

The Life and Lucubrations of Crispinus Scriblerus

Image: *Wolverhampton from the Penn Road*. William West, *Picturesque Views... of Staffordshire*. (Birmingham 1830).

Image from: Local Studies and History, Birmingham Central Library

Now, see the Sun
Exhibits bustling Birmingham to sight,
Its multiplying streets and villas bright -
And Wolverhampton's turrets, fair, unfold,
Near northern boundaries, tipt with burnish'd gold;
Fields, countless cotts and villages, between,
Give life, and lustre to the social Scene;
Within this orient Landscape's ample bound
Each matter, and each manufactory's found,
Which, wide, unfolding all their wealth, and worth,
Diffuse unnumber'd blessings o'er the Earth!
Here, ... Lime-rocks large supplies;
There clinging Clay, in shallow lodgment, sleeps,
Crude Iron rests within its ore bed;
Coal's black bitumen deeper still retires;
In Parts ... flickering flames, appear,
Like new volcanoes,
...smokey curls ... rise, *all around, red, lurid light,*
Deep, sullen sounds, thro' all the region roll,
Shocking, with groans, and sighs, each shuddering Soul!
Here clanking engines vomit scalding streams,
And belch vast volumes of attendant steams -
There thundering forges, with pulsations loud,
Alternate striking, pierce the pendant cloud;
While, to these distant hills, respiring slow,
Furnaces' iron lungs loud-breathing, blow;
Breaking, abrupt, on Superstition's ear,
And shrink the shuddering frame with shivering fear;
Obtruding on the heart, each heaving breath,
Some vengeful Fiend, grim delegate of Death! (pp.24-25, Vol.1)⁹

This very long verse-autobiography was written by James Woodhouse about 1795. The lines above, from a section headed 'Birmingham and Wolverhampton', present the towns and many products in a positive light. Next, the region's earthbound resources are listed, again with positive commentary. But then description and landscape become dark and fiery because of human activity. In the following verse-paragraph the imagery and collocation are interesting. There is a partial merging of the human animal and the mechanical: '... clanking engines vomit .../And belch...'; 'Furnaces' iron lungs loud-breathing, blow'. And there is fear of death. Unlike both *A Letter from a Mechanick* and *Colebrook Dale*, this poem by Woodhouse goes on to offer the described scene as a focus for Christian interpretation.

James Woodhouse (1735-1820) is himself of interest as an example of one whose life changed much because of his interest in poetry. Initially a journeyman shoemaker, he became a protégé of William Shenstone. Woodhouse's

1764 volume, *Poems*, was a success. He later became a bookseller in London.

⁹ James Woodhouse, *The Life and Lucubrations of Crispinus Scriblerus*, in Vols.1 and 2 of *The Life and Poetical Works of James Woodhouse*, Edited by The Rev.R.R.Woodhouse, in 2 volumes, The Leadenhall Press, London, 1896.