"Never since the days when Carthage and Venice were rendered so illustrious by the spirit of Commerce, and governed by oligarchies of royal merchants, has a more signal example of what can be achieved by the untiring industry and commercial aptitude of one man been apparent than in the case of JOHN RYLANDS, who is head of, perhaps, the largest and most important manufacturing and mercantile undertaking in the whole world."

Momus (Manchester), 15 May 1879, 81,
"Our Album. John Rylands Esq."

No other centre of business activity exerted such a hypnotic fascination upon the mind of Victorian England as did Manchester. The manufacturers and merchants of that city were dedicated to the service of the country's most important trade. Although they were apostles of the creed of individualism, they neither sought nor acquired publicity for themselves as individuals. One of the most self-effacing of Manchester men excelled all others in the magnitude of his achievements and left a profound impression upon the commercial and religious enterprise of his generation but acquired true fame only posthumously and without the help of the hagiographers of business history. Emerging from the humblest branch of manufacture, John Rylands built up over forty years the largest of firms within an industry which was primarily based upon the small concern. Throughout the remainder of a long life he successfully governed a vast, integrated industrial and commercial empire and established its foundations so securely that it survived his decease for over four score years. No other businessman approaches so closely to the ideal type of self-made man nurtured by "Cottonopolis" during its greatest age. No other firm in the cotton industry was so much the lengthened shadow of one man as was that of Rylands & Sons. The founder of that great enterprise played no part in the political life of Victorian England and, unlike the spokesmen of the Manchester school of political economy, has earned no
mention in the histories of that era or even in the standard histories of the cotton trade. As a staunch Liberal, John Rylands regarded Cobden and Bright as his heroes but he did not follow their example in forsaking trade for politics. He devoted his great powers to private rather than to public ends and achieved within his chosen field a success without parallel. Like other Manchester merchants, he was a Mancunian by adoption rather than by birth: unlike them, he remained loyal to the city of his adoption after he had become its leading merchant and had acquired a large fortune. His career furnishes a notable contrast to that of Cobden, which was a series of unsuccessful speculations and left behind no continuing business-concern as a memorial. A brief study of his career may serve to illuminate the history of the cotton industry over the long period extending from the age of the hand-loom to that of the industrial combine.  

The parents of John Rylands were Joseph Rylands (1767–1847) and Elizabeth Pilkington (1761–1829). His father was born in the village of Parr, near St. Helens, which lay within the linen area of western Lancashire and within the economic orbit of Liverpool and Chester. The son of a yeoman and hand-loom manufacturer, he became a manufacturer on his own account in 1787. His wife bore him three sons and two daughters. The youngest son and most delicate child was John, who was born to

1 I would like to express my thanks to Dr. F. Taylor, Dr. W. H. Chaloner and Professor J. R. Harris who read the first draft of this article and enabled me to benefit from their knowledge of the subject.

2 The fullest obituaries are to be found in the Manchester Examiner, 12 December 1888, 5v–vii and in the Manchester City News, 15 December 1888, 5ii–v. There are shorter notices in: Manchester Guardian, 12 December 1888, 8iii–iv; Manchester Courier, 12 December 1888, 8vii–viii; Manchester Weekly Times, 15 December 1888, 2v–vi; Wigan Observer, 12 December 1888, 5i; Gorton, Openshaw and Bradford Reporter, 15 December 1888, 6iv; Cotton Factory Times, 14 December 1888, 7iii–iv; Textile Manufacturer, 15 December 1888, 562-3.

In Memoriam John Rylands Born February 7, 1801, Died December 11, 1888 (Chilworth, Unwin, 1889, 72 pp., printed for private circulation). The author of this work is identified as Samuel Gosnell Green (1822–1905), the Baptist minister and bibliophile, by the well-informed C. W. Sutton, who was City Librarian of Manchester from 1879 to 1920, in his article on John Rylands in the Dictionary of National Biography, xvii (1897), 548–9.

Sunday at Home, 23 March 1889, pp. 181–6, S. G. Green, “The Late Mr. John Rylands of Manchester.”
her at the age of 40 in 1801. Like his father John Rylands first learned to weave and then, in 1817, became a hand-loom manufacturer and merchant on his own account, though on a very small scale. He also helped in the draper's shop, which his father had opened in St. Helens in 1810, and there displayed a precocious shrewdness in mastering the arts of the retail trader. His aptitude for commerce was so apparent and so great that he was joined by his two elder brothers, Joseph and Richard. Joseph controlled the business of manufacture while John served as a commercial traveller, toured Lancashire, Yorkshire, Cheshire, Shropshire and North Wales and marketed the firm's goods. In that field he proved so successful that the father joined his three sons in 1819 and merged his own considerable business with theirs in the new firm of Rylands & Sons.¹ That concern undertook


John Edwards, "John Rylands", *Y Traethodydd* (Caernarfon, Davies, May 1891), vol. 47, no. cxc, 184–94, which was kindly translated for me by Dr. Emrys Evans, Reader in Celtic Studies in the University of Manchester.

J. Parker, "The Story of the Cotton King: Recollections of John Rylands, of Manchester", *The Young Man. A Monthly Journal and Review*, April 1893, pp. 111–14, reprinted in the *Manchester City News*, 1 April 1893, 2iv–v, "Dr. Parker's Recollections of John Rylands" and in the *Daily News*, 7 October 1899, 8i–iii. J. Parker, "John Rylands of Manchester". The writer was a Congregationalist divine whose ministry in Manchester lasted for eleven years from 1858 to 1869. The depth of his insight into the character of Rylands is rivalled only by that of Dr. Green.


the hand-weaving of coloured and coarse linen and calico goods for the Chester trade. John Rylands speedily captured most of the trade of North Wales, benefiting apparently by the Non-conformist revival within that region and by the high quality of his wares. His eldest brother removed northwards from St. Helens to Wigan in 1820 and was followed first by John in 1821 and then by his father in 1824. Thus the firm abandoned a town which had become devoted to the chemical and coal industries, had acquired an unfavourably polluted atmosphere and lost its last cotton mill in 1842.¹

The wholesale trade soon became more important than the retail trade as the main outlet for the products of the firm. In 1822 John Rylands ceased to act as a commercial traveller and opened a warehouse for the firm in New High Street, Manchester, a town which he had frequently visited in the course of his business. He chose that market in a deliberate departure from the tradition of the manufacturers of Wigan, who had thitherto produced solely for the Chester trade. He had however entered into competition as a country manufacturer with the established wholesale houses of Manchester, whose unfriendly reception encouraged him in self-defence further to challenge existing trade customs. The entry into the Manchester market took place at the most opportune time for the firm and contributed largely to the expansion of its activity since the commerce, especially the


wholesale trade, of "Cottonborough" grew faster from 1820 than its manufacturing industry in harmony with the postwar growth in numbers and wealth of the working-class markets of northern England and with the expansion of foreign markets. The population of Manchester increased by 45 per cent during the decade of the 1820s, or faster than in any other decade of the century, while the development of its economic and social life was fostered by the successive foundation of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce in 1820, of the Manchester Guardian in 1821 and of the Royal Manchester Institution in 1823.

During the boom of 1822-5 Rylands & Sons extended its operations from the sphere of manufacture into the finishing trades and became from 1824 dyers and bleachers at Wigan. There the firm bought three large estates in the Douglas valley, and in 1825 erected, close to the railway linking Preston to Liverpool and Manchester, the Wigan Linen Works for the spinning of linen thread on throstle frames, so becoming independent of the market for its supply of yarn. The firm found, however, that the union of flax-dressers made the workmen "independent, insolent and unreasonable"¹ and further diversified its activity by adding in 1830 a new mill for the manufacture of cotton as well as of linen, together with a school. The discovery on those Wigan estates of valuable coal seams, which were unknown to either buyer or seller at the time of purchase, enabled the firm to become colliery-masters as well as cotton spinners and extended its interests into a field increasingly associated with the cotton industry. In Manchester John Rylands defied local tradition by keeping his warehouse open to buyers during the dinner-hour when other houses closed their doors. In 1829 the firm became merchants of goods for the Scotch and Irish markets and began to sell other goods in addition to its own products. The sale of Scotch and Irish linen breached the monopoly hitherto held by the four or five Manchester linen houses and began the process of extending

¹ Factories Inquiry Commission. Supplementary Report of the Central Board of His Majesty's Commissioners appointed to Collect Information in the Manufacturing Districts, as to the Employment of Children in Factories, and as to the Propriety and Means of Curtailing the Hours of their Labour (167 of 1834), part ii, vol. xx, 292-3, Answers of Manufacturers to Queries: Joseph Rylands Jr., Wigan.
the firm's mercantile interests throughout the whole range of manufactured textiles.

The acquisition of a second manufacturing establishment brought the firm into the sphere of power-weaving, gave it mills in two separate centres and enabled John Rylands to reveal his capacity for the delegation of authority to trustworthy managers. In 1839 he acquired a cotton mill at Ainsworth between Bolton and Bury and there began to produce domestics on power-looms for the Irish market, securing coal to raise the necessary steam-power from a colliery rented from the Earl of Wilton. That departure from the tradition of hand-loom manufacture took place without apparent opposition in an old centre of hand-weaving since the firm fulfilled its social responsibilities by providing the village with a chapel, with schools and with a library. That entry into the sphere of a new technology seems to have been linked with the increase in the influence of John Rylands within the family partnership, whose bonds had begun to loosen after the death of his mother in 1829. John took up residence in Manchester in 1834 and so completed the four-phase migration which had led him from Parr to St. Helens and then to Wigan. During the following decade he acquired full freedom of action as he outstripped his elder brothers in the race for commercial success. Joseph, the eldest brother, retired from the firm in 1839, built the Hull Flax and Cotton Mill in 1837 and so established the first successful joint-stock company in the cotton industry, which he managed until his death in 1853 when his son inherited his shares and his post.¹ Joseph Rylands senior, agreed in 1843 to dissolve the partnership. John Rylands preserved the original name of the firm but thenceforward became its supreme governor and remained its "mainspring, prime mover and regulator"² during a period of sustained commercial expansion. By serving as his own partner, chairman and managing director he averted the unhappy consequences of any dissension or antagonism arising from the different personalities of the partners.

In 1843 Rylands acquired his third mill and his first one in

² Manchester City News, 15 April 1865, 3i.
Manchester, so linking more closely the process of manufacture with that of marketing, and completing the phase of industrial expansion begun in 1825. He leased Gorton Mills, which had been built in 1833 on the bank of a branch of the Ashton Canal, just to the west of the terminus of the new railway line to London. There he expanded the production of domestics on power-looms and provided such liberal facilities for the education of his workfolk as to earn the praise of a leading inspector of factories. In 1845 he established at the mills a library of 600 volumes, a news-room and a school. In 1847 he opened a provision shop, from which his operatives were supplied at wholesale prices. He survived a strike by the weavers against a reduction of 12½ per cent in their wage-rates but won their golden opinions by strict compliance with the Ten Hours' Act of 1847, earning their thanks in 1849 for not running his engines longer than ten hours per day. In Gorton the firm provided employment for female labour while male labour worked in the railway workshops and in the locomotive-manufacturing firm of Beyer & Peacock, established in 1854.

In the sphere of trade Rylands began to extend the number of departments in his Manchester warehouse, where sixteen separate warehouses along New High Street were converted into one large building. He established a fustian department in 1847 to handle the clothing most commonly worn by the labouring classes, undertaking the dyeing and finishing of all fustians sold by the firm and supplying continuity of employment in a trade liable to suffer from severe periodic depressions. In 1849 he opened a warehouse in London and so gained access to the greatest single market of the home trade. Under the influence of metropolitan demand he expanded his interests in 1853 from the heavy trade into the prestigious and profitable fancy trade. As the linen industry began to adopt the power-loom and became increasingly concentrated in Ulster he withdrew from the Wigan Linen Works in 1854 and concentrated his manufacturing interests within the

1 Reports of the Inspectors of Factories, 31 October 1846, 7, L. Horner, 2 December 1846.
3 Ibid. pp. 204, 206, 208.
4 Ibid. p. 204.
cotton industry. The firm's resources were great enough to enable it to survive a disastrous fire which in 1854 destroyed buildings and stock in New High Street worth over £200,000 but did not prevent it from reaping larger returns in 1854 than in 1853. By then John Rylands had become the largest textile merchant in the land as well as a millionaire. He had joined the Anti-Corn Law League in the 1840s after a visit to Belgium, which had taught him the importance of labour-costs in the contest for the world-market. He nevertheless rose to fortune on the basis of the home trade and not on that of the export trade, conducting business from his own warehouses rather than upon the floor of the Exchange.

After residing in succession in Cheetham, Gorton and Ardwick, he bought in 1855 the Longford Hall estate in Stretford, where the home-trade merchants of Manchester had their "country residences", and made his home there in 1857 in a new hall built in Italian style. Of the seven children borne by his first wife, Dinah Raby (1803-43), only two sons, John and William, survived. Since John died in early manhood and his second wife, Martha Carden (1806-75), remained childless, Rylands concentrated his hopes for the perpetuation of his name upon his second son, William, (1828-61), whom he admitted to the business in 1852 and to partnership in 1859. In 1861 he was completely shattered by the death of his son and heir, which was followed by the death of his last surviving brother, Richard, in 1863. "Deep, poignant, and inconsolable was his father's grief. All his fond hopes respecting him were blighted, for he had reckoned on his being not only his own solace and stay in the evening of life, but that he would by his virtues, talents, and property be a great blessing in his lifetime, more especially to his native city, Manchester, and perpetuate the name of Rylands with honour to future generations." The death of William left a void in his life which was to be only partly filled by the adoption as his son of Arthur Forbes. That bereavement marked a fundamental turning point in his existence since it compelled him to modify drastically and irrevocably his deepest aspirations.

1 Manchester Guardian, 4 March 1854, 7iv-vi, 8i-ii.
3 Manchester City News, 15 April 1865, 2vi.
The crisis of the Cotton Famine summoned his energies back to the world of business, stimulated a marked expansion in the range of the firm's operations through the acquisition of three separate manufacturing establishments in Manchester and so restored the balance between its commercial and industrial resources, its trade having expanded since 1843 far more rapidly than its own production. In 1865 Rylands bought the Irwell Works of the Manchester Wadding Company in Water Street together with the Medlock Mills in South Junction Street, Medlock, to the west of Oxford Street. He also bought the Dacca Mills of the Dacca Twist Company in Lower Mosley Street. At the Medlock Mills the firm undertook the large-scale manufacture of clothing, especially of shirts, on the sewing-machine. That new venture expanded at the expense of its fustian trade but set an example which was not imitated by any other firm in the cotton industry since few possessed such secure commercial outlets. The Manchester Wadding Company turned cotton-waste into wadding which it dyed for use in the manufacture of clothing. The Dacca Mills produced on a large scale a single class of goods in domestics. The Gorton mills with their 150 appurtenant cottages were bought for £120,000 in 1864 when their 21-year lease expired: they were then extended by the addition of a large weaving shed and linked to the warehouse in New High Street by a private telegraph. The acquisition of those Manchester mills notably extended the range of the firm's operations in a vertical direction and gave it control over its sources of supply as well as over its markets. Those establishments formed a small empire unequalled in extent by any other Manchester firm and were subject to as close and direct a superintendence as the warehouses themselves. They also gave to Rylands & Sons two new trading styles in the Dacca Mills Company and the Manchester Wadding Company which the firm carefully preserved. The warehouses had reached a height of seven storeys in 1862 and extended by 1864 from one end to the other of New High Street: they had become the summit of the firm's hierarchical organization, the seat of its central power and the goal of all ambitious employees. Their stocks extended over the whole range of dry goods, including smallwares, haberdashery,
millinery, furs, mantles, boots and shoes, umbrellas, oilcloth and carpets as well as all types of textiles. Rylands also re-equipped the Ainsworth mills, which had won a high reputation for their croydons. Above all, he built between 1863 and 1865 the Gidlow Works at Wigan. His partner in those works, as in the Wigan Linen Works, was his nephew John R. Cross, who was the son of his sister Eleanor and who served as the mayor of Wigan in 1862–4. The three-storeyed fireproofed mill was the first new factory built by the firm since 1830. Erected at a time when machinery-prices were depressed, it cost over £100,000 and established new standards in mill architecture.\(^1\) With its own private spur railway and collieries, it installed 60,000 spindles and 1,500 looms for the production of Dacca calicoes and extended the manufacturing power of the firm even more than its spinning power.

By 1865 the employees of Rylands & Sons numbered 4,500 or more than those employed by Horrockses of Preston or by any other firm in the cotton industry while another 6,500 workpeople were employed indirectly on its orders. The basis of the power of the concern remained unaltered in its control over the marketing of its products to the country’s drapers. The number of its travellers had increased from four in 1840 to nineteen in 1865 and the number of its departments from four to thirty-three while Henry Bannerman & Sons had twenty-one departments and J., P. and E. Westhead had fifteen departments. The number of hands employed in the Manchester warehouse had risen from 28 to 600 while S. & J. Watts employed 200 and Westhead’s employed 150. The firm’s annual turnover must have been of the order of some £1,500,000 from its 10,000 customers since Westhead’s enjoyed a turnover of £1,000,000 from some 7,000 accounts.

The self-defensive refusal of the bleachers to supply Rylands forced him by 1870 to undertake a further measure of vertical extension. He acquired the Heapey Bleach Works near Chorley and made it into the largest bleaching and finishing works in Britain and probably in Europe, employing the excellent local water and 600 hands to create the distinctive “Heapey finish”. He raised the standard of production of bleached calico even more

than of unbleached, being an advocate of pure rather than of filled finishes in accordance with his belief in honesty and quality, his dependence on the home market rather than on the export trade and his pioneer use of the sewing-machine, whose needles tended to break when trying to pierce oversized cloth. Rylands also extended his manufacturing establishments outside Lancashire into Yorkshire and Cheshire. The growing demand for Dacca and Longford sewing cottons led him in 1871 to lease a bobbin-mill at Helmsley,¹ which however proved unprofitable and was abandoned before the expiry of the seven-year lease. In 1872 he opened the Longford Works in Crewe² for the local manufacture of clothing on sewing-machines by women and girls, whose labour was cheaper than that available in Lancashire in the absence of any opportunity for female employment in a railway-town. By then he had celebrated his commercial jubilee, having completed fifty years in trade in Manchester and achieved the great aims which he had set himself. His position had however become like that of Frankenstein since his creation had almost passed beyond individual control and management³ and required some measure of re-organization before any new expansion might be undertaken.

In 1872 Rylands secured complete control over all the firm's properties by the purchase of the full rights in the Wigan estates from his nephew, John R. Cross. The death of his intended heir in 1861 also compelled him to provide for the future management of the concern. On 25 October 1873 the various properties held under the three names of Rylands & Sons, the Dacca Twist Company and the Manchester Wadding Company and valued at £1,024,788 were incorporated as a joint-stock company under the name of Rylands & Sons Ltd., preserving the name of the firm as it had been established in 1819 and reflecting the hopes of the proprietor to perpetuate his name, if not his family. The nominal capital of £2,000,000 was fifty-fold the average capital of the

firms then existing in the cotton industry and formed the largest single capital therein until the creation of the Coats sewing-thread combine in 1896. Rylands & Sons Ltd. was one of the thirty-one private limited companies registered in the cotton industry during the great joint-stock boom of 1873–5 but was ahead of most large firms in seeking incorporation, being the fifteenth private limited company to be registered within the cotton industry since the first such incorporation in 1860. The new company preserved the character of a private partnership from 1873 until 1920 but extended the privilege of shareholding to its principal employees in harmony with the contemporary enthusiasm for "industrial partnership". Thus 454 shareholders together held the initial issue of 64,036 £20 shares, of which 50,026 or 78.5 per cent were held by the "Governor" of the company, the only member of the firm to draw no salary. The firm preserved the separate identities of the enterprises operated under its three business-styles and thus did not unduly obtrude the full extent of its operations upon the public gaze. The adoption of the company form of organization gave the firm artificial immortality through the perpetual succession conferred by statute and enabled Rylands to provide for its future management by appointing as directors Reuben Spencer in 1873 and William Carnelley (1821–1919) in 1874. It also made possible the use of shares and ultimately of debentures as instruments of industrial finance.

A new wave of expansion followed the incorporation of the firm and even led it into the direct shipping trade, to the alarm of the established export houses. That process of expansion was partly financed by the windfall-gains which accrued during the Coal Famine of 1872–3 when the output of the Wigan collieries raised the firm's returns to new heights in harmony with the increased price of coal. In London the firm concluded an advantageous contract on 25 April 1874 with its landlords, the Company of Curriers. Thereunder it built a new hall for the Company and secured in return the invaluable right to extend and consolidate its premises.\footnote{E. Mayer, The Curriers and the City of London. A History of the Worshipful Company of Curriers (London, Worshipful Company of Curriers, 1968), pp. 161–3.}
freedom on 17 November 1874 and so strengthened a profitable association between landlord and tenant. In Manchester the sale of Dacca Mills, to make way for the railway-extension which was opened to Central Station by the Midland Railway in 1877, was one of the most profitable transactions in real-estate ever undertaken by the firm. Thereafter the Irwell Works were renamed the Dacca Mills and the manufacture of grey Dacca calicoes was concentrated at the Gidlow and Gorton mills, supplemented by a small mill leased in 1876 at Crawshawbooth in Rossendale.¹ The firm bought four more factories, beginning with Waterloo Mills at Chorley in February 1874 and Swinton Mills in May. In November 1874 it bought the large Hulme Street Mills on Oxford Street for £64,900 from Reuben Spencer. In 1875 it bought for £49,277 the large Mather Street and Fletcher Street Mills in Bolton, to which district it returned for the first time since the abandonment of the Ainsworth mills after a destructive fire in 1868.² The firm used those new works in order to expand into the manufacture of floor-cloth, furniture, fancy cloths and dress goods. It manufactured floor-cloth at Chorley, shirtings and coloured goods at Swinton, packing-cases and furniture at its Hulme Street Works, clothing at the nearby Longford Mills and a whole range of fancy cloths upon 600 Jacquard looms at Bolton while its Medlock Works manufactured pattern cards as well as paper boxes, handled all its printing and letterpress work, especially the production of circulars for drapers, and so made it independent of outside printers. At Wigan a second Gidlow Mill was opened in 1880 for the manufacture of Dacca calicoes and maintained the high standards of architecture and production set by the first. Manufacturing operations were also extended in London where the firm acquired by 1880 a factory for the manufacture of shirts in Commercial Road, supplemented by a factory for clothing-manufacture in Bethnal Green. Thus was completed the construction of the most colossal commercial power originating during the first quarter of the nineteenth century.³ As John Rylands entered on the eighth decade of

³ *The Century’s Progress: Lancashire* (1892), p. 73.
his life he began to slacken the pace of his activity. His achieve­ment was greater than that of any contemporary businessman. From small beginnings he had built up the greatest of firms and had succeeded to the position of leadership formerly held by Arkwright, by Peel and by Horrocks within a much smaller industry. The organization of 200,000 spindles and 5,000 looms in seventeen mills represented the most extensive factory system under the control of a single firm and the greatest creation by any single entrepreneur within the textile industries. The firm stood somewhat apart from other large concerns because it was more important as a merchant and converter than as a manufacturer and more important as a manufacturer than as a spinner. Its spindles were exceeded in number by eight other firms but its looms by none, not even by Horrockses or Hoyle’s. In manufacture, in finishing and in distribution Rylands & Sons had become “the recognized and undisputed head and leader of the cotton trade” and “the monarchs of the cotton industry of England”. Its commercial operations dwarfed its manufacturing activities, produced an annual income greater than that enjoyed by many sovereign States, and had been paralleled in extent only in the most flourishing days of the East India Company. As the master-builder of the largest textile house in the world John Rylands had become “the Wellington of commerce”, “the old Field-Marshal of the Home Trade”, “the Cotton King” and “the greatest merchant prince the world has ever seen”.

The cotton industry had become so extensive that even the largest enterprise controlled only a minute fraction of the total plant. Rylands & Sons operated only 0.5 per cent of the industry’s spindles and 0.8 per cent of its looms. It had made its way against the opposition of established firms and never acquired a monopolistic position in an industry whose firms were numerous and

1 Manchester of Today (1888), p. 79.  
2 Ibid. p. 80.  
3 British Trade Journal, 1 April 1887, p. 277.  
4 Manchester Examiner, 12 December 1888, 5v.  
5 Cotton Factory Times, 14 December 1888, 7iii.  
6 Manchester City News, 15 December 1888, 5ii.  
7 The Young Man, April 1893, p. 111.  
8 Commerce, 5 July 1893, p. 17.
small. Nor can it be regarded as a representative cotton manufacturing firm because of its immense size, its combination of spinning with weaving, finishing and merchanting, its wide range of ancillary activities, its vertical extension into the clothing industry and the thread trade, its dependence upon the home market and its lack of any mills in the most typical factory towns of Lancashire. The causes of the successful expansion of that one great firm are to be found mainly in the unresting enterprise of John Rylands, who "accepted his work and calling as divine" and approaches the ideal type of the dedicated entrepreneur inspired by other-worldly ideals. Rylands concealed remarkable abilities beneath a wholly deceptive exterior, being small in stature and unimpressive in appearance, in speech or in gaze. Reticent in self-expression, simple in his language and averse to loquacity, he remained unaffected and unassuming in demeanour and claimed neither ancient gentility for his family nor a spurious antiquity for his firm. He nevertheless possessed almost superhuman mental and physical powers, manifested in an irresistible energy, a great capacity for physical endurance and for unflagging industry, a genius for concentration and a power of rigid self-control. His sedulous desire to excel others in all he undertook may have stemmed from a wish to compensate for his physical shortcomings, from a sense of rivalry with his elder brothers or from a certain indisposition for social life but mainly originated in his achievement-oriented education at the hands of the mother whom he revered to the end of his days. In his youth he canalized his energies into the commercial field, where early success created a self-reinforcing disposition towards a business career. Thereafter he avoided any wasteful dissipation of his powers in other less profitable fields through systematic and continuous concentration of effort.

John Rylands was not prepared to sacrifice the welfare of his firm to the pursuit of a political career and found ample scope for the exercise of administrative, legislative and judicial functions.

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1 *In Memoriam John Rylands* (1889), p. 54, S. G. Green, Memorial Sermon, 16 December 1888.
3 *Manchester City News*, 1 April 1865, 3i.
within the sphere of his own business. He declined to become either a member of the Manchester City Council in 1838 or a county magistrate in 1845. Nor did he ever seek election as an M.P. He did not even become a director of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce and certainly never presumed to act as a public spokesman for the cotton industry, as Bazley did in the 1850s and Macara in the 1890s. Within that trade he promoted no cotton spinning or manufacturing companies and joined none of the syndicates of promoters formed for speculative mill-floating in the factory towns of Lancashire. He abstained from investing money either in the joint-stock limiteds of Lancashire or in overseas enterprises. He held few directorships outside the field of the cotton industry, being only a director of the Pears on and Knowles Coal and Iron Company Ltd., which was incorporated in Warrington in 1874, and a local director of the Equitable Fire Insurance Company Ltd. He served as High Constable of Salford Hundred in 1857 and as a county magistrate from 1869 but shrank from sitting upon the bench. In 1878 he declined nomination as the sheriff of London, an office which would have made him eligible to become the lord mayor of the metropolis but which would inevitably have diverted some of his wealth from Manchester. He took no active part in any of the great political, social or religious movements of the century and never became a public figure. No national honours were conferred on him and he died as he had lived, a commoner.

In his business activity he preferred to regard himself as a manufacturer, professing scorn for the pure merchant and contempt for mere publicity. He was nevertheless a born merchant who delighted in buying and selling well and who therefore maintained absolute secrecy about his business operations, especially in regard to prices. His imagination was large and vital, combining a comprehensive view of a vast field of operations with a minute care for detail. His quickness of perception and immense fertility of resource made him highly adaptable to changing conditions of trade and ever ready to make innovations, abandoning traditional practices with zest but always providing for the unknown and the uncertain. Consistently profiting from his own

1 Directory of Directors, 1882, p. 359; 1885, p. 286.
errors of judgement, he professed to have made more mistakes than any man in Manchester. A superb organizer and one of the most successful commercial administrators of all time, he insisted that each department of his firm should stand upon its own feet and should not expect to be subsidized by any other. He loved arithmetic, the compilation of tables of discount, interest and cloth-prices and the costing of labour-saving contrivances. By making accounting the focal technique of his business he imbued his employees with his own sense of the value of methodical organization. A keen observer of men, he revealed exceptional judgement in the selection of his managers and attributed his success to his ability to read character, which secured him able and loyal servants.¹

Rylands made skilful use of his capital resources and consistently sought small profits from quick returns but undoubtedly benefited by the windfall gains accruing from fortunate investments made in real estate. His policy of strict frugality in personal expenditure led him to avoid any unnecessary expense in business and to abstain from conspicuous corporate consumption. Thus he never moved his warehouses from their original site to the more prestigious location in Portland Street and consistently preferred old to new mills. He profited from the depressions of 1837–42 and 1865–9 in order cheaply to acquire more factories and from the depressions of 1874 and 1879 in order to secure a reduction in the assessment of the Gidlow Works to the poor-rate of the Wigan Union.² By restricting dividends to a regular 5 per cent he ploughed back a very high proportion of profits into the business. By depreciating the ledger-value of warehouses, works and plant he built up a substantial but invisible reserve-fund. By offering shares as part of the purchase-price of properties he economized on direct expenditure and profited by his firm’s growing prestige as the leading enterprise within England’s leading industry. Operating costs were reduced through the

² Textile Manufacturer, August 1879, p. 264; December 1880, p. 434.
manifold economies open to a vertically-integrated firm, by the avoidance of any use of credit, by the purchase of goods for cash and by the exaction of a full discount thereon, as a symbol of status as much as a saving of money.¹ Transport-costs were reduced by the strategic location of each works near a railway, especially in the great junction-towns of Wigan, Bolton and Manchester. Labour-costs were reduced by the employment of women in the manufacture of cloth and of clothing, especially in those towns where men were engaged in coal-mining, in engineering or on the railways. They were further controlled by the adoption of cost-cutting technical innovations which gave the firm the dual advantage of a modern plant within older buildings and enabled it to resist dictation of policy, even by the most powerful of trade unions. The advantages the firm offered to employees spared it from the affliction of strikes, except at its Gorton mills. There it began spinning finer counts and conceded payment under the Stockport list but suffered in 1882 a strike by twenty self-acting mule minders for a 5 per cent advance. The firm first locked out all 1,200 hands and then replaced fourteen of the discontented minders either by piecers or by minders recruited from outside Gorton, including three women from its Wigan mills in a distinct encroachment upon a traditional sphere of male labour.² The aristocrats of the spinning-room were defeated in their attempt to exploit their key position to extort an increase in wages. The strike was a most exceptional incident in the history of a firm which proved able to win devoted and lengthy service from its employees.

As a vertically-integrated enterprise, Rylands & Sons was virtually self-sufficient and controlled all the processes of manufacture from the import of cotton to the sale of the finished product. Unlike other great firms it maintained no cotton-broking, marketing, shipping or banking affiliates but it made some and repaired most of its own machinery and engines at Gidlow and Gorton and even owned farms at Gidlow and Heapey. Its large size secured to it the advantages accruing from the economies of scale in purchase, in manufacture and in sale. It spread its over-

¹ R. Spencer, The Home Trade of Manchester (1890), p. 69.
² Gorton Reporter, 12 August 1882, 8ii; 19 August, 8ii.
head costs by increasing the range of articles in which it dealt. It
did not try to enter any branch of trade in which it could not suc­
cceed and indeed excel in price or in quality: it won a special
reputation for its Dacca calicoes and for its Dacca and Longford
sewing cottons. Thus it secured some protection from the inci­
dence of depression in any one field, remained unperturbed by
cyclical fluctuations and never passed a year without making a
profit in a trade noted for the regularity and the amplitude of its
fluctuations. In the finishing processes it concentrated on dye­
ing and bleaching rather than on calico-printing in harmony with
its original association with the linen trade. It pioneered the
large-scale development of the ready-made clothing trade in
Manchester, made its Longford Works into the largest clothing
factory in the city, employing 1,200 hands, and acquired the
nearby Midland Works for use as a warehouse and making-up
place for such clothing. Thus it controlled a whole bloc of
factories in Medlock, between Oxford Street, Cambridge Street,
Hulme Street and Chester Street, which became comparable in
importance to its works at Gorton, Gidlow and Bolton. Finally,
the Gidlow collieries employed male labour, supplied fuel to the
firm's mills and eliminated the profits and freight of the coal
merchant: they also provided a substantial surplus, especially of
domestic coal, for sale and enabled the firm to become coal
merchants in Wigan and Liverpool.

One great external advantage enjoyed by the firm was the
growing centralization of the home trade in "Cottonopolis"
which took place between 1830 and 1860 under the influence of
the railways. By improving the range and quality of its products
and by trebling the number of its travellers, from nineteen in 1865
to seventy in 1897, when S. & J. Watts mustered only thirty-six, it
won the custom of many of the shrewdest and most able traders
in the country in the drapers, enabling them to secure all their
needs from one house and through one account. The loyalty of
its clients was preserved by the tradition of absolute integrity in
all his dealings maintained by John Rylands, by his steadfast
refusal to sell direct to the public and even by the offer of shares in
the firm, which thus returned some of its profits to its customers.
As the leading home-trade house it benefited by the greater
proportionate value of the home trade in comparison to the export trade and by the relatively faster expansion of the home market after the depression of 1877–9. Even after Manchester lost its monopoly of distribution within the textile trade during the 1880s Rylands & Sons preserved its supremacy, displayed the resilience of true enterprise and averted the drastic reorganization forced upon other home-trade houses. Its continued success contrasted sharply with the declining fortunes of other houses and testified to its ability to develop those branches of trade thitherto neglected in the city, such as ready-made clothing, mantles, boots and shoes, carpets and furnishings. The firm increased the number of its departments by one-fifth to forty-two by 1887, against the thirty-two departments of S. & J. Watts, in accordance with its aim to supply all dry goods, “any articles, excepting, of course, such bulky articles as coals—which can be required by man, woman, or child, from birth to death, for their persons or their homes . . . but not soft goods, that is, provisions”. The Manchester warehouses expanded in size to form four immense blocks parallel to the city’s main centre of retail trade in Market Street. They employed in 1897 1,200 hands, or one-tenth of the firm’s labour-force, and handled an annual turnover of over £3,000,000 from 20,000 customers.

Two-thirds of the firm’s goods were sold at home and one-third abroad. Supplies were secured from all the producing centres of England and of Europe since the policy of free trade had made Britain one great free market for the goods of all nations. Imports were even made from Japan after the establishment in

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1896 of the first Japanese steamship line to Europe. Exports were sold either through Manchester merchants with good foreign connections\(^1\) or through foreign merchants and over hostile tariffs to the civilized markets of the U.S.A., Europe and the colonies. The firm did not export to Asia, which since the 1840s had provided the cotton industry with its largest foreign markets. Thus it did not need to acquire mills in the great producing centres of Oldham and Blackburn which were heavily dependent on the Eastern trade. Rylands did not believe in middlemen but favoured the establishment of direct contact between producer and consumer. He replied to a boycott imposed by the London wholesale colonial houses of all English manufacturers and merchants serving colonial drapers by immediately sending his travellers to the overseas colonies.\(^2\) Thus he entered a rapidly expanding trade and imitated the example of the home-trade houses of Glasgow which had made the colonial trade into the backbone of their business. The high quality of the firm's goods was recognized by the award of medals at exhibitions held at Cape Town in 1877, at Paris in 1878, at Adelaide in 1887, at Brussels and Melbourne in 1888 and at Paris in 1889. Its export trade would probably have been even greater if foreign states had followed Britain's example in adopting free trade.

Always conscious of the importance of transport-costs, Rylands gave more support than any other cotton manufacturer to the scheme for a Manchester Ship Canal which matured during the recession of 1882. He attended the historic meeting called by the engineer Daniel Adamson on 27 June 1882 to consider the project and became a member of the provisional committee. He subscribed £10,000 with the promise of another £50,000 to the Manchester Ship Canal Company which was established in 1886\(^3\): thus he became one of its largest shareholders as well as the only Manchester merchant to subscribe to both the Anti-Corn Law League and the Ship Canal. That project promised to save him £5,000 per annum,\(^4\) or 2 per cent on the

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\(^1\) W. H. Zimmern, "Lancashire and Latin America", *Geography*, June 1943, pp. 53–54.

\(^2\) *Manchester City News*, 15 December 1888, 5iv.

\(^3\) B. T. Leech, *History of the Manchester Ship Canal* (Manchester, Sherratt, 1907), i. 194; ii. 6, 7, 46.

\(^4\) *Textile Manufacturer*, August 1890, p. 395.
£250,000 of cotton which his firm imported every year, as well as to enhance the freehold value of the extensive Longford estate in Stretford. Rylands was, however, inspired as much by a sense of public interest as by a desire for private profit since Manchester merchants in general abstained from risking their capital in an uneconomic venture which paid no dividends on its ordinary shares for twenty-two long years after its completion in 1894.

Rylands & Sons benefited by the competition for employment in order to recruit the best commercial talent. It served as a great training-school in business method for the founders of other firms. Thus Richard Haworth (1820-83) began his career as a book-keeper at the Ainsworth mill in 1839-43 before he became an independent manufacturer in Salford and built up the fourth largest firm in the cotton industry after those of Rylands, Horrowkes and Tootal. George Booth (1807-86) was employed by the firm for twenty-four years from 1829 until 1853 and then established the merchant firm of George and Hugh Booth (1853-72), becoming a member of the Manchester City Council in 1862, a J.P. in 1872 and an alderman in 1879. John Rhodes (1817-95) was an employee from 1833 until 1868 and then became from 1868 to 1889 the head of Rhodes Brothers, merchants and manufacturers. During his 2\(\frac{1}{3}\) years at the Dacca Mills in 1868-71 W. F. M. Weston (1851-1930) learned the necessity for methodical organization before he established his own yarn agency.

Even more important for the future of the firm were those businessmen trained by Rylands who remained within his employment. The death of his son and heir was a profound personal tragedy for Rylands but an economic blessing to the firm in so far as it opened the full extent of an internal career to merit irrespective of family-connections. Reuben Spencer (1830-1901), who

1 W. B. Pope, *A Memorial of Richard Haworth, Esq., J.P. of Manchester* (Manchester, Day, 1885, 63 pp.).
2 *Manchester Guardian*, 3 July 1886, 9ii.
3 *Textile Manufacturer*, December 1895, p. 453.
had entered the employment of the firm in 1847, became the main beneficiary. Being a Congregationalist and a Liberal like his employer, he rose to become Rylands' "very confidential friend and manager—in short his alter ego". Spencer became a partner in the firm in 1867 and a director in 1873 and the main driving force in its expansion thereafter. He played an important role in the corporate life of the concern, wherein he helped to found in 1864 during the Cotton Famine the Porters' and Packers' Benevolent Society. In 1873 he became the chairman of the Home Trade Association established in 1841 and in 1878 the chairman of the Warehousemen and Clerks' Provident Association established in 1856: he also helped to found the Commercial Travellers' Association. He was a keen supporter of the Manchester Ship Canal, establishing a share-subscription system for employees of the firm in 1887 and becoming president in 1891 of the Ship Canal Shareholders' Association. He followed the example of his employer in declining political ambitions but became an advocate of a Greater Manchester which would incorporate into one municipality all the districts and population within a four-mile radius of the Royal Exchange, including Salford, Stretford and Moss Side, and would form an administrative unity appropriate to "the industrial metropolis of the world".

John Rylands was a Congregationalist, like other cotton magnates such as Elkanah Armitage and Henry Lee. His religious faith was inherited from his parents and remained largely conventional until 1829 when the death of his mother caused him deep distress. In her memory the family erected Gidlow Lane


1 Manchester City News, 1 April 1865, 2vii.
2 R. Spencer. The Home Trade of Manchester (1890), pp. 58-63; idem, To Young Men Going Out into Life (Manchester, Heywood, 1891), pp. 257-89; idem, History of Lancashire (1897), pp. 24-34, 50-72.
3 B. T. Leech, History of the Manchester Ship Canal (1907), ii. 6-7, 106.
4 R. Spencer, The Home Trade of Manchester (1890), pp. 33-44.
5 Idem, History of Lancashire (1897), p. 47.
School in Wigan. Rylands himself never abandoned the faith of his fathers but adopted the views of the Baptists and was baptized in 1830 at the Baptist Chapel in York Street, Manchester. He became a deacon of that chapel in 1834 and remained "a staunch Nonconformist of the Baptist denomination".\(^1\) In 1842, however, he withdrew from the Baptist chapel on the retirement of its minister;\(^2\) returned to his original loyalty and joined "the Congregational millionaires"\(^3\) who worshipped first in Mosley Street and from 1848 in Cavendish Street. After taking up residence in Stretford he continued to attend the Cavendish Street chapel but also rented pews in two local chapels, including that of the "Union Church".\(^4\)

The death of his last surviving son in 1861 dealt him a grievous blow and increased his preoccupation with religion. Finding comfort in the Scriptures, he determined to make their treasures more readily accessible. He therefore financed the compilation by two Baptist ministers of a new edition of the Authorized Version of 1611 as "a Self-Interpreting Bible".\(^5\) Towards the end of his long life Rylands affirmed that the Sacred Word had constantly proved "his help in many difficulties, his consolation in many troubles, and the source of all peace and hope to his soul"\(^6\) and that it contained "the only, all-sufficient guidance to the Life Eternal".\(^7\) He therefore sought to enable a student to ascertain the sense of the Bible by the best of all methods, that of self-interpretation and by the comparison of Scripture with Scripture, but with the least expenditure of time and pains. To secure that end his edition was arranged in 5,810 numbered

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\(^1\) Manchester City News, 15 April 1865, 3iii.

\(^2\) In Memoriam John Rylands (1889), pp. 16-17.


\(^4\) Manchester City News, 9 October 1909, 3iii; 23 October 1909, 3iii, J. E. Longson.

\(^5\) The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments. Arranged in Paragraphs (Manchester, Cave, 1863, 1,272 pp.; Chilworth, Unwin, 1878, 1886, 1,240 pp.) The text of the second and third editions was that edited by Dr. F. H. Scrivener in the Cambridge Paragraph Bible of 1873.

\(^6\) Ibid. (1886), p. viii.

\(^7\) An Index designed to Accompany the Holy Bible Arranged in Paragraphs (Chilworth, Unwin, 1886, 192 pp.), p. vi.
paragraphs in place of chapters and verses and was accompanied by a separate concordance of subjects as distinct from words, organized with ledger-like accuracy and completeness. In that work he united the Biblicist tradition of the Baptists to the Congregationalist belief in the priesthood of all believers and in the role of the intellect in religion.

At the age of seventy Rylands was inspired by the apparently apocalyptic entry of Italian troops in 1870 into the capital of the papal monarchy to acquire an interest in the evangelization of Italy, to visit the country, to learn the language and to establish an orphanage with a laundry in the Trastevere district of Rome. As "a New Testament man, — pure and simple",¹ he financed the publication in 1875 of an Italian translation by Giovanni Diodati and the distribution of 50,000 copies. *Il Nuovo Testamento* was followed in 1878 by *Le Nouveau Testament*, a French translation by J. F. Ostervald.² Both were private publications distributed independently of the British and Foreign Bible Society. Thereafter he turned his attention to the preparation of the second edition of his paragraph Bible. His liberal benefactions to the poor of Rome earned recognition, if not from the Pope, from the King of Italy, who in 1880 conferred on him the fifth class of an order of merit created in 1868, making him a Knight of the Order of the Crown of Italy. His deep interest in hymns, as a distinctive Nonconformist contribution to participation by the congregation in worship, inspired him to build up a vast collection of 50,000 and to publish two selections,³ wherein he sought to demonstrate that inner unity of the Churches of Christ which could not find embodiment in their creed. He took little interest in purely ecclesiastical matters and cared not at all for notional orthodoxy, which he thought so much superstition and vanity. "As to churches of every name, he believed they must all be broken up, and that a

² This information was kindly extracted for me by Miss K. J. Cann, the Archivist of the British and Foreign Bible Society, from the Society’s working catalogue.
³ *Hymns of the Church Universal* (Chilworth, Unwin, 1885, 604 pp.); *Hymns for the Young* (Chilworth, Unwin, 1887, 186 pp.).
natural process of rearrangement must bring into line and service men whose souls were akin." He therefore remained a generous supporter of the Liberation Society, which had been established in 1844 to secure the disendowment of the Church of England.

It is unjust to suggest that John Rylands was interested only in acquiring wealth and did not know how to enjoy it. He recognized that he would pass through the world but once, and therefore he did not defer his benefactions until his death, though in his will he made extensive bequests to a wide range of charitable foundations. In his philanthropic activity he was, as a strict economist, unsympathetic to small causes but he maintained a large number of pensioners and kept secret many of his largest benefactions. Remembering his own successive bereavements he made special provision for the orphan and the widow and also for the aged poor. In Greenheys he established in 1864 a female orphanage, which became known as the Rylands Orphanage. He did not, however, carry through his plan of 1876 to build a residential hall near the new buildings of Owens College for the Lancashire Independent College, which was strongly supported by the Cavendish Street Chapel. Increasingly he concentrated his charitable interests upon Stretford rather than on Gorton or on Wigan, which was dominated by the Earls of Crawford and had also been presented with a free public library in 1878 by another local cotton spinner, Thomas Taylor. Rylands became a virtual lord of the manor to the Longford district and may have aspired to have his principal employees as the tenants of his estate but could not rival the influence of the de Traffords and was forced to co-exist with the Local Board of Health created in 1868. In 1878 he built a Town Hall for Stretford with a lecture-hall and public baths, at a cost of £30,000. In 1883 he established a free lending library which contained 3,000 volumes, including

1 *The Young Man*, April 1893, p. 113, J. Parker.
3 *Manchester City News*, 15 April 1865, 3ii.
5 *Manchester City News*, 8 February 1908, 3i.
fifteen works by Samuel Smiles, and which was transferred to the Local Board in 1893 to become the nucleus of the Stretford Public Library. He also established a coffee-house, homes for aged gentlewomen and the Longford Institute, with a bowling green, a tennis court and a children’s playground. He did not, however, become the effective suzerain of Stretford: even less did he become a leader of Manchester society.¹

In 1882 Rylands acquired a country seat near Ryde in the village of Haven Street, where he opened in 1886 another Longford Institute and endowed its library with 500 books.² He never sought, however, to imitate the tastes of the aristocracy and declined to keep horses or hounds or menservants, though he employed nineteen gardeners at Longford Hall and marketed the produce of his extensive gardens.³ He did not become a member of the landed gentry and did not acquire extensive estates. Thus, he declined to follow the example set by Arkwright, Strutt, Peel, Bazley and Fielden in buying the social status conferred by landownership. The death of his son and heir would have made such a course of action pointless. The soil of England, which had been systematically enriched by vast capitals accumulated in trade, was denied one great prize. The Rylands fortune remained in liquid investments and could therefore be turned in the fullness of time to creative use. Rylands had high intellectual tastes and was certainly no Philistine, the type of whom Matthew Arnold discerned in Thomas Bazley. At the St. Helens Grammar School he had acquired a knowledge of Latin and French. He never attended a university but believed profoundly in the value of education as the parent and guardian of liberty and as a necessity for ministers of religion. At Longford Hall he built up an extensive library which was systematically arranged and was especially strong in religious and Biblical literature. His gifts of books to ministers and to Sunday schools numbered many thousands of volumes.

¹ Whitehall Review, 31 August 1882, 11, "Provincial Society. Manchester".
² Isle of Wight County Press, 7 August 1886, 3; 15 December 1888, 5, references for which I am greatly indebted to Mr. L. Bruce, the Reference Librarian of the County Library at Newport.
³ G. H. Pike, Dr. Parker and his Friends (1904), p. 54.
The death of the greatest merchant of the age passed almost unnoticed in London and his funeral was unattended by any official representative of the Manchester City Council. The passing of Rylands produced little change in the organization of the firm. Reuben Spencer succeeded him as chairman, established the Rylands Memorial Club in April 1889 for his 15,000 employees and dedicated the first survey of the home trade of Manchester to that club as a tribute to the memory of his predecessor, "a noble example of business capacity". He became an ex-officio director of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce in November 1890 as the chairman of the newly-established Home Trade Sectional Committee. The Governor's 61,336 shares in the firm passed en bloc to his widow, together with the bulk of his personal estate of £2,574,922, which far exceeded the fortune of any other cotton magnate. The firm issued in 1889 £900,000 of 4 per cent mortgage debentures, including £125,000 in satisfaction of existing mortgages and £620,000 on account of debts due to Mrs. Rylands, and so saved £8,000 per annum by reducing its interest-charges by 1 per cent. Thus, it continued skilfully to manage its extensive assets, which amounted in 1889 to £3,829,003, including £1,047,452 or 27 per cent in lands, buildings and plant and £2,000,000 in stocks. Profits were larger in 1889 than ever before, a considerable achievement after the poor home trade of the year 1888. The unfailing payment of tax-free dividends, even after the loss of over £300,000 in a disastrous fire at the London warehouses in 1882, made the firm's shares into the consols of the cotton industry. The demise of Rylands ushered in a new era in the payment of dividends, which under his firm control had maintained an unvarying level of 5 per cent per annum between 1875 and 1887. Thereafter dividends responded to the pressure from shareholders, rose to new heights and even increased during the acute commercial depression of 1891-3.

Massive reserves were built up in the form of the firm's under-

1 *The Times*, 12 December 1888, 9vi.
3 *Textile Manufacturer*, August 1889, p. 388.
4 Spencer, pp. 67, 69.
valued land, buildings and plant, in its reserve of £500,000 of un-called share-capital, in its insurance-fund of £200,000 and in its reserve-fund, which rose from £75,724 in 1882 to £500,000 in 1894.¹ That increase in reserves avoided the need for any further issue of debentures or for any calls on shareholders, made the firm more independent of outside contingencies as well as increasingly able to control the level of its dividends and so enhanced the value of both debentures and shares, which doubled in price between 1880 and 1894. The firm also accepted loans in the form of payments made in advance of calls by its shareholders to the extent of £304,275 in 1896 and paid 5 per cent interest thereon. The pace of technical innovation set by the founder was maintained in the successive adoption of the electric light in 1886, ring spinning in 1888 and the triple-expansion steam-engine in 1891.² Rylands & Sons Ltd. was the only cotton firm to charter a vessel for the inaugural voyage of 1 January 1894 on the new Manchester Ship Canal and was honoured by the appointment of Spencer as a vice-president of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce in 1895. Like Tootal’s, the firm ceased to manufacture sewing-cotton after the creation of the impregnable Coats combine in 1896 since that product was largely marketed abroad rather than at home. It abandoned its mill at Crawshawbooth in 1889³ but built a new spinning mill in Bolton⁴ and a large new shed for the manufacture of wadding next to its Gorton mills.⁵ The successful maintenance of its supremacy within the industry may well have provoked Horrockses in the 1900s to claim for itself “the greatest name in cotton”.

Under Spencer and his successor Carnelley the firm reached the heights of its prosperity, as measured by the level of its dividends. Carnelley became managing director in 1896 and chairman on the death of Spencer in 1901: he maintained the links between Manchester and London established by Rylands and strengthened by Spencer, being elected Master of the Company

¹ Textile Manufacturer, September 1882, p. 237; August 1894, p. 350.
² Ibid. September 1886, p. 438; October 1888, p. 480; November 1891, p. 529.
³ Ibid. September 1889, p. 437.
⁴ Ibid. February 1887, p. 75.
⁵ Ibid. May 1894, p. 236.
of Curriers in 1913. In him the capacity of the firm for winning the devotion of its staff received its most notable demonstration: when he retired at the age of 95 in 1916 he had completed seventy-eight years of uninterrupted service with Rylands & Sons and had enjoyed an even longer business-career than his original employer, whose Biblical interests he had shared.

Annual Percentage Dividends Paid by Rylands & Sons Ltd., 1875-1945

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Dividend</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1875–87</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888, 1889</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>6.375</td>
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<td>1891</td>
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<td>1892</td>
<td>8.5</td>
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<td>1893, 1894</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>1895–1907</td>
<td>12.5</td>
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<td>1908</td>
<td>11.25</td>
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<td>1909–25</td>
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<td>1930, 1931</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>1932</td>
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<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>1.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>1936, 1937</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>nil</td>
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<tr>
<td>1939, 1940</td>
<td>3.75</td>
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<tr>
<td>1941, 1942</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943–45</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Stock Exchange Year Book, 1897, 1421; 1915, 2136; 1922, 2599; 1930, 3231-2; 1940, 1795; 1947, 1701.

T. Dreydel, "A Fifteen Years' Record of the Stock Exchange", Transactions of the Manchester Statistical Society, 15 January 1896, p. 89, has apparently doubled the annual rate of dividends paid half-yearly by the firm.

1 Manchester Guardian, 9 October 1919, 3iv-v; The Times, 9 October 1919, 13iii; 10 October, 7i.

2 W. Carnelley (compiler), The Questions of the Bible Arranged in the Order of the Books of Scripture (London, Unwin, 1889, 370 pp.), with a preface by S. G. Green and a dedication to the memory of John Rylands, "in token of a friendship of nearly fifty years."
Annual dividends averaged 7.7 per cent between 1888 and 1894, and 12.5 per cent from 1895 until 1907. Over the forty years from 1875 to 1914 they averaged 8.65 per cent, or nearly thrice the average return on consols. Such dividends exceeded the 8 per cent paid by the Royal Exchange and by the Fine Cotton Spinners' and Doublers' Association, which was the most successful combine within the cotton industry. That standard of prosperity was maintained until the black year 1921 when the firm was sorely afflicted by the collapse of the postwar boom in textiles and lost £1,263,000 in a single half-year. Not until 1926 did it reduce its dividend below the level of 10 per cent. It did not declare a nil dividend until 1932 after completing the construction (1929–32) of its new seven-storeyed warehouse, the most imposing commercial structure built in Manchester since that of S. & J. Watts in 1856–8.

The widow of John Rylands made good use of the great fortune whose disposition she controlled for twenty years. She shared with her husband a remarkable strength of will, a profound community of purpose and an essential kinship of soul. She decided to found as a memorial to her husband an immense Nonconformist theological library in order to cater for the strong local demand for religious books and to provide for the studies essential to a learned ministry as well as to an educated laity in the Geneva of Lancashire, where seven Nonconformist theological colleges had been founded since 1840. Mrs. Rylands began to collect books from 1889 and had already acquired works worth £20,000 when she bought one of the best private libraries in the country. The broad foundations of the Althorp Library had been so thoroughly laid between 1790 and 1820 as to constitute it a truly "priceless collection." Its 40,000 volumes were

1 *The Times*, 6 August 1921, 8ii, 13ii; 8 August, 14iii.
3 *Manchester Courier*, 6 August 1892, 6vii, which described the Althorp library as "the finest existing private library in the world".
purchased on the advice of Dr. S. G. Green, Dr. J. E. Macfadyen, William Carnelley and William Linnell for the unprecedented sum of £225,000 or more than tenfold the highest sum hitherto paid in Britain for a private library. The arrival of the first portion of the Althorp library in Manchester on 16 August 1892 marked a new era in the intellectual history of a city which had acquired the first endowed public library in Chetham's Library in 1656 and the first rate-supported public library in 1852 and had pioneered in 1878 the opening of its municipal library on Sundays. London recognized that the dispersal of the Althorp library or its loss by England to the U.S.A. would have been a national calamity and welcomed the purchase as a step towards the development of culture in the provinces. That immense, generous and patriotic gift to Manchester and to England did not earn for the donor the expected royal distinctions but probably helped to secure the inclusion of John Rylands in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, a distinction denied to most other cotton spinners and manufacturers of the Victorian age. The purchase served indeed as a triumphant refutation of the fallacy of the natural antagonism between the accumulation of wealth and the pursuit of learning and contributed powerfully to the Mancunian renaissance associated with the successful completion of the Ship Canal in 1894.

Mrs. Rylands was one of the very few women to found a great library. She spent as much on the library building as on its books and invested in both some £500,000 or fivefold the amount bequeathed by John Owens for the furtherance of higher education in the region. The library took ten years to build, being


3 *Manchester Guardian*, 17 August 1892, 5v.

4 *The Times*, 29 July 1892, 7ii–iii; *Daily Chronicle*, 9 August 1892, 3iii; *The Spectator*, 13 August 1892, 211; *Saturday Review*, 13 August 1892, 191.

5 *The Young Man*, April 1893, p. 114.
JOHN RYLANDS OF MANCHESTER

constructed without haste, parsimony or publicity. The ceremony of inauguration took place on 6 October 1899, the twenty-fourth anniversary of the marriage of the foundress, and attracted little national attention because of the outbreak of the Boer War. The city fathers apparently wished a royal personage to open the library but Mrs. Rylands, a Congregationalist, entrusted the task to the Principal of Mansfield College, Oxford. In his address Dr. Andrew Fairbairn reaffirmed the original purpose of the donor as the wish to create an enduring memorial to an unassuming Manchester man, who had been "a modest merchant, a dutiful citizen and a humble lover of letters", and to make a contribution to the higher education of the community. The great fundamental, the essential character of the library, is that it is Biblical and theological, a great means for educating men in Scriptural knowledge. An elevated allegorical sculpture in the foyer paid homage to the supremacy of theology over science and art. The group represents Theology in the centre, clasping the volume of Holy Writ, and directing Science, depicted as an aged man holding a globe, absorbed in study and discovery; while Art, in the form of a youthful metal-worker shaping a chalice, turns aside to listen. The thought conveyed is that Science and Art alike derive their highest impulses and perform their noblest achievements only as they discern their consummation in Religion. The building was the greatest architectural product of the Manchester renaissance of the 1890s and remained the masterpiece of Basil Champneys. The structure was thoroughly ecclesiastical in form and a superb expression of the neo-Gothic

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1 Manchester Guardian, 1 January 1894, 5vii; Manchester Courier, 6 October 1899, 10iv.
4 Manchester Guardian, 7 October 1899, 7i.
5 Mrs. E. A. Rylands, p. 7.
style,\(^1\) being completed a whole generation after the last great neo-Gothic building in the locality but providing a peculiarly appropriate repository for its contents. John Rylands acquired a fitting monument in a permanent symbol of the superiority of spiritual values, built upon one of the costliest central sites of commercial Manchester.\(^2\) The stock of 70,000 books represented one-sixth of the 400,000 books held in Manchester's libraries in 1899, when Chetham's Library had 30,000 volumes, the University Library 75,000 and the Free Reference Library 225,000. It was, however, the rarity and value of its collections, especially its early printed books from both continental and English presses, and its almost unrivalled assembly of Bibles which raised the city to a new eminence in the world of letters.

Mrs. Rylands' achievement in "bringing together so many of the rarest and most precious of literary treasures as will make Manchester a place of pilgrimage to scholars throughout the world."\(^3\) received civic recognition: she was admitted to the freedom of the City of Manchester, being only the eighth person to receive that honour and the sole woman so distinguished until 1956. The hope expressed that the firm of Rylands & Sons might erect near the library a grand block of model dwellings for the poor\(^4\) remained unrealized. The founder of the firm was, however, commemorated in the new John Rylands wing at the Manchester Warehousemen and Clerks Orphan Schools which was opened at Cheadle Hulme on 14 October 1899.\(^5\) His biography was even selected for inclusion in the great eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.\(^6\)

The full significance of the establishment of the new institution seems to have been more accurately appreciated in London than in Manchester. "The present nucleus will grow into a very great institution, which, along with Owens College, will make of Manchester almost as great a centre of culture as it has long been

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\(^1\) *Building News*, 13 October 1899, 474iii.
\(^2\) *The Times*, 7 October 1899, 9v.
\(^3\) *Manchester Guardian*, 7 October 1899, 7iii.
\(^5\) *Manchester Guardian*, 13 October 1899, 10vi; 16 October, 12v; 24 November, 10vii; *Manchester City News*, 14 October 1899, 5ii–iii.
\(^6\) *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Cambridge University Press, 1911), vol. 23, p. 950.
of trade."\textsuperscript{1} It is true that a lending department such as had originally been envisaged was never in fact opened, and that the readers tended to be scholars and bibliophiles rather than the general public. The function of the library was, however, transformed, firstly by the acquisition of the Althorp Library and then by the purchase in 1901, for a comparable sum, of the superb Crawford collection of manuscripts in over fifty different languages.\textsuperscript{2} The Spencer printed books and the Crawford manuscripts together provided a broad base for future development in the sphere of the humanities and the arts, so that the original intention of Mrs. Rylands to establish a theological library was largely transcended. As the new foundation expanded its range the new University of Manchester, which in 1902 made Mrs. Rylands a governor as well as an honorary graduate, benefited increasingly by its presence in the city. A new Faculty of Theology was successfully founded in 1904 after the failure of earlier attempts in 1890 and 1900.\textsuperscript{3} That faculty was founded on an interdenominational basis by the Anglican T. F. Tout and the Primitive Methodist A. S. Peake and was the first in any of the modern secular universities. It comprised three chairs, in Semitic Languages and Literatures, Biblical Criticism and Exegesis, and Comparative Religion, but excluded from its purview the History of Doctrine (i.e. Dogma) in order to avoid offending the denominational colleges in the vicinity. Peake occupied the chair which it had been hoped in 1889 Mrs. Rylands would found in Mansfield College for a Baptist or a Congregationalist.\textsuperscript{4} He was the first Nonconformist to become a Professor of Divinity in an English university and the first Nonconformist layman to become an honorary D.D., of Aberdeen in 1907 and of Oxford in 1920.\textsuperscript{5} He served the John Rylands Library as the chairman of the Book Committee from 1905 to 1929 and as the

\textsuperscript{1} \textit{The Spectator}, 14 October 1899, 524, "The Value of Public Libraries".
\textsuperscript{2} \textit{The Times}, 3 September 1901, 6i-ii, "Lord Crawford’s Manuscripts".
\textsuperscript{3} W. B. Selbie, \textit{The Life of Andrew Martin Fairbairn D.D., D.Litt., LL.D., F.B.A., etc. First Principal of Mansfield College, Oxford} (London, Hodder, 1914), pp. 215-16, refers to one early proposal made in 1879.
\textsuperscript{4} Selbie, \textit{Fairbairn}, p. 242, Fairbairn to his wife, 22 December 1889.
chairman of the Council of Governors from 1927 to 1929. Professor Tout also served as a Governor for thirty years from 1899 until 1929. He sought to turn to advantage the magnificent range of learned journals held by the library and reorganized the Honours School of History in 1905 by introducing an undergraduate thesis and so encouraging students to undertake original research on the pattern established in Germany and in the field of science. That bold innovation undoubtedly contributed to the rise to national eminence during the late Edwardian era of what Firth in 1904 first christened the Manchester "School of History".

The John Rylands Library acquired its own institutional autonomy and commemorated its foundress by placing her statue within its walls in 1907, facing that of her husband which had been sculpted by the same hand in 1894. Mrs. Rylands had given to Manchester "its most perfect public building and the most incomparable library in the world." Her sudden death in 1908 came as a distinct shock to the library in which she had invested £1,000,000 during her lifetime. From her personal estate of £3,448,693 she made extensive charitable bequests and left £200,000 to the library of her creation. Her legacy to the University of Manchester of £75,000 supplemented the £20,964 bequeathed by her husband to Owens College: it was the largest gift received by that institution since the bequest made by C. F. Beyer in 1877 and was not to be surpassed until that made by Sir Samuel Turner in 1938. In honour of her memory the chair of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis founded in 1904 and hitherto

1 Manchester Guardian, 10 December 1907, 5iv–v, 14iii.
2 John Cassidy (1860–1939) was also the sculptor of the group in the foyer of Theology, Science and Art. His other work included the Dobson monument (1900) at Bolton and the statue of King Edward VII (1911–13) in the Whitworth Park, Manchester. See Manchester Faces and Places, Ix:10, July 1898, 188–91, xiv:6, May 1903, 158–61; Manchester Guardian, 20 July 1939, 15iv; Ulrich Thieme (ed.), Allgemeines Lexikon der Bildenden Künstler (Leipzig, Seeman, 1912), vi. 128.
3 Manchester Guardian, 5 February 1908, 6iii.
maintained by her was given a permanent establishment within the university and was renamed from 1909 the Rylands Professorship.

The memory of John Rylands disappeared with the passage of time from St. Helens, Wigan, Gorton and Stretford, where the influence of the Ship Canal gradually eroded the foundations of the old village-community. Longford Hall and Park were bought by the local authority in 1911 and opened to the public as a park, a necessary step after the sale of the 1,200 acres of Trafford Park in 1896 for industrial development. The John Rylands Library continued to fulfil the purpose of its creator. Increasingly it served the scholars of the world as well as those in its vicinity. It extended its influence through the institution of the Rylands Lectures in 1901 and the publication of its Bulletin from 1903; thus it became what the cotton industry had been during the era of its pre-eminence, a world-wide influence. While industries and their constituent firms rose and declined, libraries enjoyed a different life-cycle and grew in value with each successive decade. When the mills and warehouses of Rylands & Sons Ltd. passed into other hands and the firm itself ceased to exist in 1971, the name of its founder lived on in enduring association with the library. The function of that institution assumed a new dimension in 1972 when it merged with the University Library under the name of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester. Thus was fulfilled anew the primary purpose of Mrs. Rylands as it had been expressed in one of the twenty-eight mottoes decorating the nave of the library: Perpetui fructum donavi nominis—‘I have bestowed the gift of an enduring name’.