The Law Book of the Crowley Ironworks
Edited by M W Flinn
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INTRODUCTION

*The Law Book of the Crowley Ironworks* is already well known to economic historians. It is a codification of the regulations issued by Sir Ambrose Crowley and his son, John, governing the administration of their extensive ironworks in the County of Durham early in the eighteenth century. As the ironworks were probably the largest in Europe in their day, the Law Book is unique in providing a detailed contemporary description of the industrial and social organization of an unusual community. Small wonder that it has long provided a valuable quarry of fascinating material for economic and social historians. The manuscripts, however, is of considerable bulk, and though some writers have quoted liberally from the law, piecemeal quotation has detracted from its historical value, for much of this lies in its embodiment of a comprehensive conception of an industrial society. It is to be regretted that the bulk of the manuscript prohibits reproduction in its entirety. It has been necessary to summarize some laws, but it is hoped that this will not have destroyed the balance of the original.

The ironworks whose management and social organization were regulated by the Law Book were founded by Sir Ambrose Crowley in the late seventeenth century. The son of a Stourbridge ironmonger, Crowley was apprenticed, in 1674, to Clement Plumstead, a member of the London Drapers' Company. At an early age he displayed the characteristics of enterprise and determination which marked all stages in his career. Setting up in business on his own account as an iron merchant, his independent and turbulent spirit led him already at the age of twenty-six to quarrel with his su-

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The last sentence was potentially very important.

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piers of ironworks in the Midlands, and to enter industry on his own account as a manufacturer of nails. About the year 1683, after weighing up shrewdly all aspects of cost and location, he established a nail factory at Sunderland. Here he soon ran into difficulties, for the foreign workers he introduced aroused local opposition on religious grounds, and in 1691 he decided to move the works to the village of Wolsaton, some fifteen miles away in the fork of the valleys of the Tyne and the Derwent.

Crowley’s move to Wolsaton marks the beginning of a rapid rise in his fortune. Substantial regular contracts for the supply of nails and other ironware to the Navy necessitated expansion of the factory. The desire to secure independence of supplies of coal iron—the raw material of the hand nailers—and of steel, led to multiplication of the processes carried on at his works. These, in turn, required water-power to drive furnace bellows, forge hammers, slitting and rolling mills, and new factories were accordingly built in the neighbouring hamlets of Wolsaton Mill (in the late 1706/8) and Swallowell (in 1787), both of which drew their power from the water of the River Derwent. Sir Ambrose died in 1719, and his now extensive business was very ably carried on by his son John. After John Crowley’s death, in 1728, at the early age of thirty-eight, the business continued to thrive under the direction of John’s widow, Theodosia. Theodosia’s widowhood lasted fifty-four years. During most of this time she directed what was claimed to be the largest ironworks in Europe, managed the large landed estates which the wealth of her husband and father-in-law had accumulated, successfully married off her sons and daughters into the ranks of the aristocracy, and retained a prominent place in the fashionable circles of Mayfair and Bath.

The business controlled by these members of the Crowley family was a nation-wide organization. The factories, employing many hundreds of workers from the early years of the eighteenth century, were grouped in the County of Durham, south of the Tyne, some three or four miles above Newcastle. The head office, principal warehouse and family residence remained in London, firstly in Thames Street, and, after 1734, at Greenwich. Most of the goods manufactured in the North were brought by sea to London or

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“The workers were Catholics from Liege”

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