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Obituary of
Samuel Colt

1862/3

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a tract, "On the Manufacture of Gunpowder, as carried on at the Government Factory, Waltham Abbey (1857.)"¹

On becoming attached to the Royal Small Arms Factory, at Enfield, he immediately took a marked position; and if his life had been spared, he would have taken a very active and useful part in the War Office Manufacturing Department.

He was a general favourite in the branch of the service to which he belonged, and his decease was deeply and deservedly regretted by a large circle of friends.

CAPTAIN CARLTON THOMAS COLLINGWOOD joined the Institution of Civil Engineers as an Associate, in the year 1857; and died in India on the 7th of March, 1860.

It is regretted that repeated applications have failed to obtain any materials for a memoir.

COLONEL SAMUEL COLT was born on the 19th of July, 1814, at Hartford, Connecticut, U.S., America. He was of Scotch descent, his father, Christian Colt, being the son of an early settler in Connecticut.

Sam Colt had not the advantage of careful education, and at a very early age he ran away to sea, and made several voyages to India. He had latent mechanical talent and great energy, and it is stated that he was constantly devising some supposed improvements in the tackle, &c., on board, for which the commander did not award him the credit which he imagined was his due; and he turned his attention to a repeating fire-arm which should be also a breech-loader, and thus afford to the solitary pioneers of the Western States the immunity from danger which only could be obtained by rapid firing, in case of attack by the Indians. Whilst at sea he is supposed to have produced the first wooden model of the revolver pistol which bears his name; and it has been asserted that, on his return to America, he fell in with another untaught inventor, like himself, whose attention had also been directed to the same subject, and that he received from this accidental acquaintance the first notions of the necessity of adopting mechanical and automatic machinery for the production of these weapons. For some years he had to struggle with great difficulties, and during that period he turned his attention to other subjects; but always keeping in view the production by machinery of the several parts of the repeating fire-arm, and for this he invented and adapted various machines. He received his first patent in 1835, and established a factory in Paterson, New Jersey, but

¹ Library Inst. C.E. Tract 8vo. vol. cxx.

met with indifferent success. He subsequently disposed of his right to manufacture revolving fire-arms, and, as it was generally understood at the time, expended the proceeds in a vain attempt to clear his brother, John C. Colt, of a charge of homicide. Sam Colt afterwards invented a submarine torpedo, which was intended for the destruction of vessels. He gave two exhibitions of the power of his new invention in the bay off Castle Garden, by blowing up first a schooner, and afterwards a large brig. He then established a line of telegraph between New York and Sandy Hook and Montauk, which was intended to announce the arrival of vessels, and to facilitate the despatch of important foreign news; but this enterprise failed, and he became very much reduced in circumstances. Colonel Colt is also reputed to have been the inventor of the first submarine telegraph cable, as shown and tested from Fire Island to New York, and from the Merchant's Exchange to the mouth of the harbour, in 1843. A few years later he again obtained possession of his patent for the revolving pistol, and with the assistance of a few capitalists who joined him, a company was formed and a manufactory was established at Hartford, which has proved very successful, not only in the making of pistols, but in the manufacture of a revolving rifle, which was also the invention of Sam Colt. The factory was supposed, before the war, to be worth nearly \$5,000,000, and since then has, most probably, considerably augmented in value. The proceeds have been so great, that Colonel Colt realised a large landed estate, and he was no doubt one of the wealthiest men in New England.

At the period of the International Exhibition in 1851, Colonel Colt first visited London, but so little was generally known of the use of repeating fire-arms, that "Colt's Revolvers" scarcely attracted any attention, and it was only towards the time of the closing of the Exhibition that General Gibbs MacNeill (U.S. army), who had experience of the value of these arms in the Texan and other expeditions, directed to them the attention of some Members of the Institution of Civil Engineers, by one of whom a Paper was written, from the information given by Colonel Colt, describing the automatic machinery used in the production of these weapons. The Paper¹ was read, and the subject was discussed at two meetings of the Institution in the month of November 1851. This induced the attention of the Government to the mode of manufacture, and Colonel Colt was permitted to establish a small-arms factory in a building belonging to the Government at Thames Bank, Pimlico. This was not successful as a commercial speculation, but it had the result of inducing the attention of the intelligent gunmakers of the metropolis and the provinces to the

¹ *Vide* Minutes of Proceedings, Inst. C.E. vol. xi. p. 30.

subject, and eventually at the Government Small Arms Factory at Enfield, the same kind of automatic machinery was adopted, with the present evident beneficial result for Her Majesty's service. This is another instance, among many, of the too general neglect of useful inventions from abroad, and their eventual forced introduction. In this case Colonel Colt lost a large sum of money, and the Engineer who introduced him and the repeating arm to the Institution, the Government, and the public, and wrote the article in question, is not publicly known in connection with the subject. After the closing of the manufacture at Thames Bank, Colonel Colt returned to America, and on the breaking out of the war, he used great exertions to extend the production of arms, supplying also considerable funds for raising a corps of men for the service of the Northern army. He is stated to have greatly extended the Hartford works, and to have realized a very large fortune.

His decease occurred, from disease of the brain, on the 9th of January, 1862, in the forty-eighth year of his age. He was a man of determined will, of great natural powers, and only lacked the advantages of early education and training to have become a man of mark in his generation.

He joined the Institution as an Associate in the year 1852, and received a Telford Medal for the Paper already referred to.

MR. ROBERT COWEN was born at Biglands, near Wigton, Cumberland, in 1787. He received the rudiments of his education at the village school, and from youth onwards he was a diligent self-instructor. At the early age of fifteen he was associated with his father in the management of the cotton-mill carried on in Carlisle by the firm of Cowen, Heysham, and Co. In a short time he was found capable of taking upon himself the entire direction of the machinery department, and few young men, at their entrance into life, ever more closely attended to the duties of their allotted position than Mr. Cowen did. Although the long hours and rigid rules of a cotton-spinning establishment leave the persons engaged in it but little leisure, Mr. Cowen contrived, by systematic application, to extend his knowledge of scientific subjects. Mechanics were especially his delight, and his proficiency was shown by improvements in the spinning and carding machinery, which essentially contributed to the success which attended the house. In process of time the style of the firm was altered to Jacob Cowen and Sons, and Mr. Robert Cowen became a partner in the concern with which he continued to be connected for so many years. Without neglecting the business, he found time for pursuing his studies, and there were few men who better understood the principles and practice of mechanics. His know-