

Barthelemy Faujas de Saint-Fond's impressions of Birmingham, 1784

(Barthelemy Faujas de Saint-Fond, *A Journey through England and Scotland to the Hebrides in 1784*, trans. Sir Archibald Geikie (1907), II, pp. 345-350, 356-357; in D. B. Horn and Mary Ransome, eds., *English Historical Documents, Vol. X, 1714-1783*, N.Y: Oxford University Press, 1969, pp. 473-44. The author was a French geologist.)

We left Derby at noon, but as the roads are all still very bad along the whole of this route, we had much difficulty in arriving on the same day at Birmingham. It was past nine in the evening when we reached the inn, after having crossed black and arid heaths, and an extremely wild country.

We had letters of recommendation to Doctor Withering, the translator of the *Sciagraphia of Bergmann*, and a lover of both botany and chemistry: we hastened to wait on him next day to present them. He lives in a fine house, furnished with much taste and elegance. We had tea at his house in company with ladies as pleasant as they were good-looking, and to complete our good fortune, we were here introduced to Mr. Watt, one of the most scientific men in England as regards mechanics, and who also possesses great knowledge in chemistry and physics.

From the activity of its manufactures and its commerce, Birmingham is one of the most curious towns in England. If anyone should wish to see in one comprehensive view, the most numerous and varied industries, all combined in contributing to the arts of utility, of pleasure, and of luxury, it is hither that he must come. Here all the resources of industry, supported by the genius of invention, and by mechanical skill of every kind are directed towards the arts, and seem to be linked together to co-operate for their mutual perfection.

I know that some travellers who have not given themselves the trouble to reflect on the importance and advantage of these kinds of manufactures in such a country as England, have disapproved of most of these industrial establishments. I know that even an Englishman who has only taken a hasty, I would almost say an inconsiderate view of these magnificent establishments, William Gilpin [a landscape painter], has said that it was difficult for the eye to be long pleased in the midst of so many frivolous arts, where a hundred men may be seen, whose labours are confined to the making of a tobacco box. But besides that this statement is exaggerated and ill-considered, its author has not deigned to cast his eyes over the vast works where steam-pumps are made, these astonishing machines, the perfecting of which does so much honour to the talents and knowledge of Mr. Watt; over the manufactories in constant activity making sheet-copper for sheathing ships' bottoms; over those of plate-tin and plate-iron, which make France tributary to England, nor over that varied and extensive hard-ware manufacture which employs to so much advantage more than thirty thousand hands, and compels all Europe, and a part of the New World, to supply themselves from England, because all ironmongery is made here in greater perfection, with more economy and in greater abundance, than anywhere else.

Once more, I say with pleasure, and it cannot be too often said to Frenchmen, that it is the abundance of coal which has performed this miracle and has created, in the midst of a barren desert, a town with forty thousand inhabitants, who live in comfort, and enjoy all the conveniences of life.

Here a soil, once covered with the most barren and sombre heath, has been changed into groves of roses and lilacs, and turned into fertile and delightful gardens by Mr. Boulton, associated with Mr. Watt, in whose work more than a thousand hands are engaged.

The population of Birmingham has made such an advance, that during the war with the United States of America, a war which weakened the resources of England, at least three hundred new houses were added annually to the town, and this rate doubled as soon as peace was concluded. A well-informed person assured me that this was true, and he showed me, during my stay in the town, a whole street which was in process of erection with such rapidity that, all the houses being built on a given plan and at the same time, one could believe that the street would be entirely completed in less than two months.

I had much pleasure in visiting Mr. Watt as often as I could, whose wide accomplishments in chemistry and the arts, inspired me with the very greatest interest. His moral qualities, and his engaging manner of expressing his thoughts, increased my respect and regard for him. He joins to the frank manners of a Scotsman the gentleness and amiability of a kind-hearted man. Surrounded with charming children, all well-informed, full of talent and having had the best education, he enjoys among them the unalloyed happiness of making them his friends and of being adored by them as their father.

I had one day a delightful dinner with this amiable family, and it was doubly interesting to me, for Doctor Priestley who is a relation and friend of Mr. Watt, was there; I had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of this celebrated man, to whom the physical sciences owe such great obligations, and whose gentle and kindly manners increased our affection for his virtues....

We passed several days in Birmingham in the midst of the arts and industries, and in the society of enlightened men and amiable women. Nothing can equal so peaceful a charm; the mind is fed and inspirited; the head is filled with facts, and the heart with gratitude. Such was our experience in this town which we could not leave without regret.