Travels in North America, in the Years 1827 and 1828
by Captain Basil Hall

Lowell 1827

On the 12th of October, we made an expedition from Boston to the largest manufacturing establishment in New England, or, I suppose, in America, at Lowell, on the banks of the Merrimack. This river had been allowed to dash unheeded over the Falls in that neighbourhood, from all time, until the recent war gave a new direction to industry, and diverted capital heretofore employed in commerce or in agriculture, into the channel of manufactures. A few years ago, the spot which we now saw covered with huge cotton mills, smiling villages, canals, roads, and bridges, was a mere wilderness, and, if not quite solitary, was inhabited only by painted savages. Under the convoy of a friendly guide, who allowed us to examine not only what we pleased, but how we pleased, we investigated these extensive works very carefully.

The stuffs manufactured at Lowell, mostly of a coarse description, are woven entirely by power looms, and are intended, I was told, chiefly for home consumption. Every thing is paid for by the piece, but the people work only from daylight to dark, having half an hour to breakfast and as long for dinner. The whole discipline, ventilation, and other arrangements, appeared to be excellent; of which the best proof was the healthy and cheerful look of the girls, all of whom, by the way, were trigged out with much neatness and simplicity, and wore high tortoise-shell combs at the back of their heads. I was glad to learn that the most exemplary purity of conduct existed universally amongst these merry damsels—a class of persons not always, it is said, in some other countries, the best patterns of moral excellence. The state of society, indeed, readily explains this superiority: in a country where the means of obtaining a livelihood are so easy, every girl who behaves well is so sure of being soon married. In this expectation, they all contrive, it seems, to save a considerable portion of their wages; and the moment the favoured swain has attained the rank of earning a dollar a-day, the couple are proclaimed in church next Sunday, to a certainty. The fortune, such as it is, thus comes with the bride; at least she brings enough to buy the clothes, furniture, and the other necessaries of an outfit.

Generally, however, these good folks, as well as many of the more wealthy class of the community, do not think of setting up an establishment of their own at first, but live at boarding-houses. This apparently comfortless mode of life, is undoubtedly far the most economical; besides which, it saves the mistress of the family from the wear and tear of domestic drudgery, alway, unavoidably great in a country where menial service is held to be disgraceful. What happens when a parcel of youngsters make their appearance I forgot to enquire; but before that comes about to any great extent, the parties have probably risen in the world;—for everything in America relating to population, seems to be carried irresistibly forward by a spring-tide of certain prosperity. There is plenty of room—plenty of food—and plenty of employment; so that, by the exercise of a moderate share of diligence, the young couple may swell their establishment to any extent they please, without those doubts and fears, those anxious misgivings, which attend the setting out of children in older
and more thickly peopled countries! In America, an urchin, before he is much bigger than a cotton bobbin, is turned to some use. By and by, when he gets tired of school, he turns mutineer, buys an axe, and scampers off to the western forests, where he squats down on the first piece of land which pleases him. He forthwith marries, and rears up a nest-full of children; who, in due course of time, play a similar round of independent pranks, and reap the same roving sort of success, in the same broad world which is all before them, where to choose their place of unquiet rest.

On the 13th October, at six o'clock in the morning, I was awakened by the bell which tolled the people to their work, and on looking from the window, saw the whole space between the 'Factories' and the village speckled over with girls, nicely dressed, and glittering with bright shawls and showy-coloured gowns, and gay bonnets, all streaming along to their business, with an air of lightness, and an elasticity of step, implying an obvious desire to get to their work.

I was called away from this gay scene by a summons from our host to accompany him in his gig to inspect the hydraulic works, Anglic, the milldam, by which the water is brought from the river above the Falls to the manufactories, which stand a mile or two below the cascade. Every thing hereabouts looked determined and business-like, as if the whole had been guided by one clear head. A stream capable of giving motion to forty or fifty cotton-mills was brought through the forest to a reservoir, from whence it was distributed at pleasure to the numerous establishments starting up on every hand. Several school-houses were pointed out to me, and no less than three churches; besides innumerable boarding-houses, taverns, newspaper offices, watch-makers, book-shops, hatters, comb-makers, and all the family of Stores, every one of them as fresh and new as if the bricks had been in the mould but yesterday.

I was much pleased to see a great brewery starting up like a Leviathan, amongst this small fry of buildings; and still more pleased when I learnt from my friend that there were hopes of being able to substitute malt liquor among the cotton-mill population, in place of the abominable ardent spirits so lamentably prevalent elsewhere.

I walked over these flourishing establishments, I can honestly say, without any admixture of jealousy; though, had I thought the success of Lowell likely to prove seriously detrimental to Manchester or Preston, I am not such a furious citizen of the world, or itinerant philanthropist, as to have viewed its progress with unmixed pleasure. But I had no such fears. These industrious people, it must be recollected, are manufacturing for their own home markets; and I imagine a very large proportion of the English manufactures are likewise made for home consumption. At all events, there is room enough for us both. Agriculture is now, and must continue for many years to come, the most productive method of employing capital in America. And this is not the less true because, here and there, individual activity, and the powerful momentum of capital, avail themselves of some accident, such as that of the late war, or take advantage of some favourable natural position, and, by pressing the powers of nature into their service, at the right period of time, overcome many difficulties which would arrest the progress of ordinary men possessed of ordinary means. But unless those general principles which, in spite of all legislation,
regulate commerce, manufactures, and every other species of money-making, be really attended to in these matters, no such speculations can succeed in the long run.

The cheapness of labour, the facility of getting money, and, above all, the low rate of profits with which manufacturing industry is content to be rewarded in England, compared with the high wages, the large profits, and the comparative small amount of capital in America, must, probably, for a time, give to the British manufacturer the power of competing successfully in foreign markets with the Americans. And as to what shall take place in their own markets, I have not the least doubt that adjustments will ere long be made which a thousand Tariffs could not materially interfere with. After breakfast, on the 13th of October, 1827, we left Lowell, and shaped our course across the country to Salem, a town on the sea-coast, 14 miles from Boston. . . .