

**THE BRITISH COTTON
MANUFACTURES: AND A REPLY TO
AN ARTICLE ON THE SPINNING
MACHINERY CONTAINED IN A RECENT
NUMBER OF THE EDINBURGH REVIEW**

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The British Cotton Manufactures: And a Reply to an Article on the Spinning Machinery
Contained in a Recent Number of the Edinburgh Review by Richard Guest

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RICHARD GUEST

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"ERROR HOPS WITH AIRY AND FASTIDIOUS LEVITY OVER PROOFS AND ARGUMENTS,
AND PRESSES UPON ASSERTION, WHICH IT CALLS CONCLUSION."—*Observer.*

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THE leading periodical Reviews of the present time, exercise a very powerful influence over the opinions and tastes of their readers. The characters of authors and the success of books, are, consequently, in a great measure, at their mercy; they can build up, or destroy, a reputation with a paragraph, and great must the degree of excellence be, which will enable a work to struggle into popularity and estimation in despite of their fiat. Of that small portion of the public, who would have the curiosity to purchase, and to read, a work condemned by them, few would have the confidence in their own judgment and the mental independence, to assert, openly and unhesitatingly, an opposite appreciation. Instead of arraigning and stigmatizing a critique, as partial and unjust, they would timidly dissent from it, half suspecting they might themselves be mistaken, in differing from so high an authority. It is true, the reviews might not be able to set

up a decidedly bad and contemptible book, nor to write down one of first rate character, but, over the numbers that hover between these extremes,—in the intermediate region, —the temperate zone of literature, their sway is despotic. An author who can cull from their article a sentence of panegyric, and plant it in the fore-front of an advertisement of his work, may safely reckon upon its commanding a sale, and finding readers. They can usher him up the path which leads to profit and distinction,—they have it in their power to confer emolument and fame.

Upon calm consideration, we may, perhaps, doubt the expediency of their having been, by the tacit assent of the public, invested with this power. One of the effects of its exercise, is to cramp and confine the energies of the mind. An author is more anxious about what the reviewers may say of him, than he is ready to commit himself to the unfettered impulse of his thought. They are a curb to the eccentricities and the developement of genius. Instead of being its humble handmaids and followers, they become its masters and directors; at the same time that numerous and weighty reasons render their estimate a very uncertain standard of taste, and a very unsafe criterion of excel-

lence. To obtain their recommendation and applause must be the desire and ambition of many a writer, and, when an object is highly desirable, it would be to deny the usual course of human action, to suppose that it may not occasionally be sought, or obtained, by indirect means. There are possible circumstances to be imagined between author and reviewer that will procure a flattering notice of a work, not intrinsically deserved, supposing only, that the latter be of a certain cast of mediocrity, which will not absolutely disgrace the encomium. Personal intimacy, a spirit of clanship, the sympathy of fellow-countrymen, a conformity of religious or political opinion, will produce the same result. On the other hand, private feelings of unfriendliness, envy, the antipathies of party spirit, prejudice, or resentment, will cause a publication to be disparaged considerably below its actual demerits. To what extent these various motives may operate the public is ignorant. It is inherent in the character of an anonymous writer that the integrity of his censure or commendation cannot be scanned; they are, therefore, questionable and suspicious, unless confirmed by the judgment of the reader. Observations of this nature may not be palatable to those who are the subject of them, and I am prepared

for their drawing down upon what I have written, a plentiful share of detraction and abuse. The priests of the temple are not likely to be very placable towards the intruder who lays his finger on the curtain of the *sanctum sanctorum*. Censure or vituperation, cannot, however, render less certain the occasional influence of the motives I have mentioned, and may, perhaps, in fact, furnish a proof of the reality of their operation. If the reader should find, at a future period, in the pages of these literary censors, a philippic directed against myself, let him call to mind the freedom of my present remarks, and then draw his own conclusions.

On the original establishment of reviews, they purported to be critical examinations of literary and scientific publications, emanating from an association of enlightened individuals who sat in judgment upon them, and indicated to the public such as were valuable, and exposed, or ridiculed, the vapid and worthless. They proposed to give "a compendious account of the productions of the press, which "in virtue of its candour and justness of "distinction, should obtain authority enough "for its representations to be serviceable to "such as would choose to have some idea "of a book before they laid out their money

"or time on it." Their opinions and criticisms as coming from a legitimate literary tribunal, which kept aloof from the character of partizan, and gave equitable and unbiassed judgments between contending controversialists, or competitors for literary fame, obtained for them a weight and authority to which, perhaps, they might not be entitled from intrinsic excellence; and a constant and systematic use of the powerful plural "*We*" sanctioned and confirmed their ostensible character. The bulk of mankind take their opinions on trust, and it is convenient and agreeable for those, who are too much occupied, or too indolent for close application, to be led through the flowery paths of an entertaining miscellany, to conclusions, which, to be arrived at without a guide, require troublesome reflection and tedious examination. Thus private judgment is to a considerable extent superseded by reviews, and they are become the leading tests of merit, and arbiters of success.

That they were ever so conducted as above supposed is improbable, but certainly, at the present time, almost every article which they give to the world, is the production of an individual writer, occasionally, it may be, revised by another for facts or style, and even that but rarely. Notwithstanding this, and