

I first encountered *Men of Iron* in 1978 when a lecturer on my Social History Masters class, with a reputation for challenging students by drawing them into the complexities of history, asked me to read it for the next seminar on the early industrial revolution. He spotted that I was from Tyneside and was curious to see my reaction. Most seminar members expected the discussion to focus upon the 'Putting out System', textile frames, looms and jennies and concluding with Lancashire and steam powered factories. I spent the following week reading and rereading Michael Flinn's monograph, the fruits of his PhD research, and when we met in the Seminar room at the Centre for Social History at Warwick the session witnessed, thanks to Flinn, the overturning of several historical orthodoxies. First the spotlight on the rise of industrial capitalism shifted across the Pennines from Lancashire and Cheshire to Tyneside and the lower Derwent Valley. In the villages of Winlaton, Blaydon, and Swallwell the mills, forges and anvils of the Crowley establishment constituted the world's largest capitalist enterprise with over 1500 workers before the mid-eighteenth century. These workers were employed full time, were provided housing and a part contributory welfare system and laboured in an environment that was tightly controlled by company laws and regulations. Sociologically they complied with classic definitions of a structured working class, generations before the rise of Lancashire and Yorkshire textile mill towns.

Michael Flinn was well aware of the debates on social class that dominated social sciences during the early 1960's, yet he refused to get drawn in, unlike his contemporary E P Thompson whose *Making of the English Working Class* was published a few months after *Men of Iron*. Thompson's work, a landmark in English social history, nevertheless has often been criticised whilst Flinn's subtle, nuanced analysis has attracted generations of admirers. Historians increasingly see the industrial transformation of Britain as a 'process' that took at least a century to be realised rather than a 'revolution' and the iron economy of the lower Derwent Valley was an important early stage in this development.

*Men of Iron* has provided a platform for research by historians who have developed further Flinn's insights into social class and industrial society. David Levine and Keith Wrightson's, *The Making of Industrial Society, Whickham 1560-1765*, Oxford University Press, 1991, has an international reputation as one of the finest studies of English social and economic history produced in recent decades. The two Cambridge historians extended Flinn's field of study to include the pitmen and waggon way workers of the area to produce a comprehensive demographic portrait of the area which both confirm Flinn's findings and widens our understanding of the growth of the north eastern economy. Professor Chris Evans of the University of South Wales has also followed Flinn's footsteps with research into the wider area of early iron and steel production in the Derwent Valley, the role of Baltic Iron and continental labour.

Flinn was fortunate in having original source material on the Crowley company and he sought out, and tapped into local knowledge on the area, Frank Kojay in particular generously provided information and became a good friend to the young researcher. Much of the Crowley records were lost after *Men of Iron* was completed. It has been rumoured that they were mislaid during Newcastle City Library's move into its new building in 1968 and 'weeded material' was dumped on Blaydon Tip - next to the old Blaydon Main colliery and on the fringe of the Crowley operations! Michael Flinn's timely research saved this vital link in our local and national history. For many years *Men of Iron* has only been available for consultation in a few local and specialist university libraries, its re-publication is both welcome and testimony to the dedication of all involved in the activities of the village's local history organisation.