BOOK REVIEWS


In this age of mechanized warfare, mass production and technological achievements, it is appropriate to read the biography of a man like Henry W. Oliver, "Iron Pioneer." An intimate associate of the business and industrial leaders of the late nineteenth century, he more than most of them pioneered in many major industries. Son of a saddler, born in County Tyrone, Ireland, in 1840, he migrated with his parents to the United States in 1842, settling in Allegheny (Pittsburgh), near the home of another recently arrived immigrant, young Andrew Carnegie. Like Carnegie, he got a job as a telegraph messenger boy at the age of thirteen, at two dollars and fifty cents per week. He was early associated with such persons as M. W. Acheson, later judge of the United States District Court; Charles Shaler, United States District Attorney; Edwin M. Stanton, member of Lincoln’s cabinet; Judge Thomas Mellon; B. F. Jones; William Thaw; Thomas A. Scott; and other individuals who were to play a prominent role in the nation's history. At nineteen he became shipping clerk in a puddling and rolling mill; and at the age of twenty-three, he headed his own firm of Lewis, Oliver, and Phillips, manufacturers of bolts, nuts, and all kinds of hardware for farms, mines, and mills. This business grew rapidly, and by 1870 it was the leading firm of its kind in the United States.

When in the eighteen-seventies the steel business began to surpass the iron business, Oliver kept pace with all new technological developments. And when the iron and steel interests joined up to secure protection from foreign competitors, the leaders turned to Oliver to present their case to Congress. He wrote the protective tariff planks in the Republican platforms of 1872, 1876, and 1880. Failing to secure the Republican nomination for the United States Senate in 1881, he was appointed by President Arthur on the United States tariff commission of 1882. He served as chairman of most of the commission's hearings, and to the surprise of many, proposed an average tariff reduction of twenty-five per cent, recommended the creation of a custom's court, and a permanent tariff commission.

Oliver was one of the first to recommend an integration of industrial enterprises—building up an integrated, vertical type of iron and steel business. By
acquiring new blast furnaces, a major interest in the coal and coke industry, natural gas, and the tin plate industry, he decided to enter upon his greatest pioneer move—that of acquiring ore from the Lake Superior fields. He, more than any other individual, was responsible for opening up this virgin field of ore deposits just at the time the supply of ore in other parts of the country was disappearing. In chronological sequence, yet dramatic style, the author reviews the great industrial struggle that attended this pioneer move into the Great Lakes Country. The names of Rockefeller, Morgan, Carnegie, Frick, and others pass in review. One of the great epics of America's industrial history, the formation of the giant United States Steel Corporation, and Oliver's dramatic move in having his attorney follow Carnegie to Scotland and obtain secret information on the price paid by Morgan to Carnegie for his five-sixths interest in the Oliver Iron and Mining Company, is a revealing chapter of the way in which business deals were negotiated.

But Oliver's interests were not confined solely to iron and steel. He brought two new railroad routes, east and west, through Pittsburgh. Here one reads the first full account of the South Penn Railroad and its modern sequel, the Pennsylvania Turnpike. He developed the steel freight car to replace the old wooden cars. He also branched out into other fields. At the time of his death, he owned more shares of stock in the Calumet and Arizona Copper Company, and more stock in the Pittsburgh Coal Company, than any other individual. He was a pioneer in providing "slack-watering" in the Ohio River, which led to an all-year-round system of transportation. As a civic leader, he was a member of the board of the old Homeopathic Hospital, trustee of the Dollar Savings Bank, president of the Common Council of Pittsburgh, president of the Chamber of Commerce, a member and director of many social clubs. Although his business interests reached across the nation, he was always devoted to Pittsburgh and its people. This led him to become one of the largest (perhaps the largest) owner of downtown Pittsburgh property.

Mr. Evans has given us the life history of a colorful, forceful, and resourceful personality, as well as an excellent review of Pittsburgh's rise to her present industrial leadership of the world. And this the reviewer is the freer to say because he is not related to either the author or subject of this biography.

University of Pittsburgh

John W. Oliver


This book might better have been called Henry Shreve and His Times, for