

An Appreciation of a Contemporary¹

By Fred J. Miller²

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ALL who knew "Fred" Taylor well will recognize this biography as a most excellent piece of work. It is clear that the author has had access to abundant material and that he has delved into it thoroughly and conscientiously, with the sole object of presenting a true and lifelike picture of his subject; in no biography that I know of has more complete success been attained.

No one who is in any way or in any degree concerned with knowing what has happened to American industries and how it has happened since Taylor went to the Midvale Steel Works in 1878, can fail to find these volumes absorbingly interesting and extraordinarily informative.

This is not a mere colorless catalog of achievements, great and far-reaching as those achievements were; not alone Taylor himself but many other outstanding men connected with industrial affairs are here presented to view in what to most of us is a new light; some to their high credit and some quite to the contrary. Indeed, the success attained by a number of famous men in industrial affairs is clearly seen to be necessarily attributable to causes other than ability as industrial managers, for of such ability, it is made clear by this record, they had practically none whatever, not only when judged by present-day standards, but by the standards of their day. This is only incidental, however, for this is essentially a life of Fred Taylor, and others are brought into it only as brush strokes needed to complete the picture of that unique, talented, and many-sided character.

Taylor is here shown to have been reared in a refined environment by parents both well and broadly educated. His entry into industry is shown to have been almost purely accidental, though he early exhibited a talent for invention and for systematic ways of doing things.

His first employment was (I feel bound to say, unfortunately) in a place where things were pretty rough, where the only discernible philosophy was, on the one side, to drive, and on the other, to resist that driving; where gross profanity and all

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that it connotes was thought to be a necessary element in a workshop, as it is said to be in driving mules. Taylor, young and impressionable, not only adopted it but deliberately cultivated it, mainly for shop use, ignoring the plain fact that many of the most successful managers of that day, as of this, never used it nor ever allowed themselves under any circumstances to exhibit any evidences of anger or of serious emotional disturbance.

Most of us have the idea that the Taylor "system" was developed and put in practice from previously-thought-out plans, much as an office building or a factory is built. It is here made plain that the system was developed by a step-by-step process, each step being dimly, if at all, foreseen, but finally perceived to be more, or less a necessity to hold the ground attained by preceding steps. Just here Taylor's remarkable persistence and indomitable courage enabled him to go on and on to magnificent accomplishment where others, perhaps equally well equipped in other respects, would have been discouraged and quit.

He began by trying to get men working in a machine shop to do more work; found their knowledge exceeded his own; built up his knowledge of the work; found he could not go very far because the management was faulty or practically non-existent; started in and, step by step, developed a science of management; found the accounting, especially the cost accounting, blocked his way by its inadequacy and stupidity; learned accounting and developed a real system of industrial accountancy.

He started to climb a high and difficult mountain; climbed one step at a time, never thinking of giving up or even resting himself so long as his strength lasted. The top of that mountain is not yet clearly visible—it will probably be difficult to determine when, if ever, it is quite reached—but to Taylor belongs the credit of showing that it can be climbed and how it can be climbed. There were those who appreciated and helped him—William Sellers, James Mapes Dodge, Henry R. Towne—all men of outstanding achievements, partly because they could understand the work of others and were above being jealous or envious of it. Besides these outstanding men in civil life, General Crozier, Chief, Ordnance Department of the U. S. Army, and Admiral Casper F. Goodrich, of the Navy, did all that was humanly possible to secure, for their respective departments,

the benefits of the new system, and Taylor gave his services to them in the public interest, I understand, without charge.

Whatever Taylor did he literally did with all his might. Whatever seemed to stand in his way even for a minute he attacked, usually with a vigor and vehemence that made him, unnecessarily, many enemies, not alone among workingmen but among employers as well.

But there was no guile in him; whatever he did he believed in with all his soul, and whatever he believed in he did with the same absorbing devotion; utterly unable apparently to understand the world's capacity for passive and active resistance to innovators.

Workingmen, generally, in and out of unions misunderstood him, and the vast majority of employers resented his unsparing criticisms of their management. To many of them scientific management and the Taylor System are still anathema. No one can say in what degree this is due to the bludgeon methods of Taylor and some of his disciples, but much of it is undoubtedly. The biographer has clearly recognized this and revealed it.

Then, too, a little more familiarity with fundamental economics would have spared this heroic personage a good deal of effective opposition. He was wrong as to some of the results he anticipated from his work, and failed to realize the fact that a very large proportion of workingmen these days do far more reading of journals that are independent of "counting-room influence" than the journals generally read by employers; and devote more attention to the study and discussion of fundamental economic principles; principles which it is a very serious mistake to disregard, because such disregard is responsible for most of our industrial and business difficulties.

An important share of Taylor's difficulties at Bethlehem are shown to have arisen from the fact that a number of directors of the company were landlords in Bethlehem and imagined their personal interests as landlords were threatened by Taylor's efforts to get given quantities of work done by fewer workers. They actually thought Taylor was going to depopulate Bethlehem and make rent payers scarce. Yet when a hard-headed, successful millionaire manufacturer wrote Taylor urging a solvent for that difficulty, Taylor spurned him, and said quizzically, "There is a man even crazier than I

am." Repeatedly Taylor avowed his belief that his system would, of itself, solve all industrial and accompanying social problems. Whereas the workers knew by hard experience that, for example, the introduction of steam power and labor-saving machinery—increasing the productive power of workers far more than any system of management could—had brought them only that which they had fought for through unions and otherwise; as witness the struggle to abolish the sweat shops long after the introduction of power-driven sewing machines and the appearance of Hood's "Song of the Shirt."

To decry, or oppose labor-saving machinery or improved systems of industrial and business management is of course futile and foolish, but not for the reasons Taylor thought it was; and hence much of what he said about the social effects of his work was based upon a wrong premise, did not ring true, and workmen in general more or less clearly perceived this. It did not square with their experience, nor with the history of "the labor movement" reaching far back to the days of ancient guilds and beyond. This tended to confirm their suspicion that Taylor management was simply another scheme to make workers turn out more work for the same or even less wages. They misunderstood and were not aware that Taylor believed and intended that his system would and should benefit the workers as well as employers. Out of this misunderstanding grew Taylor's reiterated and bitter denunciation of workmen for general "soldiering," a charge which had absolutely only one effect, that effect being increased and more effective opposition to the introduction of the Taylor System. Taylor was made to feel very keenly mankind's intolerant and short-sighted attitude toward those who would disturb the established order; but this antagonism was increased by such things, for example, as his emphatic condemnation of tool makers as "humbugs and frauds," utterly failing apparently to appreciate the fact that thorough study of the best possible design of special tools and putting into them the best allowable or attainable workmanship, had been and still is the most important single factor in establishing and maintaining our preeminence in low-cost interchangeable manufacture of such things as sewing machines, watches, small arms, typewriters, and innumerable others.

The episode of high-speed steel is treated in an interesting way, but the fact is not brought out that