upon the research of George S. White, who downplayed Slater's significance in adopting power looms. He argues this notion, and attempts to demonstrate that Slater was not as conservative as research suggests, and he was, in fact, an early and influential adopter of the power loom. "The Merchant, the Manufacturer and the Factory Manager: The Case of Samuel Slater," is an article from The Business History Review, written by Barbara M. Tucker, which also attempts to portray Slater's significance, but does so instead by demonstrating his role in the evolution of business management by arguing that he was "perhaps the earliest example of the professional manager," (Tucker, 297).

Tucker argues that early textile enterprises, as a whole, were reluctant to adopt new trends that integrated factory operations, and later, separated entrepreneurial functions from operational ones, which would be handled by factory agents. She supports this idea through a case study of Samuel Slater, who "was slow to accept these trends," and only did so after the “obvious inability of either him or his family to cope with a rapidly growing and changing industry in the 1820s and 1830s forced him to integrate spinning, weaving, and finishing operations and to turn over broad responsibility in individual factories,” (Tucker, 297).

Tucker makes her argument through a well-formulated chronological look into the life and business practices of Samuel Slater, who ran and operated a number of mills, first under a partnership with prominent Rhode Island entrepreneurs Almy and Brown, and then under his own business partnership, Samuel Slater and Sons. Slater had very little authority over business matters with Almy and Brown, and after they opened a mill without involving him, Slater decided to open his own factories, first in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, and later, in Rehoboth, Massachusetts. As his enterprise grew, it became difficult for Slater to travel between mills and oversee day-to-day operations. At this point, his sons began playing a major role in managing the factories as well, but eventually their network would grow even more, forcing Slater to overhaul his business and rely on more than just his family.

Slater’s first move was to integrate his factories. From 1827-1830, he fully converted to the power loom, and was able to combine spinning and weaving within a single factory. From here, he let go of all the merchant weavers and most handloom weavers (keeping a few for more ornate cloth that machines were incapable of weaving). Slater also adopted steam power for his looms, “which allowed him to locate near his markets, cut his transportation costs, tap a large supply of urban labor, and operate his factory continuously throughout the year,” (Tucker, 305). He also formed the Providence Machine Company, which, along with providing supplies for his own factories, also sold to other manufacturers throughout New England.

Finally, and central to Tucker's argument, Slater reorganized management in 1829, with the hiring of specially trained factory agents to oversee operations. Each of these agents was still supervised by one of Slater's sons to ensure they were meeting performance standards. These factory agents were typically extremely experienced and knowledgeable in textile production, but lacked the capital to open their own factories. They were hired on salary by contract for a specified time, and were essentially technicians who worked directly under Samuel Slater or one of his sons. They were held directly accountable for the quality of cloth being produced, and were typical sent samples of how the end product should be. These agents, working with bookkeepers, also began the practice of keeping a factory ledger, which served a similar function to today's profit and loss (P&L) statements. Though common today, the ledger they devised was novel at the time, and allowed Slater to determine the exact cost of yarn per yard on a monthly basis, and was "one of the most sophisticated forms of accounting employed by early-nineteenth-century American businessmen," (Tucker, 309). Tucker notes that other companies didn't begin adopting this until the 1850s.

Conrad's article also recognizes the influence of Samuel Slater, but for different reasons. Conrad centers his argument on dismantling the "interpretation [that] sees Slater refusing to adopt power-loom weaving when it was first introduced in 1815," (Conrad Jr., 2). He argues "that Samuel Slater aggressively supported and effectively utilized the power loom and other post-1815 technologies long before most of his contemporaries," (Conrad Jr., 3). Conrad acknowledges that this claim goes against what historians have generally accepted, but notes that much of what is known about Slater comes from

George S. White, who “embellished Slater's achievements, made errors of both omission and commission, and produced an incomplete biography,” (Conrad Jr., 4). Additionally, the notion that he refused to adopt the power loom until well after their implementation in the Lowell mills comes from scholars who, relying on White’s biography, misinterpreted a quote referencing “Mr. Slater,” and assumed they were talking about his son being unable to convince Samuel to adopt the power loom.

While Conrad Jr. makes a strong case surrounding misinterpretations throughout the historiography of Samuel Slater based on White’s biography -- which served as a foundation for nearly all subsequent research -- his direct evidence in regards to Slater’s use of the power loom seems shaky, at best. He notes that “by 1813, nearly two years before Lowell's first power loom was fully operational at Waltham, at least six Rhode Island mechanics had constructed power looms of different designs literally from the ground up,” but makes no mention of Slater (Conrad Jr., 14). He does explain, however, that by 1815, work “had progressed beyond the planning stages,” to implement power looms in the Almy, Brown and Slater Smithfield Mill, but they were still not up and running, noted by a letter from November 1816 where the Slater brothers correspond to one another, asking about the progress of the power looms, and expressing a wish to “get some underway as soon as practicable,” (Conrad Jr., 16). At the time of this correspondence, the Lowell mills were already transitioning to the power loom.

Additionally, much of Conrad’s evidence relies on uncertainties, often using words like “may,” “might have,” and “perhaps.” For example, he explains how a letter from Slater suggests, “water looms *may* have operated at the Oxford Dye House prior to 1819,” (Conrad Jr., 20). It is not until 1820 that Conrad shows definitive proof that

Slater's use of power looms "at West Boylston and Smithfield is easily verified," by an 1820 *Census of Manufactures* (Conrad Jr., 20). Conrad also seems to back peddle a bit on his argument, by providing evidence for why Slater didn't implement the power loom right away like some of his contemporaries, which seems to go against his argument. He explains that his partnership with Almy and Brown was partly responsible, as they "were somewhat dissimilar in regard to the extension of the business," which "undoubtedly applied to the development of power weaving," (Conrad Jr., 14). Additionally, he notes that there were "significant barriers," including "economic instability and the general state of the textile industry in 1815," which was comprised of "fear of imports, and inadequate tariff protection [which] combined to hurt and, in some cases, destroy Rhode Island Mills," (Conrad Jr., 18).

Conrad's article also takes aim at Tucker's research, which is somewhat strange, as their arguments aren't entirely at odds, but simply stress different elements of what made Slater so influential. His main point seems to be to demonstrate that most research on Slater has been based off of White's biography. He provides examples of this by dissecting many scholarly articles, including Tucker's study, which "found Slater 'bound' by traditional or preindustrial values that resulted in his failure to fully adopt the power loom," (Conrad Jr., 10). While Tucker does make note that "Unlike many other factory owners, Slater did not adopt the power loom immediately," it is not a central focus of her argument (Tucker, 302). She does, however, make a strong case that Samuel Slater "was slow to accept these [managerial and technological] trends," and only did so after the "obvious inability of either him or his family to cope with a rapidly growing and changing industry in the 1820s and 1830s (Tucker, 297).

Despite Conrad's emphasis on the power loom, and the lack of definitive evidence to demonstrate definitely that Slater was indeed an early adopter, he provides important research to the narrative of Samuel Slater, helping to revise the history that had been based primarily on one biographical work. He relies on valid scholarly sources ranging from shortly after Slater's death, to the time in which he published his research in 1995, as well as manufacturing census' and a collection, the John Slater Papers, held at the Brown University Library. Tucker uses similar academic resources, including the biography by White that Conrad calls into question. Still, her sources are quite reliable, ranging from documents from Slater's time, to research done throughout the twentieth century by academics that studied textile mills, industrialization and Samuel Slater.

While Conrad Jr. does question some of Tucker's statements, this two articles can best be viewed as complimentary, rather than being at odds with one another. Together, they can help one understand the life of Samuel Slater, and the significant role he played both in the textile industry, as well as in management within the business world. Both Conrad Jr. and Tucker emphasize the importance and influence that Slater served in both of these areas, though they emphasize different reasons. While Conrad analyzes the historiography of Slater, arguing that his role in adopting the power mill is much greater (and earlier) than previously thought, Tucker stresses Slater's innovative managerial techniques, which she argued makes him one of the earliest examples of what we would define today as the professional manager. Though focusing on different attributes of Slater's business, the two articles together help paint a portrait of the life and significance of Samuel Slater.

Works Cited

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